

Contemporary Jewish Homiletics: Some Key Components

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Abstract

This article deals with the derasha, the Jewish sermon and offers an inventory of the key dimensions of the Jewish sermon as practiced today and in the past from a reformed Jewish perspective. It shows its connection to the particular moment, its functions (further distinguished as contextual, intentional, educational, and symbolic), its message, sources, structure, and the techniques involved in its delivery and gives a brief example of one of the author's own derashot from July 2015.

The *derasha*, a homily delivered usually in a Jewish liturgical or ritual context, has been a central feature of Jewish life for more than twenty centuries. It is one of the most significant loci where orality and literacy meet within Jewish culture. Despite enormous differences in frequency, form and content, the role of the spoken explication of and elaboration upon the Hebrew Bible in a communal setting has characterized Jewish society in Baghdad, Brooklyn, Budapest and beyond for two millennia.

This essay will not attempt a survey of the history of the Jewish sermon. Important books and articles have contributed much to this field of research ever since the groundbreaking work of Leopold Zunz, whose *Die Gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden* first appeared in 1832. Since then, historical understanding of the development of the Jewish sermon has developed greatly, and a number of studies of particular eras and geographical settings have been produced in recent years.¹

Rather than speak to the development of Jewish preaching in different eras and places, I want to offer two contributions to an understanding of contemporary expression of this ancient and

¹ The 1892 edition of Zunz's foundational work was translated into Hebrew and published by the Bialik Institute in 1954. Rather than offer a comprehensive bibliography of more recent works on the history of the Jewish sermon, I will mention only a small number of outstanding examples. These will feature multiple examples of the works of Joseph Heinemann and Marc Saperstein, who in an earlier era and in our day have set the pace and tone for understanding the development of the Jewish sermon. See *Israel Bettan*, *Studies in Jewish Preaching*, Cincinnati 1939; *Kimmy Caplan/Carmi Horowitz/Nabem Ilan* (eds), *Preachers, Sermons and Homiletics in Jewish Culture* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 2012; *Alexander Deeg/Walter Homolka/Heinz-Günter Schöttler* (eds), *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity*, StJ 41, Berlin 2008; *Robert V. Friedenberg*, "Hear O Israel" – The History of American Jewish Preaching, 1654–1970, Tuscaloosa 1989; *Joseph Heinemann*, The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim – A Form-Critical Study, in: *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature, Scripta Hierosolymitana XXII*, edited by Joseph Heinemann and Dov Noy, Jerusalem 1971, 100–122; *On Life and Death: Anatomy of a Rabbinic Sermon*, in: *Joseph Heinemann/Shmuel Werses*, *Studies in Hebrew Narrative Art, Scripta Hierosolymitana XXVII*, Jerusalem 1978, 52–65; *Shaul Regev*, Oral Preaching and Written Sermons in the Middle Ages, in: *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 9.1 (2015), 85–99; *Marc Saperstein*, *Jewish Preaching 1200–1800: An Anthology*, New Haven 1989; "Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn" – Themes and Texts in Jewish Preaching, Cincinnati 1996; *Exile in Amsterdam: Saul Levi Morteira's Sermons to a Congregation of "New Jews"*, Cincinnati 2005.



noble art. It should be noted at the outset that I am a Reform rabbi, heir to an approach which merged some traditional tropes of the Jewish sermon with practices learnt from the German Protestant church, and later influenced by trends within North American society. It is helpful to be aware of these influences. Of course, other practitioners of Jewish homiletics – preachers of North African origin, sermonizers in the Hasidic tradition – all bring their own influences to bear in the way they teach and preach. I certainly do not claim that the approach presented here has the monopoly on authenticity. It shows one way in which Jewish preaching is understood and practiced in our day. The degree to which the *derasha* in different cultural and denominational milieus has some essential similarity is an issue itself worthy of research. It speaks to a wider and controversial question – the extent to which Jewish cultural motifs continue to exercise some unifying influence over an increasingly various and fractured Jewish world.

