

Writing a D'var Torah: A Guide for Students of All Ages

A D'var Torah is an interpretation, a commentary on a passage of Torah. "Torah" can be viewed in the narrow sense as the Five Books of Moses, or it can be construed as the full body of sacred writings: the Tanakh, Mishnah, Talmud, etc. For our purposes, we will use the term to represent the Tanakh (this, then, covers the Five Books of Moses, the Haftarat, and the Megillot). Our d'var Torah will be a commentary on a piece of text from the Tanakh.

What is the objective of a d'var Torah? It is always to communicate something important to the congregation which will enable them to draw closer to God. It can be a description or an explanation which is new, or it can be simply a reminder of an old explanation which may have been forgotten. It must bring the text into our lives and make it relevant. Above all, the d'var Torah must make a difference. Always ask the question, why should anyone listen to this?

There are three aspects to a d'var Torah:

- I. Research and Preparation
- II. Composition
- III. Delivery

If any one aspect is weak, the davar will be poor.

I. Research and Preparation (*the largest piece of work*)

- A. The d'var Torah begins with a complete knowledge of the piece of text on which you are focusing. That means, KNOW YOUR PARASHA and/or HAFTARAH. Know the name, the page numbers in the chumash and the verses. Know the context of the story: in which book does it appear? Who are the main characters? Where are they geographically?
- B. Read the entire parasha (not just your triennial portion) in English. Read your entire haftarah, even if you will be focusing on the Torah portion. Make sure you understand all of the words (yes, I mean the English words).
- C. Know the date on which you will deliver the d'var Torah, and be aware of any significant events for that date (this information may be useful later).
- D. If possible, read the parasha in Hebrew.

- E. Summarize the parasha
- a. Make an outline of the events (don't try to form beautiful sentences – just capture the action, laws, and ideas)
 - b. Identify the main characters
 - c. In a few words, write down the main idea
- F. Identify 3 things in the parasha which trouble you
- a. In outline form, write down any issues which are confusing or which you don't understand
 - b. Focus on 3 things which you will need to figure out or comment on
 - c. Write down the chapter and verse numbers for these things, and paraphrase the issues, e.g. God said that any person who goes up the mountain will be killed, and yet the reason for this was not explained
- G. Focus on 1 (one) of the issues that was troubling
- a. Describe the issue and the context
 - b. Write down what is troubling or confusing in as much detail as possible
 - c. READ the HEBREW for the interesting passage. Try to translate the Hebrew word for word. In order to do this, you may want to consult a more literal translation (e.g. Metsudah Linear Chumash)
 - d. Is there any discrepancy between the more literal translation and the Etz Chayim translation?
 - e. Read the Etz Chayim commentary on the passage, if it exists. Does this explain or address your concerns with the passage?
 - f. Is the passage or your concern related to other passages in the Torah? Find them and write them down.
- H. Find 3 (three) commentaries that address the passage (and your concern) directly
- a. Possible sources for these commentaries are attached to this guide. Common commentators or anthologies include: Rashi, other chumashim (such as the Hertz Pentateuch), Rambam, Sforno, Nechama Leibovitz, JPS Torah Commentary
 - b. Make sure you know who the commentator was: full name, when and where they lived, background
 - c. Write down what each commentator had to say about the passage. Did they resolve your concern?
- I. Write down, in outline form, your resolution to the issue
- a. What do you believe is the “real” meaning, and why?
 - b. Why didn't the commentators satisfy your concerns?
 - c. How does one's perspective on Judaism and Torah affect the interpretation?
- J. How is this issue, and your interpretation, relevant for you today?

- a. Does it change the way you live?
- b. Does it enable you to put your life in perspective?
- c. What events in your life relate to this issue?

II. Composition

- A. Bring the pieces of the outline for your d'var Torah together
 - a. Summary
 - b. 3 issues
 - c. 1 focused issue
 - d. 3 commentaries
 - e. Your resolution
 - f. Relevance and impact on your life
- B. Begin writing the d'var with an introduction and a conclusion
 - a. The intro should begin with a welcome and the name of the parasha
 - b. The conclusion should identify what you have learned and how the Torah impacts your life
 - c. The final line of the conclusion should identify the Etz Chayim page number for the reading
- C. Take the outline and form coherent sentences and paragraphs.
 - a. Each sentence must be grammatically correct.
 - b. Paragraphs should contain unified ideas, similar to the sections in (A) above.
 - c. References to the Torah text should include the actual text, not just the verse number
- D. Reread the d'var and eliminate redundancies
- E. Add in explanations of people or Hebrew where needed.
- F. Check spelling and grammar
 - a. Make sure someone else reads your work
 - b. Review and edit

III. Delivery

- A. Read the davar out loud, to yourself
 - a. Read it aloud a few times to be comfortable with the words
 - b. If, after reading it aloud, the words sound or feel awkward, change them!
 - c. Read it again, and add the proper emphasis

B. Read it aloud to someone else

- a. Did they hear and understand every word?
- b. Did they find it interesting?
- c. Did they get the point?

