

New Voices of Torah Workshop

Rabbi Michael Safra

Blessing Before Torah Study:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצוותיו, וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה:

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melek ha-olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu la-asok b'divrei Torah.

Praised are You Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who sanctifies us with the commandments and commands us to immerse in the words of Torah.

Textual Meditations on Torah Study

1. Leviticus Rabbah 22:1

"And the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God, and written upon them (*va-aleihem k'tuvim*) all (*k'kol*) the exact words (*ha-d'varim*) that the Lord had addressed to you on the mountain out of the fire on the day of the Assembly" (Deuteronomy 9:10). Rabbi Joshua ben Levi taught: Instead of "on them" (*aleihem*), it says "and on them" (*va-aleihem*); instead of "all" (*kol*), it says "as all" (*k'kol*); instead of "words" (*d'varim*), "the words" (*ha-d'varim*); [and in Deuteronomy 8:1, it says "all the commandments" (*kol ha-mitzvah*) instead of "commandments" (*mitzvah*)] – this means that Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, additional legends, and even that which a good student will one day recite before his teacher, it was all spoken to Moses on Sinai, as it says: "Sometimes there is a phenomenon of which they say, 'Look this one is new!' – it occurred long since, in ages that went before us" (Ecclesiastes 1:10).

ויתן יי אלי את שני לוחות [האבנים כתבים באצבע אלהים ועליהם ככל הדברים אשר דבר ה' עמכם בהר בתוך האש ביום הקהל] (דברים ט, י). ר' יהושע בן לוי אמר עליהם ועליהם, כל ככל, דברים הדברים (שם דברים ט, י), מצוה כל מצוה (שם דברים ח, א), מקרא משנה תלמוד תוספת הגדה ואפילו מה שתלמיד ותיק עתיד לומר לפני רבו כלן נאמרו למשה בסני, שני יש דבר שיאמר ראה זה חדש הוא חבירו משיב עליו כבר היה לעולמים (קהלת א, י).

2. Talmud Hagigah 3b

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria opened with this teaching: "The words of the sages are like goads, like nails, planted in prodding sticks. They were given by one Shepherd" (Ecclesiastes 12:11). Why are words of Torah compared to a goad? To teach that just as a goad points the ox in the right direction in order to bring forth life to the world, so do the words of Torah direct those who study them from the path of death to the path of life. Were you to think that just as a goad is moveable and impermanent, so too are words of Torah moveable and impermanent, the text adds "like nails." Were you to think that just as a nail diminishes and never increases,

so too do words of Torah diminish and never increase, the text adds "planted" – just as a sapling grows and increases, so do the words of Torah grow and increase.

"In prodding sticks" (read "Men of Assembly") – these are Torah scholars who sit in various assemblies and immerse themselves in Torah. Some declare things impure while others declare them pure, some prohibit while others permit, some declare invalid while others declare valid. A person might ask: "How can I possibly study Torah now?" The text adds, "They were all given by one Shepherd" – one God gave them, one lecturer taught them, from the mouth of the Blessed Lord of all Creations, as it is written, "God spoke *all* these words" (Exodus 20:1). You must make your ear as a hopper to hear the words of those who declare pure and those who declare impure, those who prohibit and those who permit, those who declare invalid and those who declare valid."

ואף הוא פתח ודרש: (קהלת י"ב) דברי חכמים כדרבנות וכמשמרות נטועים בעלי אספות נתנו מרעה אחד. למה נמשלו דברי תורה לדרבן? לומר לך: מה דרבן זה מכוין את הפרה לתלמיה להוציא חיים לעולם, אף דברי תורה מכוונין את לומדיהן מדרכי מיתה לדרכי חיים. אי מה דרבן זה מטלטל אף דברי תורה מטלטלין - תלמוד לומר משמרות. אי מה מסמר זה חסר ולא יתר אף דברי תורה תסירין ולא יתירין - תלמוד לומר נטועים, מה נטיעה זו פרה ורבה - אף דברי תורה פריין ורביין. בעלי אספות - אלו תלמידי חכמים שיושבין אסופות ועוסקין בתורה, הללו מטמאין והללו מטהרין, הללו אוסרין והללו מתירין, הללו פוסלין והללו מכשירין. שמא יאמר אדם: היאך אני למד תורה מעתה? תלמוד לומר: כולם נתנו מרעה אחד - אל אחד נתנו, פרנס אחד אמרו, מפי אדון כל המעשים ברוך הוא, דכתיב (שמות כ') וידבר אלהים את כל הדברים האלה. אף אתה עשה אזניך כאפרכסת, וקנה לך לב מבין לשמוע את דברי מטמאים ואת דברי מטהרים, את דברי אוסרין ואת דברי מתירין, את דברי פוסלין ואת דברי מכשירין.

