

Dvar Torah: Dos and Don'ts

Factor your audience's expectations and the limits of their patience into your presentation.

By Rabbi Richard J. Israel | September 25, 2003



Reprinted with permission from [The Kosher Pig and Other Curiosities of Modern Jewish Life](#) (Torah Aura Productions). The essay from which this article was excerpted, "How to Give a D'var Torah," originally appeared in *New Traditions*, published by the [National Havurah Committee](#).

The [Torah text](#) is the common ground between you and your listeners. They assume that you will find something in that text that will be worth their while to hear. They are not expecting to learn about the [political situation in Israel](#) or what was in the *New York Review of Books* last week. Neither are they expecting you to explicate the Torah in a way which is not at all congruent with their sense of the tradition. They anticipate hearing some old ideas or familiar verses in a new way that will invigorate their Jewish lives.

This means that you may not turn a text on its head by teaching, for example, that [Esau](#) [Jacob's twin brother] or [Amalek](#) [an enemy of the Israelites], for some interesting reason that you have just discovered, are splendid fellows. You may conclude that [Joseph](#) is selfish and that [David](#) has [serious personal flaws](#); the Torah knows that and agrees with you.



But you may not announce that Goliath is a misunderstood hero or that it is unreasonable to pick on poor [Pharaoh](#) who was really a kind and gentle man—at least not unless you want to alienate your listeners. You must work, even if loosely, within the traditional understanding of the character and events of the Bible. A *d'var Torah*, though it involves learning and challenge for the listener, also has a [ritualistic](#) quality. At some level it must provide comfort.

Not everyone accepts that proposition. There is a kind of person, often inexperienced, for whom making other Jews angry is a source of joy. They usually declare how pleased they are to be making others think. Instead of calling attention to Torah, which is the appropriate task, what they really do is call attention to themselves. Those who must listen to such speakers will always feel shortchanged.

Try not to get carried away by your conclusions, clever though they may be. You will generally be better served if you are modest about your claims. Ours is a very long and complex tradition, and there are very few propositions that can be stated flat-out without lots of qualifications. Any sentence that starts by saying "Judaism teaches that..." probably ought to make your listeners a little nervous. It is less pretentious and more honest to note that "Rabbi X teaches that..." or, "It is possible to interpret the text in the following manner."

If you can speak from notes, rather than a text, your *d'var Torah* will have freshness about it that cannot come from a read text. One option is an index card with no more than five separate entries of one line each.

In Praise of Brevity

But far better a read text than sloppiness or talking too long. Verbosity and bluffing are usually part of the same package. Inadequate preparation is one of the most frequent reasons people talk too long. It is usually more work to be brief. But even if your brevity is not the product of

thoroughness or wisdom, a brief bad talk is always appreciated more than a long one. Also, the more dubious the methodology, the briefer your comments should be. That you are bluffing with a [Snuff Box \[see accompanying article, "Seven Approaches to Giving a D'var Torah"\]](#) may be perfectly apparent to everyone, but people will be more forgiving if your talk is short.

There is almost no such thing as too short a *d'var Torah*. Don't even be afraid of one liners or quick insights into two or three verses of the *parashah* [weekly Torah portion]. If you can hang them all together, so much the better, but if you can't it is not serious. For some reason, groups of three often work well and provide a certain reassuring symmetry. If you can make three points or give three examples, your *d'var Torah* will feel complete regardless of how brief it is.

If the material you have been presenting is sufficiently suggestive, there is nothing wrong with letting people finish what you are saying inside their heads. More plants have died of over-watering than from thirst, and more Jews have been turned off by talks that are too long than by those that have been too short or too evocative.

In my view, it is not necessary for a *d'var Torah* to be excessively earnest. You should not be a stand-up comedian, but a jigger of wry is rarely out of place. Gentle humor, if it is not overdone, helps put your listeners on your side. It makes them more ready to listen to the other things you have to say.

If you are really new at this sort of thing, giving your *d'var Torah* may be a terrifying experience. Your listeners do not want to know that. Cover your fears as best you can and help people sitting in front of you to relax. Knowing that they are in safe hands, they will listen better.

[You Have Cast Your Bread Upon the Water](#)

You should know about an important aspect of giving a *d'var Torah* that is quite unsettling. You can work very hard on a talk only to find that it falls on deaf ears. On the other hand, you can whip up a little something that morning and discover that it saves someone's soul.

It is more than slightly bewildering to have a couple tell you 10 years later how this or that *d'var Torah* that you gave changed the direction of their lives, saved their marriage, or convinced their son to return to Jewish life.

You may not remember who they are or what it was you said, even though you feel sure it couldn't have been what they heard. I mention this because teaching Torah is real responsibility. People are often quite open and vulnerable on a Shabbat morning. Once you send out your words, you never know just what use people will make of them. So be sure they are the words you want to say.

Giving a *d'var Torah* should not primarily serve to feed your own ego, although it may do that too. 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 that in mind you may find personal pleasure and growth among the by-products of your efforts. You may even become a great Torah teacher.

[SPONSORED: "Why Be Jewish?" Edgar Bronfman's clarion call to a generation of secular, disaffected and unaffiliated Jews. Get it now!](#)