My intention here is to offer an inventory of what might be considered to be the key dimensions of the Jewish sermon as practiced today, and to a significant degree how it has been practiced over the centuries. Secondly, I will offer a brief example of one recent sermon (one of my own) as a reflection of these various aspects at work. It is important to note that nothing stated about the contemporary Jewish sermon in the West is exclusively Jewish – none of the categories listed below would be out of place in a discussion of contemporary Christian preaching. Nonetheless, there is much in the history and current practice of Jewish preaching that is distinctly Jewish, and this essay will dwell on some of these aspects.

The classic Jewish setting for the *derasha* is the synagogue, but in the course of Jewish history other sub-genres, such as the words spoken to a couple at their wedding, have developed. The teaching of Rabbi Hananya ben Teradyon in the Mishnah² condemning any gathering in which words of Torah is not spoken became a mandate for the prevalence of the *d'var torah*, a word of Torah, at meals and other opportunities. These different settings span different lengths, styles and conventions. Regional and cultural variations also influence the style and scope of Jewish homiletics.

Despite this variety, there are a number of dimensions of a *derasha* which characterize many or most of them. It is to these dimensions to which we now turn.

1. Moment

The Jewish art of preaching is a reflection of time and context. The first question a Jewish preacher has traditionally grappled with has been: what is the particular moment in which these words are being uttered? First and foremost, this question will bring into focus the particular portion of the

² Mishnah Avot 3.2.

Torah which is being recited that week. This will be the primary focus even in services where the Torah is not being read, since the weekly portion sets the tone for the entire week. Second, proximity to a festival, a special Sabbath, a fast day, or some other moment in the Jewish calendar, will (or at least should) be in the mind of the preacher.

The *darshan*, the Jewish preacher, is often motivated to bring the great cycles of traditional Jewish life to expression. In this context the teachings of Franz Rosenzweig come to mind. Rosenzweig suggested that the cyclical time of the Jewish year, the cycle of eternity, is the time in which the Jew lives – the linear passage of historical time is not the main focus of the Jew. In Yehoyada Amir's formulation, "The Jew lives beyond history, in a time-cycle that anticipates eternity."³ As he wrote in his *Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig believed that "[i]n the cycle of weekly portions [...] the spiritual year is paced out".⁴

Rosenzweig notwithstanding, a Jewish preacher's reading of the moment reaches out beyond the self-contained cycles of the Jewish year. It is not just the cycle of liturgical readings and calendrical events which constitute the moment. Events in the life cycle of individuals within the community will play a role in constructing the message of the homily. Increasingly, it is also the case that contemporary events taking place in the wider world will also find their way into the discourse of the *derasha*.⁵

If one considers the events which have taken place in the course of the twentieth century, the lines between the cycle of eternity and the intrusions of contemporaneity have become blurred. Both the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel have found a place in the liturgical calendar. The tendency to relate to the present time does not only relate to events on the epic scale. Commentary on events in the news has become a familiar part of the *derasha*, particularly in more liberal Jewish circles.

The *derasha* is not only intended to reflect the moment, liturgical, personal and secular, which is taking place. At its best, the *derasha* can help give the moment, in all its complexity, a place within the context of Jewish tradition. The Jewish homily is designed both to reflect the moment and to illuminate it. A Jewish preacher should ask: what is happening today in the world, in our city, in our community? And what is happening in the various cycles of liturgical readings, the festival calendar and other expressions of 'Jewish time'? The Jewish sermon bridges between these various

³ Yehoyada Amir, 'Towards Mutual Listening: The Notion of Sermon in Franz Rosenzweig's Philosophy', in: Deeg/Homolka/Schöttler (eds), *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity* (note 1), 126.

⁴ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, ed. William H. Hallo, Notre Dame 1985, 310.

⁵ See Marc Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching in Times of War, 1800–2001*, London 2008; John Rayner as Preacher: *The Sermon in Response to Historical Events*, in: *European Judaism* 45.12 (2012), 50–57. There are many collections of sermons which illustrate sensitivity to changing times, and Marc Saperstein's use of the sermon as a source for historical as well as theological insight has opened an important vista of historical research. See Harold I. Saperstein, *Witness from the Pulpit: Topical Sermons, 1933–1980*, Lanham 2000. Marc Saperstein, the son of Harold Saperstein, edited and provided an introduction to that volume.

dimensions of the current moment.

