

Giving a *Devar Torah*

Scary, Maybe • Impossible, No!

The call comes, the one you've worried about, it's time for you to give a *devar Torah* on a Shabbat morning. You hear your mouth saying "yes" as your mind is saying "who, me?" Rest easy, it **can** be done. It just takes some thought and some time.

Here's some ideas for creating a *devar Torah*:

1. Review the *parsha* and the *Haftarah*. It sounds a bit silly, perhaps, but the first thing to do is read through the sections. Take the time to think about the individual verses or the overall story. Is there anything which leaps out at you, raises a question, a concern or your hackles?

2. Review the traditional sources: *Midrash*, *Talmud* and commentaries, such as *Rashi*, *Ramban*, *Ibn Ezra*. Remember, they were reading the same texts and looking for questions or problems, too. They saw different problems in the text (they were living at different times) then we might, but they offer fascinating insights to personalities, rituals and relationships with God. If nothing jumps out at you, try to figure out what prompted their comments. That alone can help you to see areas of difficulty in the text. English texts which have extensive notes from the classical commentaries include the *Soncino Humash* (**not** the *Hertz*) and the *Artscroll Chumash*.

3. Look at the moderns. You can analyze the source of the text, discuss how archaeology impacts on the story or note linguistic themes. Good for this are the *Anchor Bible* or the *International Critical Commentary*. Don't forget to see Nahum Sarna's book on *Genesis*, Moshe Greenberg on *Exodus* and the Jewish Publication Society's new *Torah Commentary* and, of course, *humash Etz Hayim*.

4. Think about what's going on around you. A personal reaction to the text need not be corny; if there is something which can be self-affirming or disagreeable, use it! Having the text "react" to modern life is how the classic commentaries wrote theirs (they just lived long ago). After all, we believe the Torah has something to tell us about how we should live, so we should be able to find examples in it.

Other thoughts:

How long to speak? *Divrei Torah* at Beth El tend to be between 10 and 15 minutes. A Seminary homiletics teacher used to say that giving a sermon is a bit like drilling for oil. If you haven't struck pay-dirt in fifteen minutes, stop boring.

Politics? These issues can often be "too much" for many people to handle. If you choose to enter those waters, be sure to expect at least a few comments.

Think about the **format** of your *devar Torah*. If you're using a text, we can reproduce it for you (*if you have it ready by Thursday, noon*). You can ask the congregation to read the section in the *humash*, but remember the translation in the *Hertz Humash* is a bit stilted.

Prepare! Whatever you do, don't speak off the cuff. Speak from an outline, notes or full text (whatever makes you most comfortable) but make sure you have taken the time to consider the questions you're raising to be sure you've dealt with them adequately. You may want to ask someone else to read your *devar Torah*. If you're quoting Hebrew be sure to quote it correctly, pronounce it correctly and translate it, too.

Develop your ideas. Be sure your *devar Torah* has a beginning, middle and an end.

As always, if you need help along the way, be they sources, ideas to discuss, questions to raise in the text, or anything else which comes up during your preparation, I am ready, willing and available to help you.

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