

A NEW APPROACH TO DIVREI TORAH FOR THE JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONAL

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Too many Jewish communal professionals lack the basic Jewish knowledge needed to hold even a simple conversation about Jewish concepts. This article presents a new approach to delivering a D'var Torah that will enable all professionals to feel comfortable with that task. The primary concern of this approach is maintaining relevance for both the professional and his or her audience.

I have a close friend who is an outstanding Jewish communal professional. She is adroit at supervising large staffs, managing complex budgets, and interacting successfully with her lay leadership. She is the type of professional whom executives love having on their staff and younger professionals emulate. Those who know her have few doubts that she will one day head a large Jewish institution.

I was, therefore, surprised when she told me recently how she had spent the better part of two days struggling to prepare what she deemed to be a fairly basic five-minute D'var Torah. She spoke with great pride about how she had researched the topic of her presentation thoroughly and how she became engrossed in the wealth of information that flowed as she entered deeper into Jewish text. Yet, mingled with her pride was a deep frustration at her limited Jewish vocabulary and a desire to be much more comfortable around Jewish subject matter.

This individual may be seen as a prototypical representative of the field of Jewish professional communal leadership. While Jewish communal institutions are blessed with workers who have a deep love for the Jewish community, there is a gulf between the commitment these workers feel toward the perpetuation of Jewish life and their knowledge of the textual canon that encompasses much of what Jewish life is all about. This is perhaps the great irony of Jewish leadership—the professionals who keep us the “People of the Book” can't read the book themselves.

The scope of Jewish knowledge that one needs to work in the Jewish community varies

from institution to institution, yet too many Jewish communal professionals lack the basic comprehension needed to hold even simple conversations about Jewish concepts. The situation is dire when professionals are in direct service positions where there is a clear expectation that they will be asked to perform Jewish rituals. In some organizations, professionals are touted as “Jewish educators” without clear understanding of the expectations that go along with this title.

Many Jewish organizations have instituted the practice of having a D'var Torah (words of Torah) precede meetings and gatherings. Beginning meetings with Torah firmly grounds us and binds us with the sacred covenant that underlies all of our work.

This article presents new approaches so that all staff will feel comfortable delivering a D'var Torah.

A NEW APPROACH TO DIVREI TORAH

All staff are capable of delivering Divrei Torah. What frequently handcuffs them is their misconception that a D'var Torah must only be text-based. Staff are often intimidated by the thought of presenting themselves as an “expert” in the area of Jewish text.

The approach that I suggest in this article should waylay some of these fears by focusing on Divrei Torah in areas that are potentially more accessible to staff and that are essentially interpretive. In this way, staff need not experience an overwhelming sense of frustration when beginning a conversation on Jewish themes.

Critics of this approach fear that it dilutes the relevance of Jewish text, and I grant that it is clearly not the ideal. I would wish that all Jewish communal institutions would employ staff "from Dan to Beersheva" who are quite knowledgeable about all manners of Jewish educational thought. The noted scholar, Professor Michael Rosenack (1995) of Hebrew University, writes that Jewish education "gains its *raison d'être* from a legitimate desire or even a commandment to teach a Jewish language and to cultivate learners who not only understand it, but who live within it and who are capable of appreciating a Jewish literature that is articulated in that language." We are not at a point where the staff of Jewish communal institutions have all the tools to speak this Jewish language. The way to teach this new language is to begin by speaking to them in a language that is relevant and to use that language as a bridge toward a more relevant, Jewish conversation.

The primary concern of this approach is maintaining relevance for both the presenters and their audience. Those who embrace text as the only means of presenting a D'var Torah suffer from the fact that their message may not hold sway or relevance for their audience. While we should not dilute the message of a D'var Torah to the point that any statement said in a Jewish setting passes for a D'var Torah, we must expand the base of what is considered to be Divrei Torah to allow more staff to engage in Jewish dialogues.

A D'var Torah should do the following:

- express the personality and intelligence of the person delivering it
- be on a subject of interest to the presenter
- reflect the person's understanding of the subject
- be well thought out and researched
- allow for the participation of the group
- entice the presenter and participants to explore the Jewish cannon further

This article presents three topics for Divrei Torah: the arts, current events, and Israel.

THE ARTS

Jewish text, in the hands of a master teacher, unites both novices and connoisseurs. Great teachers bring the accumulated life experiences of their students into interplay with the text to arouse the intellectual curiosity of their students. Therefore, knowledge of the text is beneficial, but does not discount the input of the novice as he or she brings ample life experiences to tease open new perspectives.

The arts are a wonderful entry point for Jewish study because they similarly invite both novices and experts into the arena of interpretation. Within the heading of "The Arts" fall an abundance of creative options for the Jewish professional to excite and engage staff in further explorations of Jewish life. The benefit of using the arts is that they are non-threatening media that call for divergent opinions. Art can be a wonderful precursor to text study.

Photography

A number of famous photographers focus on Jewish themes in their work. David Rubinger, Frederic Brenner, Roman Vishniac, and Bill Aron are but a few of the photographers who have documented Jewish life over the past century. Their work can be compared and contrasted to see how Jewish life is perceived in different countries at different times.

Their works also stand alone. Rubinger has been the premier photographer in documenting the past fifty years in Israel, whereas Vishniac captured life in pre-war Europe. Brenner and Aron have photographed Jewish life in numerous parts of the world.