In the list of troops who joined the side of David at Hebron in 1 Chronicles 12, those who come from the tribe of Issachar are described using the Hebrew phrase *yod'ei binah le'itim*. This translates to something like: those who understand the times. I want to suggest that the finest exemplars of the Jewish art of preaching strive to be descendants of Issachar, reading the moment – liturgical, communal, historical – in all its complexity, and offering words which both reflect and illuminate.

The best *derashot* have roots in “Jewish time” and simultaneously in the specific time of their delivery. If the preacher has been thoughtful and effective, it may be hard to tell if the starting point of the sermon was a particular reading, or a particular event on the local or national level. Of the sermons delivered in North America in the immediate aftermath of September 11th 2001 at the Jewish New Year, which was just a few days later, many responded to the momentous events. Some did not. The numbing impact of what had taken place, the fact that much work had already been done preparing a homily – for one reason or another, some decided to persevere with their previously-prepared *derasha*. In my reading of the essence of Jewish preaching, this was in some sense a dereliction of duty. It involved fealty to “Jewish time”, the spiritual cycle invoked by Rosenzweig, but no sensitivity to what was going on at that moment in the lives of every member of the congregation, and society in general.

There are certainly many examples to be found which indicate imbalance on the other side – in such cases the preacher is keen to relate to a burning issue of the day but does not manage (or is not interested) to find a basis for the homily within the cadences of “Jewish time”. Here, too, the basic criterion of attentiveness to the multi-faceted moment has not been met. The speech may be stirring and its values impeccable, but it is not a *derasha* in the fullest sense.

2. Function

The contemporary Jewish sermon fulfills a wide range of functions, often simultaneously. It is possible to distinguish between four kinds of function that a *derasha*, like other examples of vocal performance and homiletical proficiency, can be expected to fulfill: contextual, intentional, educational and symbolic.

By *contextual* I mean the particular situation in which the sermon is being delivered: not only the confluence of “Jewish” and “general” time, but also the proximate circumstances of the homily’s delivery. A homily delivered in synagogue on the Day of Atonement with a congregation expecting a thirty-minute address is likely to fulfill a different role from words offered under the wedding canopy or at the start of a committee meeting. Words spoken at a circumcision ceremony

will have a different tone and aim to achieve different ends than words offered at a memorial service.

The *derasha* does not always sit comfortably in its contexts. Consider the most frequent setting, as part of a prayer service. It has been observed that “the modern Jewish sermon became the very center of the liturgical structure, supporting the core of the religious experience and communicating an increasingly ethical message.”⁶ However, in Judaism throughout its history, a tension between the rhythm of the prayer service and the role of the homily has sometimes been present.

This tension is in fact as old as Rabbinic Judaism itself. It is recounted in the Babylonian Talmud⁷ that the Babylonian Sage known as Rava criticized his contemporary Rav Hamnuna for extending his prayers at the expense of study. In rebuffing the reproach, Rav Hamnuna declared that there are separate times for prayer and for study. Here (and ever since) the sometimes competing of the liturgical and homiletical thrusts of traditional Judaism come to expression. Rav Hamnuna was not expressing a view antithetical to the practice of Biblical exegesis. Rather, he was attempting to defend the integrity of the prayer service against what may have been perceived of a kind of creeping pan-intellectualism, where the study of Torah was considered core, and everything else peripheral.