Some Critical Approaches

Source Criticism – This approach breaks the Torah down into various sources, primarily from the J (Yahwist), E (Elohist), D (Deuteronomist), and P (Priestly) schools. The source critical approach helps to explain why stories or laws are often repeated with differing details. It is sometimes helpful to recognize that the Bible rarely speaks in a singular voice on any issue; source criticism invites the reader to isolate differing viewpoints.

Leading Words (*leitwords*) – When certain words are repeated more times than necessary in a single passage, those words may offer a clue as to the Torah's message or primary theme. For example, the nine verse narrative of the Story of Babel (Genesis 11) repeats the phrase "*kol ha-aretz* / all the earth" five times. The emphasis could belie the enormity of the problem of humanity's corruption; or perhaps it is a reminder that even as people are spread into multiple nations with confused languages, God remains the lone ruler over all the earth.

Feminist Criticism – One feminist approach is to examine the roles of the Bible's various female characters in order to understand their contribution to history. Another approach would be to uncover the patriarchal or misogynistic undertones in various narratives and to ask: How might this story be presented differently if the feminine voice were included?

Canonical Criticism – This approach looks at the totality of the Bible and asks: How did that book make it in? A subset would be to explore difficult passages and mine them for meanings relevant to our world.

Literary Criticism – If source critics break the text apart, literary critics read the text as a whole. Even if one assumes multiple biblical authors, we should not assume that the texts were pieced together randomly or that the redactors and early communities of readers were not aware of the repetitions and discrepancies that exist. Literary critics often find meaning in the medieval Jewish commentators because they are engaged in a similar enterprise. The traditional commentators did not assume multiple authors, but they recognized the inconsistencies in the text, which means that they often asked the same questions that modern critics ask.

History of Interpretation – This approach brings the study of Torah up a level. Instead of studying the text itself, one engages the commentators in a debate with one another. It is interesting because, most of these scholars lived in differing time periods and lands, which means they never knew one another. For example, in Genesis 37:15, Joseph meets “a man” when he is out in the fields looking for his brothers. The man helps Joseph find his brothers, which sets off the chain reaction where they throw him in a pit, sell him into slavery, he goes to jail, rises up, meets the brothers again, and the Israelites become slaves in Egypt. The commentators ask: Who was this man? Maybe he was the angel Gabriel (Rashi), or just a man (Ibn Ezra), or a messenger of God (Ramban)!

Steps for Building a Discussion

1. Read the text and outline it. Don't spend time worrying about details; if there is something that seems interesting, mark it for later and move on.
2. Look over the outline and pick a theme for further exploration. Use the Seven Approaches to determine the type of theme that will work. If you are having trouble settling on a theme, check out Harvey Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Time*.
3. Ask a question about the text and try to come up with some preliminary answers. This is when some of the other texts and commentaries could be helpful.
4. Plan out a discussion plan:
 - a. Allow people to introduce themselves. Often a leading question is helpful.
 - b. Introduction – Offer a short summary of the entire portion. Tell people what you want to focus on and where you think you are going to go with the discussion.
 - c. Read a text aloud
 - d. Ask a question. Offer preliminary ideas. Discuss.

Selected Resources (available in Blumberg-Zalis Family Library)

Torah Commentaries

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary (2001). This text of the Conservative movement includes the New Jewish Publication Society translation (NJPS; 1985) and three separate commentaries. Above the line is an abbreviated version of the scholarly JPS Torah commentary. Below the line is a compilation of *homiletical* and

midrashic ideas compiled by Harold Kushner. Shaded boxes describe *halakhah l'ma-aseh*, practical issues of Jewish law derived from the Torah text. The volume also includes a nice collection of maps.

The Stone Chumash (1993). This text of the Orthodox movement includes an original, literal (sometimes overly-literal) translation and the complete Rashi text. It includes an often-insightful collection of medieval and modern "authoritative" commentaries.

JPS Torah Commentary. This is a 5-volume set, with additional volumes for Haftarat, Jonah, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Esther. Each volume is written by a different author, with the scope and style varying. The section headings and excurses are particularly helpful for deep exploration of any text.