In David Rubinger's "Portrait of Israel" CD-ROM, he explains and displays his most famous pictures. His most famous photograph is of three Israeli paratroopers standing in front of the Kotel in 1967 moments after it was recaptured. His narrative explaining these photographs is chillingly beautiful and could easily be a springboard for a lengthy discussion on perceptions of Israel. An on-line display of Rubinger's work, with a sample from his CD, can be found at

www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0003/drintro.htm.

Frederic Brenner captures both American and Israeli Jewish life with his original perspective. His book, *Jews in America*, (1996) presents a wildly creative view of Jewish life in America. His work can also be previewed at www.photoarts.com/greenberg/brenner1.html.

Music

Music can be a wonderful vehicle to discuss Jewish thought. I recently delivered a D'var Torah on the theme of Jerusalem. Rather than present classic Jewish text, I played two songs: Naomi Shemer's "Yerushalayim shel Zahav" (Jerusalem of Gold) and Dan Bern's "Jerusalem." One is the most popular modern song in the Hebrew language, almost a national anthem, and the other is a fairly obscure, irreverent modern folk song. The purpose of the exercise was to show how two diverse artists could approach the same subject from such different vantage points.

There are countless ways in which music can be employed to lead a Jewish discussion. Music can be the basis for discussions on identity. From playing snatches of klezmer tunes or a segment of "Kol Nidre," the listeners can be asked to discuss the feelings or memories that are evoked hearing a particular type of Jewish music. A staff person can explain how moods are conveyed within the text by comparing the tropes associated with the prescribed religious readings that take place on Purim and Tisha B'Av.

A fun way to use music is to teach about Jewish musicians and composers. This information can be gathered at www.jewhoo.com/.

Poetry

Poetry can be a powerfully moving means of eliciting discussion on Jewish topics and Jewish identity. Poetry is so interpretive that it invites any listener to participate on equal footing. In terms of a D'var Torah, the emotion that a poem expresses often suffices and does not require further discussion. For

example, a Yom Hashoah ceremony may only require a few simple poems in order to best express the deep grief associated with the day.

The works of American, international, and Israeli artists can be explored to understand their various views of the world.

- Yehuda Amichai is the most famous of modern Israeli poets. His work ties in biblical and Israeli themes and conveys universal themes through a distinctly Jewish prism. A compilation of his works is available in *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry*. For a sample of his work on line, click on www.poetryreviews.com/poets/poet-amichai.html.
- Gerald Stern, a modern American poet who has been compared to Walt Whitman, often connects his work with his Jewish roots. One of his most famous works, "Behaving like a Jew," poignantly discusses the Jewish experience in America.¹ A PBS interview with Stern, which contains a number of his works including "Behaving like a Jew," can be found on www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec98/stern_11-23.html.
- Hal Sirowitz is a young American poet whose work can best be compared to the early writing of Philip Roth. His work is deeply humorous while conveying an angst that he connects with his Jewish identity. It would be fascinating to see how relevant his work is to staff, especially those poems that he writes about his mother (which comprise much of the body of his work). His most well-known books are *Mother Said* and *My Therapist Said*.

CURRENT EVENTS

There is never any shortage of news events that could serve as the basis for serious discussion on the place of Jews in America today. A professional may want to tie current events

¹I would like to thank Rabbi Avi Weinstein, Director of the Joseph H. Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning of Hillel's International Center for bringing this poem to my attention.

to a Jewish theme. For example, by linking the nomination of Joseph Lieberman to the Biblical Joseph or to Mordechai from the Book of Esther, the discussion can take on a richer tone.

Current event discussions can also focus on these issues:

- the status of the jailed Iranian Jews
- the status of Ethiopian Jews; check out the website www.circus.org/nacoej.htm
- the restitution settlements currently being paid to Holocaust survivors
- the past and recent state of Jewish-Christian relations
- Jewish perspectives on the issues of school vouchers, gun control, etc.
- prayer in the public schools
- whether public places should be able to display the Ten Commandments

ISRAEL

Israel captures the imagination in ways that other topics may not and presents a wealth of opportunities for discussion:

- the status of the current peace process (if the staff person does not feel he or she is an expert in the matter, that person can act as a moderator and bring in an expert to lead a conversation)
- the relationship between the religious and secular in Israel and its implications for modern Israeli society
- Israeli culture, as seen through art and film
- the cuisine of the Middle East; listeners can participate in a food tasting of typical Israeli foods
- the political structure of Israel and the make-up of the Knesset; this can provide real insights into the political situation of modern Israel
- a geographical quiz on modern Israel; questions can range from the rudimentary to the complex

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosts a very comprehensive website listing

every public link in Israel: www.israelmfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00kj0

CONCLUSION

In arguing that the subject matter of any Jewish education course must be religious in nature, Rosenack (1986) states:

The tension between the imposed and the discovered, the communal and personal, the law and the ever-replenished spirit, is exactly what religion is all about, what Jewish education has traditionally been about. God can be found in sacred literature and literature, but God is also "everywhere." Judaism is specific knowledge, beliefs, practices, and experiences but it is also the experience that "no place is empty of Him" (Zohar)—as is no subject matter, no poem, no person, no attempt at self-understanding.

In today's world, with these pupils who are not committed, who don't "do" Torah, we must begin with the listening. We have to give reasons for the commandments, for what they don't observe. We have to justify the Jewish tradition not as it was done in the past, by enlarging it through intellectual deliberation and spiritual contemplation, but by creating a climate of possible doing. "Possible doing" replaces, for most Jews, the traditional understanding of "doing."

For Jewish communal institutions, this translates into the shift from "possible study" into "study." And in many places, possible study is not such a bad thing in itself.

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