

# How to Write a D'var Torah

**Read the entire Parashah and Haftarah** in a language you understand fluently. Then answer the following questions:

1. In which of the five books of the Torah does the Parashah take place? \_\_\_\_\_

2. The Parashah begins at chapter \_\_\_\_\_ verse \_\_\_\_\_ and ends at chapter \_\_\_\_\_ verse \_\_\_\_\_.

3. **Where** do the events in the Parashah take place?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. **When** (within the Torah's timeline) does the Parashah take place?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. List the **important characters** who appear in the Parashah:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. List 3 **major events** that occur in the Parashah. If the Parashah contains mostly laws, list 3 **significant laws**

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

7. Come up with 3 (or more) **questions** about the Parashah. The best questions deal with passages in the text that bothered you, or sections that you really liked.

a. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Now choose one of these questions to explore in more detail.

# PARDES

## The “Orchard” of Studying Torah

As you investigate your question in greater depth, you should explore what Jewish sources have to say about the topic. There are four traditional ways to study Sacred Scripture, expressed as an acronym by the word **PaRDeS**, meaning “orchard.”

Whenever one studies or teaches Torah, it is important to be clear about which method one is using to understand the text.

**P’shat** – “Isigesis.” Plain meaning of the text. What is the internal meaning of a word or phrase? What would it have meant to a reader living at the time in which it was written?

**Remez** – Allusion, a veiled allusion in the text that can be revealed by gematria (numerical value of letters, or acronym, etc.

**D’rash** – “Exegesis.” Homiletical interpretation. Midrash. This seeks to explain something about a text in a way that would not be possible from within the text itself.

**Sod** – Secret mystical or kabbalistic interpretation.

Every commentary is written by a human being in a particular time and place. Consider what that person might be thinking about. Why is s/he choosing to comment on this particular passage? What question or problem in the text is s/he trying to address?

# Writing the First Draft of Your D'var Torah

## The Structuring of a Drashah

One should not begin structuring a drashah before clearly identifying:

- a. The need to be addressed.
- b. The act or acts to be suggested that might contribute toward meeting the need.
- c. The ethical value or values that the commended act will concretize.
- d. The Torah text in which that ethical value explicitly or implicitly inheres.
- e. The formulation of the proposition underlying the drashah.

There is no logical order that the darshan must follow in identifying the components of his projected drashah, but their identification will contribute greatly to the logical organization of the drashah.

From "The Conservative Rabbi as Darshan," by Rabbi Simon Greenberg

---

Put in simpler terms, every D'var Torah should include the following:

- **Thesis** – expresses a Jewish value-concept in a single sentence
  - **Torah portion** – What in the parashah supports your thesis?
  - **Commentary** – How does Jewish tradition understand the parashah and your value-concept?
  - **Application** – How can listeners apply this value-concept to contemporary life?
- 

## INTRODUCTION

**Hook** – Find a way to grab your listeners' attention. This can be with a story, a joke, a provocative question – something that would be interesting to most people in the room. It is usually not a good idea to begin your D'var Torah talking about the parashah. Whatever you do to "hook" your listeners, it should transition into your thesis.

**Thesis** – What is the (positive) lesson that your listeners will come away with? You should be able to say it in one sentence. A thesis should express a Jewish value-concept.

## BODY PARAGRAPHS

1. Tell us about the Parashah. Give your listeners the information that they need to understand your thesis and how the Torah portion relates, but do not go overboard.
2. Ask a question about the Parashah. Discuss possible answers. Try to find a traditional commentary or midrash. The answer that you provide should support your thesis.
3. How is this answer relevant to us? You might want to give an example(s) from world events, popular culture, your own life, etc.

## CONCLUSION

Restate your thesis and summarize your major points. What would you like your listeners to do or think about now that they have heard you speak?

## General Suggestions for Effective Communication

### **Keep it Simple**

Put yourself in the shoes of someone listening to your D'var Torah who is unfamiliar with the Parashah, understands little about Judaism, and does not know any Hebrew. What will this person need to hear to understand your point?

### **Stay Focused**

Everything you say should further develop your thesis. Anything that does not move your argument forward will likely distract your listeners and should probably not be said.

### **Length**

There is no rule about how long a D'var Torah should be. If you have fully communicated your thesis, it will be the right length. Most people speak approximately 130 words per minute. Try to determine your speaking speed. That should give you an idea about how long your D'var Torah will be. My Divrei Torah tend to be 1200-2000 words.

### **Make Stories Exciting**

Stories, even of events that happened long ago, tend to be more engaging for listeners when told in the present tense. Also, dialogue makes stories come alive.

