

Guidelines for a Successful Torah Midrash

By Tony Robinson

I have been blessed with the opportunity to lead small-group Bible studies many times in my life. Whether leading a Bible study on campus or facilitating a Bible study in a house full of young adults with children, Adonai has allowed me to experience many facets of small group Bible study. More recently, I have been involved in leading Torah midrashes. You may wonder why I have distinguished between a Bible study and a Torah midrash.

I use the word midrash instead of study because many times, Bible studies are just teaching times when a teacher gets to teach while others listen. This is not the case with a Torah midrash. In a midrash, everyone participates in the discussion. Questions are asked, points are made and everyone contributes to the discussion. This is the type of gathering I would like to talk about. I'd like to provide some easy, practical guidelines on how to lead a successful Torah midrash.

Preparation

First, let's cover some issues related to the preparation for your Torah midrash. There are a few ways you should prepare so that your group will benefit from the time spent during the session.

Know Your Audience

First, *you need to know your audience*. Will you be interacting with adults, teens, or children? Do your listeners understand their Hebraic roots? How familiar are they with things considered Jewish/Hebraic? These are all questions whose answers will determine what you can study and how deep you can go. Consideration of your audience will determine how many Hebraisms you can use and/or it will determine how much introductory material you will need to cover before you get into the midrash.

It is very important to know your audience because this knowledge will help ensure that you chose an appropriate topic. The only thing more frustrating than having a Torah midrash that is too advanced for those new to Hebraic thought is to have a Torah midrash that is too basic for those seasoned in Hebraic thought. Hopefully, you see my point. The midrash topic and format must be one that can *inform, engage, and challenge* the participants. In this manner, all will benefit.

Know Your Time Limit

Make sure you know in advance how much time you have to conduct the midrash. This is important for a couple of reasons. If you have one hour for the midrash, you don't want to prepare a study that will take two or three hours to complete. On the other hand,

if you have 2 hours for your midrash, you don't want to prepare a lesson that is essentially complete after the first hour.

When determining how much time you have for your midrash you should be aware of the following parameters.

- ◆ How much time do you estimate it would take for you to go through the midrash on your own without any discussion and questions from others?
- ◆ Is this group talkative and engaging, or quiet and more prone to listen?
- ◆ Will you have enough time to complete the midrash even if you find yourself on some rabbit trails?

These are some of the more important time constraint considerations to examine when preparing for your Torah midrash. Notice how the second bullet above is actually part of knowing your audience! I mention this because each aspect of preparation will influence other aspects of preparation. This is a good example of how knowing your audience (are they talkative or not) will influence how much material you present so that you can finish within your time constraints. Bullet three is important because you will always find yourself drifting away from your main topic. It happens all the time. Invariably, someone will get off on a tangent which may or not be constructive. Make sure you have time for a few of these unplanned forays.

Set a Goal of What You Want to Accomplish

When I prepare for a midrash, I determine ahead of time what my main goal or objective will be. In other words, once the evening is over, what do I want the people to walk away with? What knowledge or understanding do I hope to impart to them? For the most part, your main hurdle in this phase of preparation is to ensure that you limit your goal. For example, instead of making your topic too general, as in the second coming of the Messiah, you may want to discuss one aspect of the Messiah's second coming. Many within the Messianic community do not believe in a pre-tribulational rapture of the church. Maybe your midrash could concern disproving a pre-tribulational rapture by looking at the verses typically used to support such a notion and putting them into proper context. Or, perhaps, you may want to look at one passage such as Matthew 24:36-41, which is often cited as a proof text for the rapture, and debunk the erroneous interpretation. In the last two examples cited, the scope of the midrash was greatly diminished by narrowing in on a more concise topic. You see, there is a danger in not limiting the goal/topic of your midrash. You may find yourself in a situation where you're just sitting around talking about everything under the sun and chasing all sorts of rabbit trails instead of imparting clear understanding.

Limiting your goal is really a way of limiting the topic of discussion. Or, put another way, limiting the goal of what you want to accomplish is a way of putting up some flexible, yet definite boundaries within which to have your midrash. Without boundaries, your group will bounce from one issue to the next and you may easily lose focus and control of the direction of the midrash.

Prepare Points to Make and Emphasize

Once you have a goal of what you want to accomplish during the Torah midrash, you should prepare some main points you want to emphasize. These points should lead you from the beginning of your midrash to its final conclusion. Basically, you are putting together a game-plan to ensure the group will understand the subject you're presenting by logically progressing from one point to the next. If you are able to engage your group in this manner, you will help ensure that they understand your final goal for the midrash.

Prepare Scriptures

You should have a list of scriptures written down ahead of time. These should be scriptures you want to use to help teach your main subject. As you choose scriptures, you should choose ones that will 1) keep you progressing toward the goal of your midrash and 2) help reinforce the points you want to emphasize during the discussion. Remember, one of the goals of a midrash is to involve everyone in the discussion. A good way to do this is to have others read the scriptures you've prepared. It may seem insignificant, but I really think it enhances the study for everyone involved, especially those who like to contribute to the discussion.

