Giving a Dvar Torah or Drash

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Our tradition says "*Shivim panim l'torah*/the Torah has 70 faces."[2] A dvar Torah (literally: "word of Torah") is a sharing of one of the faces of Torah. There are so many facets and potentials to the endless wellspring of Torah. There are always new insights, new interpretations to be offered and engaging with a couple thousand years of Jewish wisdom can be wonderfully inspiring and nourishing.

General things to keep in mind:

- *Limmud torah*/the study of Torah is a mitzvah, a sacred practice. It should feel **FUN**, even joyous! It's a path of discovery. So often I sit back in wonder and gratitude at the alchemical process that unfolds in the drash process journey, in the arc from where I started to where I ended up several hours later, with five books spread over my desk.
- The opportunity for sustained meaningful reflection that writing a dvar torah requires is an incredible gift in our busy, too often scattered lives.
- Drash comes from the Hebrew word Midrash = to expound. The idea of a drash is to teach or explain or raise questions about something that is in the Torah. Judaism always reads Torah, our most sacred text, with midrashim and commentary, with these teachings or expoundings. If you just read the Torah without any teaching or creative interpretation, this is not a Jewish way to read the Torah! Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg calls this "Jews for Exegesis!"

A drash process:

- **Step One:** Clear your mind of all preconceived ideas about the *parsha* (Torah portion). We all carry pictures in our head from Hebrew school, DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, popular culture. **Try to let the text be as fresh and new as possible, and try to open your heart and your mind to it.**
    - As you sit down to read the parsha, f you have not already said it today, say the bracha for Torah study (page 168-171 in Kol Haneshamah), or see the end of this document. This helps recognize the sacred context for your study. The paragraph (p. 170) after the blessing is quite beautiful.

- **Step Two: read the entire parsha.** Some strongly suggest to read it aloud, either to yourself or with someone else. Take notes as you go; make a simple outline. ***Try to have more than one translation available*** (at sefaria.org, you can choose from several different translations of the Torah) **—remember that every translation is also an interpretation.** You may need to read part of the previous parsha or the subsequent parsha for context.

- **Step Three:** As you read the parsha, what jumps out at you? What seems interesting, perplexing, inspiring? What would you like to know more about? Follow

[1] Much of this material is drawn from a document created by Rabbi Toba Spitzer, and also one by Rabbi Jeremy Schwartz.

[2] Bamidbar Rabbah, 13:16.

your curiosity. One approach: either during your reading or after you are finished, write down several drash questions you have about the parsha. Rather than points of information or facts, drash questions (or "big questions") ask why someone did a certain thing, or what a certain verse or event is trying to teach us or could mean for our lives or the world today. These questions may come from things in the portion that interest or inspire you, and/or things that bother or confuse you about what the Torah and Judaism mean. And if these end up being comments rather than questions, that is fine. The point is to make notes of things that you want to think more about.

- **Step Four: Get hold of a few commentaries** (see the resources section of this doc). Use the commentaries to spark your own thinking, to bolster your own ideas, to argue with, or to take you deeper into your question.

⇒ **Don't do too much**. As you begin thinking about your dvar, focus on one aspect of the portion--a theme, one verse or a couple verses, one story. For a 7-10 minute dvar, there just isn't time or space to cover everything an entire parsha contains. **A dvar *is not a book report—you don't have to let people know everything that happens in the entire* parsha (although you may need to do a brief summary to give people some context).**

⇒ **Look for questions, not answers.** Some things to look for: are there any apparent contradictions in the text? What **don't** we know? (for example, how did Sarah feel when Abraham dragged Isaac off to sacrifice him? Who exactly did Jacob wrestle with beside the river?) The next step is to see what answers the text—and possibly the commentaries—suggest to you. But it's also okay if you don't find an answer—**raising good questions for folks to ponder or to have a short discussion about can be a great drash.**

⇒ **Look for patterns in the text.** The rabbis taught that the Torah never wastes a word, that everything is there for a purpose, and that's a good rule of thumb. The Everett Fox translation of the Torah is especially good for this purpose, as he translates fairly literally, and pays attention to repetitions and literary patterns (the new JPS translation is least helpful in this regard, although it is very readable). Look for repeated words or themes, and think about what these repetitions might be pointing to. Also, look for echoes of other Torah stories that are familiar to you (e.g. Leah having "weak eyes," and Isaac having "dimmed eyes," and the tricks played on or through each of them).

⇒ **Bringing in a personal story** or example to illustrate or connect to whatever overall point you want to make is always helpful and more engaging. It can also be a good hook to begin your drash.

A Super-Simple Guide to the Four-Sentence Drash Guide to the Four-Sentence Drash (From Rabbi Noa Kushner)

Sentence 1: "What I am talking about."
Remember, in Torah it is easy to get sucked into recapping the entire parsha (portion) because one story bleeds into the next. Develop a discipline of only reframing the exact piece you are talking about and giving only the context that is necessary.

Sentence 2: "What's my question?"
This is the key to the whole drash. A question is different from a judgment about the parsha. A good way to start is to brainstorm 20 questions about a given section. Then pick your favorite. Remember, a good question opens doors, it doesn't close them.

Sentence 3: "Here's what someone else said about my question."
The more you know about what someone else said, the deeper your answer is likely to be. Chances are, if you asked it, the rabbis also asked it too and have come up with a variety of answers. You may find several conflicting answers that speak to you.

Sentence 4: "This is what I think."
This does not need to be an ultimate answer. Rather, based on your research and your own creative thinking, what is your answer to your own question?

Resources
https://www.sefaria.org/texts. Sefaria is a vast and extraordinary resource. Here you can find the classic commentary on the Torah by Rashi (11th c), who brought the entire rabbinic tradition of midrash to a line-by-line explanation/expansion of the biblical text. To easily get to multiple commentators on a given verse on Sefaria, type your verse into the search box, then click on the verse, and you will see a box with many commentaries come up. Quite a number of them are in English. Sefaria also houses a vast collection of study sheets created by users – if you browse "Topics," you can choose biblical characters or other themes to find these study sheets, which often contain midrashim, commentary, etc.

Resources in the Oseh library:

Grab your laptop and head over to immerse yourself in some of the resources at the Oseh library! Here are some you can find there:

The JPS Commentators Bible. This is a 5 volume English commentary that translates all of the classical commentators, verse by verse.

The Women's Torah Commentary. Produced by the Reform movement, this modern commentary is from a feminist perspective. It also has wonderful resources at the end of each parsha, taking you deeper into some aspect of the parsha, including poetry connected to the parsha.

The Language of Truth: the Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet. If you're looking for a more spiritual take on parsha, this 19th century Hasidic commentary is a great choice. The translation also includes a paragraph or two of contemporary reflection from Rabbi Arthur Green that helps bring the traditional Hasidic teaching into the modern era.

Other Resources:

Reconstructing Judaism--https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/divrei-torah/

For a wonderful collection of commentaries on each parsha by LGBTQ+ authors (including Rabbi Toba!), check out **Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on The Hebrew Bible,** ed. by Gregg Drinkwater, Joshua Lesser, and David Shneer.

For a deeply spiritual, yet accessible take on the parsha, you can look at Rabbi Shefa Gold's **Torah Journeys**. These are also available online: http://www.rabbishefagold.com/library/torah/parashot/Even if you don't end up using something from Rabbi Shefa's commentary, just reading her take can expand your sense of what's possible with reading the Torah.

Another great collection is by Rabbi David Kasher, **ParshaNUT**. These are also available online: https://parshanut.com/archive

https://www.thetorah.com/ This site fuses Torah with academic biblical scholarship.