The Torah: A Modern Commentary (1980). This text of the Reform movement divides the text thematically, if not always according to familiar *aliyah* breakdowns. It includes the NJPS translation, a scholarly commentary by Gunther Plaut, and a series of thematic "gleanings" at the end of each section.

Commentary Collections

Fields, Harvey. *A Torah Commentary for our Times* (1990). Fields offers a summary and then divides each portion into three or four themes. For each theme he asks leading questions and provides summary insights from the medieval commentators.

Green, Arthur. *The Language of Truth: Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet* (1998). Four to five commentaries each week from a prominent Hasidic rabbi of the 19th century. As is common among Hasidim, he "dives" into the text in order to draw conclusions about daily living and larger Jewish and universal values.

JTS Torah Online – www.jtsa.edu/jts-torah-online. Archives are available for several commentaries. These are available for weekly delivery via email as well.

Parashat Hashavua from American Jewish University – www.aju.edu

Methodological Approaches

Holtz, Barry. *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*. A series of essays on modern approaches to Torah, Midrash, medieval commentary, Jewish Philosophy, and mysticism.

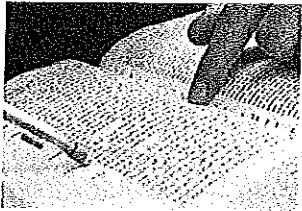
Israel, Richard. "Dvar Torah: Seven Approaches" (2003) Available at www.myjewishlearning.com.

McKenzie, Steven and Stephen Haynes, *To Each Its Own Meaning* (revised 1999). A series of essays on numerous modern critical approaches (source criticism, form criticism, feminist criticism, etc.).

Dvar Torah: Seven Approaches

Thinking of your *d'var Torah* as an example of a standard form can help you plan what to say.

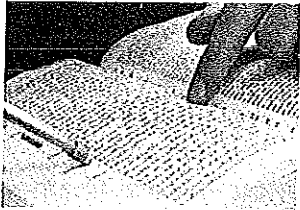
By Rabbi Richard J. Israel | September 25, 2003



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Your *d'var Torah* will almost inevitably fall into some rather specific categories or combinations of a couple of them.

The Microscope



From close up you look at very small fragments of a text in great detail and hope that as you magnify the specks you will discover whole worlds within them. You have to be sure to pick up your specks with care, but you will know that you have some nice ones if the commentators are as interested in them as you are. If they aren't, chances are you should forget it, too.

Example: Take the first word of Genesis or, better yet, the first word of Leviticus (which you'll need more because the story line is not as interesting), and describe how a series of biblical commentators have treated that word, what problem it represented for them, and what generalizations can be made about their resolutions.

The Airplane

Observe the text from a distance, survey the panorama, take note of interesting details, and then as you descend make observations on why the trip was worthwhile in the first place and how to appropriate what you have just observed for your more earthbound existence. The Airplane is especially suitable for those Torah readings that deal with ritual details at great length.

Example: After describing the architecture of the *Mishkan* [the Tabernacle that served as the Israelite's place of worship during their wandering in the wilderness] and its role in the lives of people, you might want to discuss the role of minutiae in the building of a religious life. As the French say, God is to be found in the details.

Or: A discussion of the *Mishkan* often suggests an evaluation of the difference between a Judaism that is fixed in one place, Jerusalem and the Temple, and the portable Judaism of the *Mishkan* that can be carried about wherever we go.

The Diving Board

This one begins with an idea from the text, takes a big jump, and carries it into another issue of greater interest to you.

Example: If the text deals with the furniture of the *Mishkan*, you can talk about the history of the artifacts used in the synagogue. Or if the text devotes a lot of attention to the dress of the priest,

you can discuss Jewish traditions about dress and articles of clothing, the significance of the *tallit* [prayer shawl], the *kippah* [yarmulke], the special hats Jews were required to wear in the Middle Ages, or the self-imposed restrictions that Jewish communities once placed on fancy clothing.

If the text contains long lists of names, you can present a history of the origins of some characteristic Jewish names, including the names of some of the people who will be present when you speak.

If you are new at giving *divrei Torah*, the thematic approaches represented by the Airplane and the Diving Board may be the easiest for you to handle. Unless you are basing yourself on a traditional commentator, stay away from forms like Microscope or Puzzle (see below) until you know enough Hebrew to be able to distinguish between a real nuance in the text and a mere idiosyncrasy of translation.

