

Bringing it to Live

Solid advice for making your shiurim relevant to your audience

by Rabbi Dan Roth

As educators, we have all experienced it: the blank faces, the empty stares. If only we could present a *shiur* so interesting and intriguing, so gripping and stimulating, that our listeners would immediately connect.

But how does one create a *shiur* of this caliber? Where does one begin?

In the following essay, we will attempt to draw guidelines for creating a *shiur* whose Torah content is guaranteed to speak to everyone, no matter their age, gender, or religious background.

But first a disclaimer: if you have a short deadline, please stop reading now. This approach is not for you. It requires an investment of time and preparation but the results will be well worth it. You will have created a *shiur* so relevant and powerful that people will be begging you to come and teach it. It will be the kind of *shiur* you can give over and over again, and each time it will seem fresh and new.

Still on board? Let's begin...

The first stage in developing a *shiur* that is guaranteed to excite is to choose the right topic. And this is where many of us go wrong. We have set texts we like to follow; books such as *Mesillas Yesharim* or *Pirkei Avos* that we've gone through before, and with which we feel comfortable. Of course, we try to make our classes relevant by sprinkling them with anecdotes and examples that relate to the lives of our listeners. But the underlying theme is our chosen book, our set text.

To present an exciting and riveting *shiur* the likes of which we described above requires breaking away from what we already know. It requires letting go of ourselves and the material we have already prepared, and focusing instead on the interests of our audience: what topics interest them? What are their concerns and fascinations? What life issues are they grappling with and need to hear about?

For example, an audience of high-tech individuals might be wondering about the Torah's view on technology and its proper use. Specifically, what is the Torah's understanding of why the world of computers has blossomed specifically in our day and age?

For school-age youngsters, the burning issue of the day might be the issue of friendships: how does one make and keep a true friend? What are the traits to look for in such a friend and how does one go about finding someone with those traits?

For an older group, the crucial issues may be: what is Torah's viewpoint on retirement? How is the latter half of my life meant to be used? What is my role in the education of my grandchildren?

Whatever the audience, the first thing to do is to think about what issues they yearn to hear.

This requires a certain degree of confidence – even courage.

When we follow a fixed text, we have the security of having the information mapped out and prepared for us. The material has already been laid out. We simply need to follow its path.

But when we choose the topic according to the listener's needs, we are on our own. We will have to locate the information on our own, spanking new grounds. But who is to say that we have the answers?

To be sure, if we had photographic memories and knew *shas* inside out, we would know what the Torah's viewpoint is on any of the above questions. But the majority of us, do not have encyclopedic knowledge and therefore are afraid to even ponder giving such a *shiur*, for the task of finding the answers is frightening. The natural tendency is thus to freeze up because we fear the move into uncharted territory.

In choosing a topic, therefore, we need to momentarily forget where the answers will come from, and focus solely on the audience and their interests. And the truth is, we have nothing to fear. As the Mishna states in Avos: *hafoch ba v'hafoch ba dekula ba* — Delve into Torah for everything is in it: every facet of creation and every wisdom of the world. [1] As Reb Yitzchak of Volozhin put it, "There is no question in the world whose answer cannot be found in Torah.... One only needs to open his eyes to find where it is written." [2]

Granted, you say, that conceptually all this makes sense. But the plain fact is that I still need to prepare my *shiur*! Where do I look? Of course the Torah contains the answers, but how do I tap into them?

Here is one tried and true approach: What one needs to do is to thoroughly examine any Torah source that is any way related to the topic at hand. Even though we may feel that we are completely familiar with the Torah source, and are convinced that we already know whatever there is to know about the text, we have to search anew. We need to analyze and probe even more deeply, to look for new levels of insight, and explore avenues we never thought of before.

But, you protest, how can I come up with new insights when I have already gone through that source and haven't seen anything of note until now?

For this, we need to understand that the Torah is described as being deep[3], which, as we explain in an accompanying article, [The Source and the Secret](#), means that it can be understood simultaneously on different levels. “When a child learns Bereishis he understands the verses on one level. As he grows older and learns the same verses again, he reads more into the text and attains new levels of understanding. In fact, a person can read the same verse in the Torah again and again throughout his life, uncovering new layers of meaning each time. Indeed, the Vilna Gaon perceived that the details of every creation that ever existed and that will ever exist — human, animal, plant, and inanimate object — are all contained in Bereishis.[4]”

And this is the second area in which we err. We assume that the ideal level would be if we had encyclopedic knowledge and could spit out the sources from memory without having to go through the effort to toil and dig for them. That first we have to spend hours searching and thinking in an effort to work out the Torah's viewpoint for ourselves, is for many of us a *bdieved* situation. We wish we could avoid it.

This is a widespread mistake of our generation. When asked to prepare a talk or *shiur*, our gut reaction is to think, “Where can I access ready-made material on the subject? Who has a ready given a *shiur* on the topic? Where can I go online to download an MP3 file on the topic? Which Jewish database will give me pre-packaged information on the topic? Who has notes on the issue? What ‘cheat book’ can I use?”

We don't want to think for ourselves. We want it prepackaged and ready to go without having to work for it on our own.

The truth, however, is that the searching and probing is the ideal method. If we could spew the material out on demand from an inner data bank, we would be robbed of a real and meaningful connection with the material. We would never have the opportunity to really live Torah. The process of thinking through the topic on our own, grappling with Torah ideals and searching for how they relate to the present reality, is the process that builds us up as a *bnei torah*. It's what connects us to Hashem like nothing else. When we think on our own, ripping the topic apart in our mind and grappling with it in order to find answers to questions on our own, our minds becomes attuned to the Torah's way of thinking. The struggle to work out what Torah has to say about something, to turn over questions until the light appears, seems more difficult on the surface, but in the end it reaps benefits and rewards both for ourselves and our listeners.

The other method – of having the answers ready on file without having to toil to access them (which many of us view as ideal!) – is in fact not ideal at all. We would be nothing more than a walking encyclopedia but would have no inner connection to the Torah we

possess. To use the metaphor of the *Chovas Halevavos*, such a person is like a “*chamor nosei sefarim*” a donkey carrying a load of books on his back. The books are physically attached to the donkey, but there is no real connection between the two.

To be sure, a person should hear what insights others have to offer on the matter, and should be open to listen to what others have to say. But there is a world of difference between hearing insights and ideas as the first stage of one’s preparations versus being exposed to them after and after one has thought about it on his own.

Rav Chaim Brisker once asked a student how many hours a day he learns. “Sixteen,” replied the student. “If you learn so many hours a day,” asked Rav Chaim, “when do you have time to think?” Thinking about Torah connects us to Torah and makes it part of our world.

Only through wrestling with a subject, thinking about it and analyzing it, can a Torah subject become part of our inner world. When that occurs, our listeners sense that we are not simply echo chambers parroting what others have long ago articulated, but that we are transmitting something to them that is part and parcel of our own selves, a piece of our *Torah neshama* that we are sharing with them. As such, our words become *devarim hayotzim min halev*, and will thus surely be *nichnasim el halev*. When the subject matter becomes part of our life, that sense trickles down to the audience. They pick up on it and the material penetrates their minds and hearts in a way that could never have taken place had we just copied the material from some book.

When Torah lives inside us, then the chances are very high that it will also live within our students and listeners.

[1] Avos 5:26.

[2] Chofetz Chaim in the name of R’ Itzelle, quoted in *Kovetz Ma’amarim Velgros* 1:229.

[3] *Sanhedrin* 44b with Rashi, ד"ה עתה באתי.

[4] Commentary to Sifra Ditzniusa, chap. 5.