



How to begin working on a D'var Torah

The D'var Torah is a central component of your child's bar/bat mitzvah. It is an opportunity for your child to engage his or her Torah portion and teach the congregation from his/her own observations and reflections. This can be daunting! Rest assured, it is my job to guide you through the process. In fact, the bulk of our first scheduled meeting will be dedicated to helping you think through the D'var Torah. With that in mind, I offer the following tips and suggestions to get you started.

1. Be prepared.

First and foremost, be sure to have read and discussed the Torah portion ahead of our first meeting. Your Bar/Bat Mitzvah packet includes a translation of your child's portion, as well as a section of commentary, that might help get you started. Begin by reading through the portion with your child. Have a notepad to jot down anything that your child finds interesting, confusing, disturbing, etc. Discuss the portion together and try to solicit questions, even if it is, "Why should I care about this?" In the days before our first meeting, review the portion and your list, and try to focus on two or three areas or questions that are of particular interest to your child. These can be questions like, "Why does Jacob trick his brother?" or "Why is the Torah so interested in sacrifices?" Avoid more technical questions like, "Who are the Midianites?" (although we can certainly discuss them together if your child is curious!). These questions will form the basis for our discussion when we meet.

2. Get help.

Feel free to use additional resources to help you approach the portion. This material can be very difficult! We include a sample commentary that does a nice job of identifying issues that arise from the portion and helps frame questions and ideas for responding to them. You can also look at books, the internet, or any other resources you wish. (See below for some suggestions.) In all cases, it's fine to use a resource to help you come up with questions or ideas, but you shouldn't simply echo what somebody else says on the portion – your thinking should be original. I am also available if you want to check in at any point in the process, either on your child's D'var Torah or any other topic relating to Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

3. Think small.

The D'var Torah cannot and should not attempt to address all the different topics contained in your portion. The idea is to focus on one particular question that arises and delve deeply into that – not by doing research, but by your child's thinking through and exploring the issue and trying to relate it to his or her own life and the milestone of becoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Please note that the section of the portion your child discusses does not need to be the same as the section he or she chants.

4. Less is more.

The D'var Torah should be about five minutes total. That's about one and a half single-spaced typed page. Focusing on a smaller question is important. By the time your child writes an introduction and conclusion, that leaves about four paragraphs, so don't bite off more than you can chew! This does not include the presentation of the child's mitzvah project (which we will also talk about together) or a brief section of thank-you's.



5. Have fun!

The D'var Torah is a wonderful opportunity for your child to share his or her own thoughts about and responses to the Torah portion. The more you discuss this as a family and think about ways to engage the portion creatively, the more fun and rewarding the experience of preparing and offering this teaching will be.

Additional resources:

Besides the translation and the commentary (photocopied from *A Torah Commentary for Our Times* (UAHC Press, 1990), there are many other wonderful resources to be found that explore the portion. The books can be found in our synagogue library, at Jewish bookstores or from Amazon. These include:

Etz Hayim (JPS, 2001). The Torah commentary of the Conservative movement, with wonderful notes and commentary and brief introductions to each section, as well as one-page essays in the back.

The Torah: A Modern Commentary (UAHC, 1981). The Torah commentary of the Reform movement, with some commentary and thoughtful introductions to each section.

Teaching Torah (A.R.E., 1997). A review of major themes and questions arranged by Torah portion.

American Torah Toons (Aronson, 1997). Humorous and incisive one-page artistic responses to every Torah portion from the editor of Reconstructionism Today.

<http://www2.jrf.org/recon-dt/index.php> - Reconstructionist Divrei Torah from the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.

<http://urj.org/torah/> - Reform Divrei Torah from the Union for Reform Judaism.

<http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/parashah/index.shtml> - Conservative Divrei Torah from the Jewish Theological Seminary.

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Weekly_Torah_Commentary.htm - collection of Divrei Torah from various movements and Jewish organizations.

http://www.beliefnet.com/story/8/story_805_1.html - archive of Divrei Torah from a variety of viewpoints.