



PLANNING A D'VAR TORAH by Toby Katz

PICKING A TOPIC

For most kids preparing for a bar or bat mitzvah, the hardest part of writing their d'var Torah is picking an interesting topic. Here's how you can make the whole process of picking a topic easy, meaningful, and even FUN.

Getting Started

Step 1: Find a good English translation of your *parashah* (weekly Torah portion) and your *Haftarah* (selection from *Nevi'im*, Prophets, that will be read on that Shabbat). The translation you choose should include commentary on the meaning of the text. Read it two or three times, along with the commentary, so that you become familiar with it.

Step 2: Create an outline for the *parashah* (and the *Haftarah*) listing all the events, laws, travels, people, sacrifices, and other topics found in your portion.

Step 3: Go back over your outline and circle or highlight the points that interest you. These are possible topics for your d'var Torah.

I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING TO SAY

Don't throw your outline away. We're only just getting started.

What is a D'VAR TORAH?

It is how YOU see or how YOU interpret the events and the issues in your *parashah* or *Haftarah*, and how you teach them to your family, friends, and congregation.

In picking a topic, remember that your d'var Torah is your one big opportunity to address your congregation, your family, and your guests. Ask yourself:

- What moral or ethical lessons do I want to teach them?
- What message do I want to leave with them?
- What action do I want them to take to make the world better?

INJECT YOURSELF INTO THE TEXT

Go back over your outline and try injecting YOURSELF into the text.

Is there a cause or issue that you really care about? Can you relate it to your *parashah* or *Haftarah*?

Do any of the events in the *parashah* or *Haftarah* relate to incidents in your own life or in the history of your family? What did you or your family member do? What could the people in the text have done differently? If you were there, what would you have done? How could a different action have affected Jewish history?

What are your favorite subjects, sports, or hobbies? Can you use your background to find new insights into the message of your *parashah* or *Haftarah* or to the descriptions of the events? For example, your experiences on a team sport might lead to insights in the value of community or leadership.

WANT MORE IDEAS?

How about telling your *parashah*'s story from a different point of view?

What is a POINT OF VIEW?

The point of view is how the storyteller sees the story, the events, or the issues described in the *parashah* or *Haftarah*, based on the storyteller's background, political ideas, or identity. Go back to your outline and try telling one of the incidents from the opposite viewpoint. For example, what would the story of Adam and Eve look like from the snake's point of view? Or the Exodus story from Pharaoh's point of view?

Make a case for or against the actions of one of the people in your *parashah* or *Haftarah*. Pretend you are the prosecutor (or defense attorney) and argue the case for or against the person in the story. [This will require research. Your Rabbi or synagogue librarian can recommend books that will teach you about laws, customs, attitudes, etc. in the time the events took place.] If you pick this option, ask yourself if it is fair to judge these people by today's standards.

STILL NOT SATISFIED?

Go back to your outline. Pick one of the topics and ask yourself:

WHY IS THIS IN THERE?

Your d'var Torah can answer that question and focus on the lesson the text can teach us.

Do we really need to know the names of every rest stop our ancestors made in the wilderness of Sinai, or the number of oxen and sheep that were sacrificed when the *mishkan* (tabernacle) was

dedicated? Our Sages taught that every word in the Torah was placed there for a purpose, usually to teach an important lesson to future generations. The lesson isn't always obvious. For example, the story of Adam and Eve teaches us that all people are descended from the same two people. Therefore, no one can claim that their ancestors were superior to anyone else's.

If you pick this option, it is up to YOU to interpret the lesson and to teach it to the congregation. You may want to discuss this with your Rabbi to get some suggestions on how to approach the topic.

Whichever topic you choose, your d'var Torah is your big opportunity to teach your family, friends, and congregation, and perhaps even to charge them with a mission that will improve the world.

MAZEL TOV on becoming a bar/bat mitzvah! *Behatzlaha* (Good Luck) and *Yashir Koach* (Congratulations, or literally, may your strength be firm)!