It is interesting to note that one of the twentieth century’s leading theologians of Jewish prayer, Abraham Joshua Heschel, was distinctly unhappy about the trend to place increasing emphasis on the sermon at the expense of the authenticity of the prayer experience. His critique, offered originally at a conference of rabbis in 1953, left no doubt as to his opinions on this issue:

“The prominence given to the sermon as if the sermon were the core and the prayer the shell, is not only a drain on the intellectual resources of the preacher but also a serious deviation from the spirit of our tradition. The sermon, unlike prayer, has never been considered as one of the supreme things in the world [...] Preaching is either an organic part of the act of prayer or out of place.”⁸

Heschel’s resistance to the prominence of the sermon did not derive from any anti-intellectual predilection: he was one of the most learned Jewish theologians of his day, with a keen appreciation for the role of the sermon in Jewish history. Rather, his position mirrored that of Rav Hamnuna: he was concerned that by offering rhetorical pyrotechnics, the preacher may distract the worshipper from the hard work of prayer. The context of the two men’s defense of the prayer service was of course quite different, but there is a point of connection between them. Heschel was concerned

⁶ *Mirela Saim*, *The Modern Renewal of Jewish Homiletics and the Occurrence of Interfaith Preaching*, in: Robert H. Allinson (ed.), *A New History of the Sermon – The Nineteenth Century*, Leiden 2010, 460.

⁷ bT Shabbat 10a.

⁸ *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, *Man’s Quest for God. Studies in Jewish Prayer and Symbolism*, New York 1954, 79–80.

that a crisis in the prayer service was causing many to privilege the sermon (and often the charismatic individual delivering it) over the act of praying.

Rav Hamnuna may have been concerned to take a stand against peremptory fulfillment of prayer requirements in contrast with soulful and intentional acts of praying. For Heschel, his critique should be seen against the backdrop of a moment in American Judaism where the rabbi's sermon was likely to put the prayer service in the shade. As Marc Lee Raphael has summarized the life of the synagogue in the course of American Jewish history, "the highlight of worship services has fluctuated – at different times, in different wings of American Judaism, and in different locales – from the liturgy to the sermon, with the latter sometimes just a pause in the liturgical flow, other times the center of the worship experience."⁹ It was this fluctuation which was the cause of Heschel's disapproval. He did not want the sermon to overshadow or swamp the act of prayer.

One function, then, of the *derasha*, is to serve as an integral part of the wider context of which it is a part. Standing with a couple beneath the wedding canopy, at the pulpit during the Day of Atonement, in these and many other communal settings, the preacher has a responsibility to serve the needs of the particular situation. In that sense, our first category – *moment* – is at work in establishing the core function of the sermon. The *darshan* (the preacher) is charged with the task of reading the group being addressed and assessing what would be most appropriate and most needed. Heschel believed that the energy dedicated to oratorical proficiency would be better invested in building a worthy prayer experience. Others might argue that while liturgy is a closed book to many congregants, the *derasha* provides an opportunity to offer ideas and insights for congregants in search of meaning. The contextual function of the *derasha* is to enhance the particular ceremony or setting in which it is placed.

The *intentional* function relates less to the role of the *derasha* within the particular context of its delivery, and more to the intention of the *darshan* (or his female counterpart, the *darshaniit*). Am I trying to inform, entertain, distract, upbraid, focus, comfort, harangue, challenge, support, excoriate, congratulate, condemn? As I link this moment to "Jewish time", what else am I trying to achieve as I demand these people's attention for the next few minutes?

There is rarely one clear answer to any of these questions. The preacher may have a number of intentions in mind. The congregation comprises listeners with a range of interests, needs and intellectual capacities. This, too, is bound to influence the intentional function of the sermon. It is worth noting here that the Jewish sermon has long been subject to what be termed, in a paraphrase

⁹ Marc Lee Raphael, *Judaism in America*, New York 2003, 98. For the earlier phase of this development see Naomi W. Cohen, *What the Rabbis Said: The Public Discourse of 19th Century American Rabbis*, New York 2008. The experience of liberal Jews outside North America has been largely similar.