C. Edit it again based on the comments of the listener

D. Print out a clean, well-formatted copy with font that is large enough to read.

Resource Guide for Divrei Torah

(from the DC Minyan website)

Online Resources

[The Almighty Google \(www.google.com\)](http://www.google.com)

Divrei Torah

Dvar Torah sites: (Sites with a weekly Dvar Torah as well as an archive of previous Divrei Torah. They provide great leads for ideas and sources.)



Yeshivat Har Etzion: www.vbm-Torah.org/parsha.htm

Orthodox Union: www.ou.org/Torah/archive.htm

OU parasha summaries: www.ou.org/Torah/tt/aliyaharchive.htm

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism: www.uscj.org/torah_sparks_weekly5467.html

Jewish Theological Seminary:

www.jtsa.edu/Conservative_Judaism/JTS_Torah_Commentary.xml

Bar Ilan University: www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng

Kolel: The Adult Centre for Liberal Jewish Learning: blog.kolel.org

Aish HaTorah: www.aish.com/tp

American Jewish University:

judaism.ajula.edu/Content/InfoUnits.asp?CID=1701

Torah.org www.torah.org/learning/parsha/parsha.html

Shamash: shamash.org/tanach/dvar.shtml

Torah Online: www.jr.co.il/hotsites/j-Torah.htm

Divrei Torah from British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

www.chiefrabbi.org/CR_Covenant_Conversation.aspx

'How to Write a Dvar Torah' Sites:

United Synagogue Youth: www.usy.org/yourusy/reled/dt/how.asp

Tips from Jewcy.com:

www.jewcy.com/faithhacker/so_you_want_to_write_a_dvar_torah_that_doesnt_suck

National Federation of Temple Youth: www.nfty.org/resources/rc/writingdvreitorah

Divrei Tefillah

Dvar Tefillah Websites

Tifereth Israel Congregation:

www.tifereth-israel.org/DvarTfila/DvarTefila.html

Webyeshiva: <http://blog.webyeshiva.org/category/halacha/tefillah> (videos on tefillah and halacha)

Chabad: www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/862308/jewish/Jewish-Prayer.htm

Donin, Hayim Halevy, *To Pray as a Jew: A Guide to the Prayer Book and Synagogue Service*

Feuer, Avraham Chaim, *Shemoneh Esrei*

Hoffman, Lawrence, A., *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries*

NOTE: This version for Shabbat is the tenth of ten volumes Hoffman has written on the subject – search Google books for “My People’s Prayer Book” for other volumes available online
Zahavy, Tzvee, *Studies in Jewish Prayer* (www.zahavy.com/studies.html)

Additional Online Resources

Primary sources:

Mechon-Mamre - JPS 1917 edition of the Tanach: www.mechon-mamre.org

Soncino Online Talmud: www.come-and-hear.com/talmud

E-daf Talmud (page by page, in GIF format): www.e-daf.com

Shulchan Aruch (Jewish law): www.torah.org/advanced/shulchan-aruch

Snunit: www.snunit.k12.il (a Hebrew portal for educational information, full text of a lot of rabbinic literature)

Mikranet (primary and secondary sources in Hebrew: www.mikranet.org.il)

Background information on Torah and Judaism:

www.myjewishlearning.com

www.jewfaq.org

www.jewishencyclopedia.com

www.chabad.org

www.askmoses.com

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org

www.halakhah.org

Publications useful for writing a Dvar Tefillah (not available online)

Hammer, Reuven, *Entering Jewish Prayer*

Hammer, Reuven, *Or Hadash, A Commentary on Siddur Sim Shalom*

Hoffman, Lawrence A., *The Way Into Jewish Prayer*

Kirzner, Yitzhak, *The Art of Jewish Prayer*

Mandelkern, Solomon, ed., *Concordance of the Bible*

Steinsaltz, Adin, *A Guide to Jewish Prayer*

Selected Siddurim and Sifrei Kodesh

The Artscroll Siddur

Siddur Sim Shalom (w/ commentary)

Koren Siddur (w/ commentary)

Mikraot Gedolot (Biblical text with numerous commentaries)

Tehillim Rabbah (Midrashic commentary on the book of Psalms)

From Union for Reform Judaism

How to Write a D'var Torah: A Beginner's Guide

Originally published in [Inside Leadership](#).

