

How to give a Dvar Torah

According to our tradition, the Torah has “seventy faces”. In other words, there are lots of ways to understand it, and there are always new insights to be gained from it. As Ben BagBag said, “Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it.” A dvar torah is a sharing of one of the faces of Torah.

In general, a Dvar Torah asks a question or two about a passage in the Torah and answers them. It’s often a good idea, though not always necessary, for one of the questions to be “What’s this have to do with me/us?” Also, the congregation often learns as much from the questions as from the answers. It is not always obvious that a certain passage in the Torah raises a certain question and raising that question can itself reveal a “face of the Torah.”

Here are some **popular generic questions**:

Some classical questions to ask of a Torah text:

What is the plain meaning of the text? (pshat)

Does the text seem to contradict itself? How can the contradiction be resolved?

Does the text seem to include redundant, extraneous, or superfluous statements?

Can new meaning be derived from the seeming extra words?

Does the text allude to something else in the Tanakh? What can be learned from the allusion?

Is part of the story missing? How can it be filled in? (This question is answered by telling the missing part of the story.)

What have other commentators said about this text? (Given that most congregants are not that familiar with various commentaries, just sharing someone else’s commentary and why you like it can be an interesting dvar torah.)

What is the connection of passages that are next to each other?

Is there a symbolic meaning to the details of the passage?

Some perhaps less classical questions:

What does this have to do with me?

What was the historical/political context out of which this comes? What difference does that make?

This text makes me angry/makes me laugh/etc; can I learn from it anyway?

What are the unstated assumptions in this text?

What can we learn from literary forms, such as the repetition of theme words?

Supposing this was written by our ancestors (rather than by God), what was their experience that let them write this?

How would we say this/deal with this theme in modern language? (A close relative of this question is what’s known as the “spring board” dvar torah. For example, “this parashah deals with family dynamics. Let’s talk about family dynamics.”)

some tools for arriving at questions and answers

I alluded to other commentators above. Commentaries can be a good source of possible answers and even of questions. (Reading the most classical of classical commentators, Rashi, is like playing Jeopardy: he gives you answers, but it's often a fairly difficult puzzle to figure out what his question was.) The best available starting places for English commentary are the editions of the Torah published by UAHC, edited by Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, and the Etz Hayim edition from JPS and the Conservative movement. Of course, if you're looking for resources, the rabbi would be happy to help.

two formats

The two basic formats are: talk versus discussion. In the talk format, you raise the questions and you give the answers. In the discussion format, you raise the questions and, if you're nice, provide at least some tools for answering it, and then leave it up to the congregation to explore the answer.

so, to summarize,

You might want to start off with a "hook": a question or story or statement to grab people's attention. Then you'll probably want to get them to understand your question. You'll suggest an answer or two, which might include a suggestion of how we might think, feel, or act differently based on what you've learned for the Torah passage(s). And you'll conclude. Some people end with a prayer, or by saying "Shabbat Shalom."