of Leo Strauss' phrase, persecution and the art of preaching. There are different layers, contrasting and even opposing messages, which may be placed in a sermon. This may stem from a wish to conceal esoteric content, or there may be a polemical political motivation. It is reported that the rabbi of the Jewish community of Wiesbaden, Rabbi Paul Lazarus, was imprisoned in 1938 following a sermon he preached on the verse from Psalm 90, "For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past". He was accused by the Nazi authorities of aiming a polemical dart at the "thousand year Reich".¹⁰ There is evidence that during this period some Jewish preaching and writing was indeed intended to conceal words of resistance or comfort at a time of impending doom.¹¹

Even when a *derasha* is being delivered in less extreme circumstances, the *darshanit* is motivated by a range of ambitions. Her words are likely intended to fulfill a number of goals. It is often the case that the longer the list of such goals, the greater the risk of dilution, diffusion and confusion. The ability to pitch a *derasha* on more than one level, and to ensure that it works simultaneously on each of them, is a sign of enhanced homiletical virtuosity. The *darshan* needs to ensure that the list of intended outcomes is short enough to be attainable but varied enough to account for the range of listeners present in the room.¹²

The *derasha* also has an *educational* function. As a preacher, I want to ensure that some features of Jewish (and other) culture have been imparted to my listeners. Those involved in frequent preaching know that it is difficult to utter some earth-shattering insight every time one speaks to a congregation. But so rich and vast is the store of Jewish tradition, that it ought to be possible on every occasion to bring some teaching, to shed light on some aspect of literature or history which may edify and enrich.

Some words of Torah, particularly short comments, may eschew some of the grander and less tangible goals of the *derasha* and prepare to act as a *d'var torah*, literally – a word of Torah. Modern preachers, who often function in conditions of radical assimilation, may regard it as an important end in itself to enhance the Jewish vocabulary of the congregation. In such a case, teaching key concepts and sources is not a by-product of the *derasha*, but rather a core function.

The last function to be mentioned here is termed *symbolic*. There may well be a specific teaching at the heart of the *derasha* (discussed in the following section), but there is also the general

¹⁰ http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/valley/wiesbaden/nazi_regime.asp

¹¹ For a contemporary example involving not preaching but popular writing in the *Gemeindeblatt* of Berlin, see *Michael Marmor, Traditional Exemplars in a Time of Crisis*, in: Michael A. Meyer/David N. Myers, *Between Jewish Tradition and Modernity: Rethinking and Old Opposition*, Detroit 2014, 192–208.

¹² It is interesting to note that in recent years more and more congregations have started streaming their services to people linking up through the internet. This has all kinds of implication, not least for the preacher, who can no longer know who is in fact in the virtual room.

disposition of the *darshan*, bearing witness or offering an example of a particular approach. I will offer two examples of this kind of preaching-as-testimony. In 1838 Abraham Geiger preached a sermon at the Great Synagogue in Breslau. It included these words on the dynamics of change within Judaism:

“The truth is that nothing has really changed. All that changes is the outer shell, only some outward forms undergo modification; the essence of things remains intact. Do not fear and be not misled by the talk of the foolish who view a few concessions to the times as tantamount to the collapse of the faith. [...] But neither must you allow yourself to be misled by those others who reject the whole faith of Israel merely because some outward forms are no longer to their liking, and who would say with the Israelites at the time of Ezekiel: *Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.* No, our hope is not lost; the true faith of Israel remains unshaken [...].”¹³

This is not scholarship, or argument. Rather, it represents an attempt by Geiger to position himself in the long-standing tradition of defenders of Judaism. It is intended to console, inspire and reassure. Even at that relatively young age, the 28-year old Geiger was seen as a leader of the Reform tendency. By speaking for the essential unity and coherence of the faith of Israel, Geiger was assuming a conciliatory position before the wider Jewish community. He was also perpetuating the age-old tradition of offering a *nechemta*, a message of comfort, encouragement and consolation.

The second example is taken from a later age and a different continent. In March 1958 the Jewish Center in Nashville, Tennessee was dynamited by a white supremacist group. In a sermon delivered shortly after, Rabbi William Silverman offered words of testimony and resistance:

“WE WILL NOT YIELD TO EVIL. We will not capitulate to fear. We will not surrender to violence. We will not submit to intimidation but, as Reform Jews, we will continue to speak for truth; we shall continue to dedicate ourselves to social justice and to the brotherhood of ALL men, knowing and believing that all men are created in the divine image, and this includes Negroes as well as Caucasians.”¹⁴

The sermon does include a number of Biblical and other sources. But the main intention of these words is to demonstrate the refusal of that rabbi to be intimidated by threats, and his wish to bear witness to his convictions.