As a trustee, you may be asked to present *divrei Torah* at meetings and on other occasions. Nora Perlmutter, the president of Temple Chai in Phoenix, Arizona, was asked by her rabbi to include a short *d'var Torah* when she made the announcements to the congregation at a Friday night service. Why? As she stated, "The congregation would see that laypeople as well as the rabbi can read and discuss Torah, and the board members would become more knowledgeable, which would enhance their Judaism."

Although there are many different techniques for writing a *d'var Torah*, they all include the following elements:

1. **Allocate plenty of time.** You may not actually write your *d'var Torah* until the last minute, but give yourself time to think about the *parashah*, to let your mind visit and revisit the text.
2. **Read the *parashah* for the week and whatever interpretations you can find.** You can obtain commentaries from your rabbi, your education director, and your library. There is no need to reinvent the wheel: People have been pondering these writings for thousands of years. Avail yourself of their wisdom. It will give you food for thought and different approaches to the text. Consider these sources:
 - *Plaut's Commentary* provides clear insights into Torah and haftarah.
 - Field's *A Torah Commentary for Our Times* is a user-friendly reference that includes traditional as well as contemporary insights.
 - Nehama Leibowitz's *Studies* provides authoritative modern perspectives.
 - The Soncino *Chumash* and *Rashi* in particular are the classic rabbinic commentaries.
 - *The Five Books of Moses* by Everett Fox is a word-for-word translation of the Hebrew text.
 - *The Encyclopaedia Judaica* is a classic resource.
 - [Reform Voices of Torah](#) features contemporary commentaries by modern scholars in the Reform Movement.

Using any of the ideas from the commentaries above is fair game, but remember to cite them. What is most likely to happen when you find that someone else's idea engages you is that you will incorporate it into your own thoughts in such a way that by the time you are finished, the original author wouldn't even be able to claim credit for it. And remember that your own life experiences can be a poignant and fertile source of ideas.

3. **Determine your approach.** Consider these possibilities:
 - **Analyze a small fragment of the text in great detail.** You will know that you have picked a good one if other commentators are as interested in it as you are.

- **Observe the text from a distance, taking note of some of its interesting details.** This approach is particularly suitable for parashiyot that deal with ritual details at great length. Discuss the role of minutiae in the building of a religious life. After all, it is said that God is in the details.
 - **Begin with an idea from the text and apply it to another issue that is of great interest to you.** For example, if the text contains a long list of names, present a history of the origins of some typical Jewish names, perhaps including the names of those present.
 - **Analyze the characters of biblical figures and the events of their lives in ways that will shed some light on our own.** For example, consider the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau and the issue of preferred children.
 - **Using the classic form for the *d'var Torah*, present several apparently discrepant facts** and then explain how they are not contradictions at all but instead point to a deeper meaning that is not obvious at first.
 - **Historical insights can illuminate a text in an exciting way.** Even if you don't draw any deep morals from this approach, it can still be enriching.
4. **Write a first draft that grapples with the meaning.** A *d'var Torah* does not merely summarize the *parashah*. If you are having a problem, try the indirect approach: After your initial reading of the *parashah* and some commentaries, write down any thoughts you have about it and then set what you have written aside. Keep it in the back of your mind. Read it right before you go to bed. Think about it when you are running or driving. Once you begin writing your *d'var Torah*, jot down all your thoughts no matter how tangential they are: They may lead you somewhere.
 5. **Edit, edit, edit.** It is usually harder to be brief, but brevity is always appreciated. There is no such thing as a too short *d'var Torah*. A few thoughts and examples are really all you need to present. If your material is sufficiently suggestive, there is nothing wrong with letting people finish on their own what you are saying.

Presenting a *d'var Torah* should not primarily serve to feed your own ego, although it may also do that. It should be an attempt to perform a holy act, and it is within that context that you should make your preparations. If you keep this in mind, you will find personal pleasure and growth among the by-products of your efforts. You may even become a great teacher of Torah.