### **Limit Quotations**

Ideas will sound much better coming out of your mouth when they are expressed in your own words. Only quote someone else if you feel an idea needs to be expressed in the author's language. Otherwise, feel free to summarize, but be sure to credit the person whose ideas you are borrowing.

### **Avoid the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person**

Nobody likes to be told what to do. We like to feel like a speaker is "one of us." Try to use "we" and "us" rather than "you."

### **Eye Contact**

Remember the 3 L's of effective eye contact:

**Look** around the room.

**Lock** eyes with someone.

**Linger** on that person's eyes until you finish your sentence and phrase.

### **Speak Slowly and Loudly**

If you feel like you are speaking too slowly, it is probably the right speed. Be loud, without shouting.

Whoever says a word in the name of the one who spoke it brings redemption to the world, as it says: "Then Esther said to the King in the name of Mordechai..." - Pirkei Avot 6:6

## Sources for Preparing Divrei Torah

### BOOKS

The following books in English, mostly from Rabbi Berkenwald's personal collection, are available at Sinai. Please make arrangements with Joelle to access the library and check out books.

#### Torah Translations

*Etz Hayim Chumash* - JPS, Conservative  
*The Hertz Chumash* - Soncino, Conservative  
*The Jewish Study Bible* - JPS, Conservative  
*The Stone Chumash* - Artscroll, Orthodox  
*The Torah - A Women's Commentary* - URJ, Reform  
*The Five Books of Moses*, Robert Alter  
*The Five Books of Moses*, Everett Fox

#### Torah Commentaries

*The Commentators' Bible - The JPS Miqraot Gedolot* (3 vols.), Michael Carasik  
*The Midrash Rabbah* - Soncino  
*The JPS Torah Commentary* (5 vols.)  
*The Torah Portion-by-Portion*, Seymour Rossel  
*A Torah Commentary For Our Times* (3 vols.), Harvey Fields  
*Studies in Bereshit, Shemot, Vayikra, Bamidbar, Devarim* (7 vols.), Nehama Leibowitz  
*Torah of Reconciliation* - Rabbi Sheldon Lewis  
*Leviticus - A Continental Commentary* - Jacob Milgrom

#### Other Resources

*The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*  
*Jewish Literacy* - Rabbi Joseph Telushkin  
*A Code of Jewish Ethics* (2 vols.) - Rabbi Joseph Telushkin  
*The Book of Legends* - Bialik and Ravnitzky  
*The Observant Life*

### WEBSITES

#### **Congregation Sinai Online Resources**

<http://www.sinai-sj.org/online-resources>

#### **United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism**

<http://uscj.org/JewishLivingandLearning/WeeklyParashah/TorahSparks/Archive/Default.aspx> On Torah Sparks offers a summary of the weekly Torah portion, along with insights quotations and questions for open discussion in synagogue or at home.

**Torah From JTS**

<http://learn.jtsa.edu>

Original content includes both writings and podcasts on the weekly Torah portion; formatted and downloadable Jewish texts; and audio and video classes.

**Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies**

<http://ziegler.aju.edu/default.aspx?id=3889>

Learn about topics in Jewish life, the weekly Torah portion, the High Holidays, and more with faculty from the Ziegler School.

**Conservative Yeshiva**

<http://www.conservativeyeshiva.org>

Wonderful online learning opportunities prepared by Dr. Joshua Kulp. In addition, you can register for online classes.

**Schechter Institute**

<http://www.schechter.edu>

Read new articles on timely Jewish topics by Schechter faculty.

**Encyclopedia Judaica Online**

<http://www.bjeindy.org/resources/library/access-to-encyclopedia-judaica/>

The Encyclopaedia Judaica is an encyclopedia of the Jewish people and Judaism. The Bureau of Jewish Education of Central Indiana has generously made Encyclopaedia Judaica available online for free.

**MyJewishLearning.com**

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/>

A comprehensive adult Jewish education website with a section on the weekly parasha that includes many contemporary commentaries.

**Weekly insights on the parasha with commentaries by Nehama Leibovitz**

<http://www.jewishagency.org/JewishAgency/English/Jewish+Education/Compelling+Content/Jewish+Time/Jewish+Sources/Iyunum/>

High level analysis of the parasha and medieval commentators by one of the giants of contemporary Torah interpretation.

**The Judaica Press Complete Tanach with Rashi**

[http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/63255/jewish/The-Bible-with-Rashi.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/63255/jewish/The-Bible-with-Rashi.htm)

A translation of Rashi's commentary, the classic interpretation of the Bible from the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

**Family Shabbat Table Talk**

<http://urj.org/holidays/shabbat/intro/>

From the Union for Reform Judaism this site includes: an excerpt from the Torah text that will be the focus of discussion, a short d'rash (teaching) on the text, and some discussion questions .