¹³ Quoted in *Max Wiener* (ed.), *Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaism*, Philadelphia 1962, 248.

¹⁴ Quoted in *David J. Meyer*, *Fighting Segregation, Threats and Dynamite: Rabbi William B. Silverman's Nashville Battle*, in: *American Jewish Archives Journal* 60.1–2 (2008), 109.

It is reasonable to claim that testimony is a less prominent feature of the Jewish sermon than of its Christian counterpart. Nonetheless, this fourth symbolic function is an aspect of the contemporary *derasha*.

3. Message

Students learning homiletics at the Jerusalem campus Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion are often given an unnerving task. They are asked to summarize what they are actually trying to say. If they are incapable of delivering such a summary to themselves, they are sent back to the drawing board, and asked to try again.

That this test often proves so difficult should not be a great surprise. Often the categories discussed above account for most of what happens in a *derasha* – linking the Jewish moment to the historical moment; suiting the liturgical setting; effecting some mood or sensibility; teaching an aspect of tradition; and offering some testimony. However, without a particular teaching or insight, without a challenging concept or controversial opinion, the *derasha* lacks focus.

The risks associated with assuming controversial stances, and the difficulty in keeping abreast of new ideas both account for the prevalence of platitude and cliché in many contemporary Jewish sermons. It is hard to take a stand on anything but the most bland of platforms, and this explains the frequency with which liberal congregations are told that life is a journey; that we are all partners in the work of Creation; that racial hatred is a bad thing; and that moderation is a virtue. It is hard for most congregants to find fault with any of these statements, but it is just as hard for them to find interest in them.

The precedents offered by those who do take a clear stand are not all encouraging. Judah Leon Magnes, who was later to become the first President of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, delivered a rousing sermon to the congregants of Temple Emanuel of the City of New York in April 1910. In his sermon Magnes, who had become a rabbi at Emanuel some four years earlier, offered a relentless critique of the assimilationist tendencies of many of the congregation's members:

“Look among you. Your sons and your daughters, many of them, are marrying outside the people. They are rearing their children with all modern accomplishments, but with no religion. Their homes are bare of piety and of the spirit of prayer. Some of them perhaps are engaged in charitable work, but [...] it is very seldom carried on in the spirit of Jewish brotherhood, but rather in a spirit of remote piety mingled with disdain.”¹⁵

¹⁵ *Arthur A. Goren* (ed.), *Dissenter in Zion: From the Writings of Judah L. Magnes*, Cambridge 1982, 109.

In the peroration at the end of the sermon, Magnes showed that he was fully conscious of the rhythms of Jewish time. Speaking on the festival of Passover, he referred to two Biblical sources related to that season – the Song of Songs and (like Geiger in the sermon quoted above) Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones.

“For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of the birds is come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.’ Will you share in the renewed hopes of the Jewish springtime? Will you celebrate this *z’man herutenu*, this season of Jewish freedom, by an indication to me and to the Jewish people of your willingness to take the road that has been pointed out to you? Will you, as the prophet of old, see the dead bones rise in the valley and stir with the breath of life? Will you have the courage to attempt the long journey? Will you have the vigor to cover the long distance should you attempt it? Will the blessing of God rest upon this congregation, or is it doomed to inanition? Look into your hearts and ask yourselves, do you or do you not wish to remain Jews? The way of life and the way of death is before you. Choose.”¹⁶

The congregation did indeed choose. Within three weeks Magnes had informed the congregation of his intention to resign. The rousing call had fallen on deaf ears. Here is an example of a preacher with the courage of his convictions, prepared to deliver an unambiguous message to his flock, and then unceremoniously driven from the herd. Such examples help encourage a degree of caution in many preachers which does much for their longevity but little for their forthrightness and intellectual honesty.