The Snuff Box

This is a less respectable version of the Diving Board. A visiting *maggid*, or preacher, used to go from one community to the next. Just before he began his only sermon, his snuff box would drop out of sight. "Where is it?" he would ask loudly. "It has vanished, swallowed up the way the earth swallowed up Korah and his company ... which reminds me of an important thought about Korah."

Inventing a non-existent relationship between the text and a talk you would like to give is a technique generated by desperation. If you have just looked at the *parashah* (the weekly Torah reading) for the first time the morning you have to speak and you have discovered that there isn't even any good commentary on the text, then you are in deep trouble and may have to bail yourself out. But even then, the Snuff Box approach is definitely shabby. When you are finished speaking, your listeners have the right to expect that they will know at least some small new thing about the Torah they didn't know before. The Snuff Box rarely provides that. You may be sufficiently stuck that you have no alternative, but this is not a method of which you should be particularly proud.

Occasionally you will have an idea that can legitimately be attached to a number of texts. If, for example, you want to talk about the significance of miracles and have a talk in mind, you can probably hang it on several *parashot* (plural of *parashah*) where miracles are found. Such a *d'var Torah* should not be considered a Snuff Box.

The Biblical Personality

Dealing with the narrative portions of the Torah, it is possible to analyze the characters of biblical figures and the events of their lives in ways that will shed some light on our own. Some of the standard subjects in this category include Jacob and Esau or Joseph and his brothers and the problems of sibling rivalry and preferred children, or Sarah and Hagar and the jealous wife. Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews* can often be of great assistance in supplementing your sense of a biblical character. Originally published in six volumes, it is also condensed into one thick paperback [called *Legends of the Bible*]. *A Certain People of the Book* by Maurice Samuel can also be helpful in this area.

The Puzzle

People love to solve puzzles. If there is classic form for the *d'var Torah*, this is it. You present several apparently discrepant facts or texts and then explain how the contradictions aren't contradictions at all, but instead point to a deeper meaning that was not obvious at first.

Example: Light was created on the first day of creation, while the sun and the moon were not created until the fourth. Where did the original light come from? Rashi has an answer; in fact, he

has several answers. So does contemporary physics. Can one derive an authentic Jewish response to the creationism controversy from these texts?

Or: Why is the story of the mission to find Isaac a wife repeated four times, each time with slight differences?

Or: The Torah tells us that we are not permitted to eat leaven on Passover because the people of Israel did not have enough time to allow their bread to rise as they hurried out of Egypt. But they did have leaven in their bread. Why should we not have been told simply to bake our leavened Passover bread quickly before it has time to rise? That would have been a closer approximation to this important incident in our history.

Or: Consider the riddle of the red heifer (Numbers 19), whose ashes are used to purify the people who are impure but make impure the pure who do the purifying. Attempts to solve this one or just shed some light on it have been the subject of innumerable divrei Torah throughout the ages.

Nehama Leibowitz, in her volumes compiled as "Studies in the Weekly Sidra," is particularly skillful in the creation and resolution of such puzzles. She never lets her readers off easily, so they still have quite a bit of work to do even after reading her material. But she brings a great deal of interesting rabbinic literature, that is otherwise not available in English, to bear on the questions she considers.

Classical Jewish literature loved the "Puzzle" technique, which in its more elaborate form is known as *pi1pul* (literally pepper—i.e., a sharp performance). These days, except in very specialized communities, one has to be careful not to get as carried away by it as our forefathers sometimes were. The number of contradictory facts that a contemporary Jew—even a smart one—can carry is rather limited. Don't build too clever a structure or it will fall apart and you will lose everyone.

The Historian

Historical insights can sometimes open up a text in an exciting way. Even if you don't draw any deep morals, people are frequently delighted and enriched when they see a text in its historical setting.

Example: Verse 1:9 in Song of Songs says, "My love, you are like a mare among Pharaoh's chariots." Buckets of ink have been used to describe the literary significance of that particular image, but Marvin Pope's commentary in the Anchor Bible deciphers this verse with case. In the ancient Middle East a particularly effective way to disrupt your enemy's chariot charge was to release a mare in heat to run among the stallions pulling the chariots. This would throw the horses into pandemonium. The verse thus says simply that his beloved is profoundly exciting to him. Such an explanation may not carry a lot of spiritual weight, but people do like to learn such tidbits.

A word of caution: Don't get too carried away with the idea that the Bible is a history book. It is also a history book, but it is not only or even primarily that. Instead, it is a religious book that wants to tell us about the relationship of God to the people Israel. You should never let that fact out of your head as you prepare your *d'var Torah*.

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