



GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A *D'VAR TORAH* (OR *HAFTARAH*¹)

We as Jews never accept Torah on face value and never look at it without analysis and commentary. We know that Torah is meant to be more than a history book – it is a guide book that helps us learn how to live moral Jewish lives. That means there's got to be hidden meaning under the surface of each verse of Torah.

That's what the *D'var Torah* is all about. It's a short sermon or teaching based on your verses, and it's designed to give you and the congregation a moral or ethical lesson from the verses you read from the scroll. It allows you to be the teacher for the day, as well as the service leader – an important part of becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

The following are helpful guidelines in preparing your *D'var Torah/Haftarah*:

Step #1: Read through your Torah (or Haftarah) portion in English with your family. Do a **close examination** of the text and look at its context (where it falls in the stories of the Torah). Look at the commentaries and footnotes. Pick out ONE thing you find to be most interesting; it can be a word, a phrase, or a concept. Ask yourself: Why does the Torah tell us this? Why is it included? What is its significance? Remember that no word in Torah is superfluous – if it's in there, there's got to be a reason. In the Torah packet you will receive at the *B'nei Mitzvah Shabbaton*, there is extensive commentary on the Torah portion as well. This is a great resource.

Step #2: Figure out what that word, phrase or concept *really* means. What is the “**moral of the story**”? What are we really supposed to learn from this Torah portion? What makes it relevant for us today? Or, is there something about this portion that really “rubs you the wrong way” – that you disagree with?

¹ If you have a partner for Bar/Bat Mitzvah, one of you will interpret the Torah, the other will interpret the Haftarah (reading from the Prophets). The process is exactly the same – and Rabbi Axler can tell you which you will write on. For the purposes of this document, we are using the words Torah and Haftarah interchangeably. They are not the same thing. But more on that when we meet. ☺

Step #3: About four or five months prior to your bar/bat mitzvah, you will have a *D'var Torah* meeting with Rabbi Axler (Lori Levitas coordinates this). At least one parent or other adult should accompany you to this meeting. They will participate in the discussion, and very importantly will also serve as your note-taker for our conversation. In this meeting, we will go over your Torah portion again, and see if you have found some good parts you'd like to explore. We will also look at the materials you have put together from the Torah packet. Following this meeting, move to Step #4.

Step #4: Outline and draft your *D'var Torah/Haftarah* based on what you've figured out in Steps 1 and 2:

- 1) Give a brief summary (a few sentences) of your Torah/Haftarah reading. "My Torah portion (or My Haftarah) is about..."
- 2) Give a brief explanation of what in particular you found most interesting, troubling, or challenging in those verses. "Here's what I found most interesting....and I wondered, "why..."
- 3) What is the underlying lesson the text is trying to teach us? What can we all learn from this? "I think what this text is trying to teach us is..."
- 4) Give a specific example of how this ethical or moral lesson – this Jewish value – has meaning in your own life.

Step #5: E-mail me the draft and copy Lori Levitas within a couple of weeks after our meeting. You can always do it sooner – and I will be patient if you need a little more time. **It is really helpful if you e-mail it as an ATTACHMENT in the Microsoft Word format.** Other formats will be very difficult for me to help you in editing. I also suggest using a large font – 14 or 16 – which will make it easier to read from on the *bimah*. My e-mail address is rabbiaxler@templeisaiah.org Lori is lori@templeisaiah.org I will respond back with comments and edits. Sometimes I will also ask you to expand on a question that I will pose. I try to get back to these emails quickly – sometimes it takes a little time. **Don't be afraid to send me a follow-up email that says: "Hey, Rabbi Axler – did you get my speech?!?!?"**

Step #6: Don't forget to **bring the *D'var Torah/Haftarah*** with you to your rehearsals with Mrs. Feldman after it is done. Put it in your binder of materials. You will rehearse it with her and with me as you get closer to your bar/bat mitzvah.

Step #7: Enjoy yourself!!!!

Revised 2/1/2019– based on a document originally created by Rabbi Audrey Korotkin