The contemporary preacher is faced with the challenge of deciding when the platform provided to her should be used to take a stand which may jeopardize their employment or cause fissures to form within the congregation. Not every message, of course, has to involve such dire professional or personal consequences. Often it can be enough to do the congregation the honor of reading, thinking and preparing. On occasion even such opinions can prove to be controversial. In April 2001 David Wolpe, a leading rabbi in the Conservative movement, told his Los Angeles congregation that “virtually every modern archaeologist who has investigated the story of the Exodus, with very few exceptions, agrees that the way the Bible describes the Exodus is not the way it happened, if it happened at all.” The resultant uproar was intense, and his remarks sparked a furore which few could have predicted.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., 114–115.

¹⁷ <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/15596/1-a-rabbi-creates-furore-by-questioning-exodus-story/>

The risk of saying something which may cause offence is a necessary part of the preacher's trade, and extreme aversion to controversy is usually a guarantee of shallowness and frivolity. One part of the *derasha*, then, is the punch it packs.¹⁸

4. Structure

At the turn of the twentieth century, and then again in the 1960s, an institution in Jerusalem named "Shirat Yisrael" (the song of Israel) was active in Jerusalem. Subjects taught included the cantorial arts, Jewish music of different kinds, and the art of the *derasha*. That homiletics and music were seen as connected is certainly no coincidence, in both cases, structure and form help bring control and focus to live performance. A preacher may not be able to hold a tune, but an appreciation of the structure and flow of the sermon has parallels with an appreciation for music.

There is a venerable history to Jewish sermon structure. Many methodological challenges confront scholars who have to decide if the literary remnant is a faithful reconstruction of the original *derasha*. While this problem is acute when considering ancient Rabbinic homilies,¹⁹ by the Middle Ages there is evidence in the form of guides to preachers in the spirit of Christian *ars praedivandi* literature. From these and other sources, Marc Saperstein has produced a fascinating summary of some of the structural options employed by Jewish preachers in that era.²⁰

The modern liberal sermon employs a different range of structural options, to be sure, but the necessity of employing structure has not lessened. Referring again to the musical parallel, the structure of a modern three-minute pop song offers one example of how the modern sermon is structured – after a brief introduction, the recurrent theme of the homily (parallel in this sense to the chorus) is interrupted by 'verses' in which elaborations on the original idea are presented. The conclusion of the song reminds the listener both of the main theme and of some of the supplementary nuance.

A more ambitious structure can be likened to a classical composition, in which two (or more) separate themes are presented, intertwined, and eventually linked. Yet another approach is in essence circular – each component leads on to the next, until the issues discussed come full circle and the original statement is underlined, repeated and often re-understood. Yet another approach, taken directly from classical Jewish sermons, would be to take a Biblical verse (known as a *noseh* in that earlier era) and to split it up, paying attention to each individual word or phrase.

¹⁸ For a case for substantive theological sermons, see *Louis Jacobs*, *The Pulpit as an Instrument of Theological Teaching*, in: *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America* 23 (1969), 9–24.

¹⁹ See *Günter Stemberger*, *The Derashah in Rabbinic Times*, in: *Deeg/Homolka/Schöttler* (eds), *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity* (note 1), 7–21. See also *Steven D. Fraade*, *Literary Composition and Oral Performance in Early Midrashim*, in: *Oral Tradition* 14.1 (1999), 33–51.

²⁰ *Saperstein* (note 5), 63–79.

It is not my intention to list all possible structures for the contemporary Jewish sermon. My point is that structural considerations are inescapable. It is true that there has been a shift in some circles away from an intellectual approach in favor of a more evocative and emotion-based emphasis. This might be understood in terms of a previous category, the sermon's intentional function – the preacher is interested to move the listener, rather than necessarily providing them with new ideas. This shift in emphasis does not mean, however, that structural considerations are less important. No less structure is necessary to evoke emotion than to provide intellectual stimulation.