Prepare Questions

This is one of the most important portions of your preparation. You can never ask enough questions. Remember, one of the goals of a midrash is to involve the participants in the discussion. The best way to do this is to ask them to answer the questions. If you already have 1) an overall goal for your midrash, 2) points to make/emphasize in order to keep you progressing toward the goal and 3) scriptures associated with the points, then your questions essentially lay before you. How? Because, instead of just reading each point or reading each scripture, you need to learn how to ask questions that will naturally lead the group to those points and/or scriptures. I'll talk about this technique later in the second part of this article. For now, just realize that your job as a Torah midrash facilitator has more to do with stimulating discussion (through asking questions) than presenting a bunch of facts for the listeners to accept.

Another reason you want to ask questions is because the participants will retain more when they "discover" things on their own. In other words, your job is to ask questions that will naturally lead them in a certain direction—the direction you want them to go! ☺ As people answer the questions you present, they will have a sense of accomplishment and participation that cannot be achieved by simply reading scriptures and facts to them. Next, let's examine a few practical guidelines on how to implement the strategies mentioned above.

Presentation

Now that you have prepared for your Torah midrash, you need to execute your plan. Here are some suggestions on how to have a successful midrash.

Ask Lots of Questions and Don't Easily Tell the Answers

Learn how to formulate your main points into questions instead of just reading them or telling them. A midrash needs to be a time of discovery for the participants. As much as possible, you need to help people come to certain conclusions on their own. When this is done, they experience a greater sense of contribution and discovery. This will help them retain the information much longer than if it was just another fact read to them among many others. The best way to accomplish these goals is to ask questions that will naturally lead people to the correct answer. Even when you ask your questions, learn how to ask them in a generic manner such that they may not be easily answered after the first asking except by someone who is really knowledgeable. Why? Because, in every midrash, you will have people at various levels of understanding. You don't want to ask questions in such a manner that everyone gets the answer immediately. By asking questions in a somewhat obscure manner, you will set the stage for more questions, answers and discovery. Let me show you, by way of example, how this might work. I recently taught a lesson on the prophetic significance of Channukkah. During the teaching, I wanted to make a certain point (I'll share it with you later). Instead of just stating the point, I formulated some questions to lead the listeners to the conclusion I wanted to make. This scenario would work well in a Torah midrash. Here's how the situation may play itself out in a Torah midrash. Please open your Bible and follow along. I think you will find this interesting.

Tony—"Could someone please read II Samuel 13:1-3?" Someone reads the passage. Tony—"Now, let's key in on verses three through four." Then, I would read verses three to four. Tony—"Do these two verses sound familiar?" Note how I asked the question. I didn't really ask for anything particular. It is what we call an open ended question. Open-ended questions are those that require more than a yes or no answer—"Do these two verses sound familiar?" At this point, you may or may not get any responses. When I asked this question, I didn't get any response. Now you may begin to be a little more specific in your questions. Tony—"Notice how the passage states that Jonadab was crafty/subtle. Have you seen that anywhere before?" You may get an answer this time. If so, someone has just made a discovery and helped you move the group closer to the revelation you want to impart. Otherwise, ask another question which will help them even more. Tony—"Where have you read a scripture that stated someone was crafty/subtle and then the crafty/subtle person asked a question of someone else?" It was at this point that a couple of people at our Channukkah celebration piped up and said, "This reminds me of hasatan in the Garden of Eden!" That's right—see Genesis 3:1-2! Then I would ask one more question. Tony—"Why do the scriptures make this connection between Jonadab and hasatan?" Some in your midrash may or may not get the answer. If someone says anything close to "This connection was made to show that Jonadab's advice was satanically inspired," then that's the right answer. If, after some

discussion, no one gets the answer, then tell them; but only after they have tried to answer it. Once you share the answer with them, they'll probably understand it more readily.

My point? I had an overall goal in my teaching. But in order to reach the final goal, I had to ensure that the people understood many other points. One of the many points I wanted to make was that Jonadab's encounter with Amnon was satanically inspired. I could have just told them up front; however, by asking these questions, they made the discovery on their own and believe me, they were much more excited about what they learned than if I had simply told them up front.

Facilitate, Don't Talk Too Much

It's very easy for the leader/facilitator to dominate the discussion in any type of Bible study/midrash. This is a temptation you need to try to resist. Obviously, there are times when you will be the predominant speaker; however, try to minimize the amount of time that you talk for long periods without input from others. The more you talk then the less the others will be adding to the discussion and making discoveries. You should mainly try to keep the discussion moving by asking questions, questions and more questions, leading the group to conclusions. You should be clarifying points, summarizing statements and helping to ensure smooth transitions from one point to another. Try to make it your goal to help others discover new knowledge and wisdom on their own with gentle prompting from you.

Encourage Participation

Lastly, encourage everyone to participate. Personally, I think the best midrashes are those where everyone participates and many if not all experience a sense of accomplishment. It's best when everyone can walk away thinking they helped others by providing insight. The other reason you should encourage others to participate is because invariably others will have insight that you don't. Maybe there is a better scripture for proving a certain point than the one you suggested. If so, someone else in the group may know it and be able to suggest it. In the final analysis, a Torah midrash is a time of sharing by all. Hopefully, this article has helped you see the importance of facilitating a midrash that encourages participation and a fun sense of discovery.