W.E. Sangster has commented that “[n]o sermon is really strong which is not strong in structure too”,²¹ and this observation is as germane for Jewish preaching as it is for the Christian sermon. Analyzing a sermon from the perspective of structure is often a useful diagnostic to help identify weakness in the argument of the *derasha*. Frequently, extraneous material which does not serve the structure of the sermon interferes with the flow and thrust of the argument. Quite often the hardest part of sermon preparation is deciding what to leave out. Attention to structure can help make this decision easier.

5. Sources

Quotation has been a prevalent feature of Jewish culture since earliest times.²² Sources are cited to act as evidence, to provide *bona fides* for the person doing the citing, to engage with the persons and genres being quoted, and for many other reasons.

While the classical Jewish homily and its medieval version were always replete with traditional sources, this is not always the case for modern iterations of the genre. In his book on Jewish preaching, based on lectures given in 1941, the American Reform rabbi Solomon B. Freehof devoted a chapter to what he described as the non-Scriptural sermon. The chapter begins by drawing a contrast between Philo of Alexandria and the Jews of today. While Philo believed that the words of the Bible were holy in origin, employed allegorical and other methods of interpretation, and could assume that his listeners were acquainted with the Bible, the situation in modern times is quite different:

“For these reasons we modern Jewish preachers have developed a type of preaching which is almost without precedent in the past history of Jewish preaching, namely, the non-textual sermons.”²³

²¹ Quoted in *John R. W. Stott, I Believe in Preaching*, London 1982, 229.

²² See *Michael Marmor, Why Jews Quote*, in: *Oral Tradition* 29.1 (2014), 5–46.

²³ *Solomon B. Freehof, Modern Jewish Preaching*, New York 1941, 61.

One of the main distinctions between liberal and orthodox proponents of Judaism is to be found in the sources they quote and the way they quote them. Modernizing preachers have broadened the range of acceptable sources to include a wide variety of Jewish and non-Jewish texts and cultural references. Often they are shy of intensive quotation of canonical Jewish sources, because they are likely to evoke a response of distance, even alienation. On the other hand, a *derasha* which comprises a string of insights and aphorisms none of which is drawn from the wellsprings of Jewish creativity is hardly a *derasha* at all.

The opinion I am expressing here is partisan. There are many in the non-Orthodox camp who are happy to keep canonical sources to a minimum in their words, perhaps preferring immediacy and relevance to profundity and relevance. It is certainly true that care must be taken with the use of traditional sources, lest they leave the listener feeling overwhelmed and disenfranchised. However, while celebrating the fact that the range of sources we are prepared to quote from is wider and more inclusive than the strict canon enforced in more traditional circles, I am alarmed at the prospect of the non-textual sermon becoming normative. I believe that a non-quoting Judaism is unlikely to stand the test of time. How and what is quoted – that should be an area of change and creativity.

In the English speaking world in the twenty first century, the confessional and personal have become the key currency of discourse. On occasion it seems (to this biased listener) that the *darshan* has replaced the Five Books of Moses with the sacred book of their own life, from which they quote with frequency and solemnity. As I will argue in the next section, this is a perfectly acceptable technique, if it is used in the service of an aim which extends beyond self-indulgence or self-promotion. Preachers who tell of traumatic challenges in their own lives often manage to touch their listeners in profound ways. But the moment this testimony replaces the testimony of Jewish tradition, something vital is lost.

At its finest, the Jewish art of preaching finds a way to integrate sources from three thousand years of Jewish thought with other prompts and sources, and for that matter with excerpts from the Book of Life. In this context, it may be appropriate to quote from the conclusion of a lecture given by the great Rabbinic scholar Louis Ginzberg to students at the fledgling Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1929. In his closing remarks he referred to a Rabbinic interpretation of the Eden narrative which suggested that the Tree of Life was in fact encased within the Tree of Knowledge:

“The *haggadah* asks, why did Adam, who was very wise, act so foolishly as to eat first of the Tree of Knowledge, thus bringing upon himself mortality? [...] The *haggadah* answers this question that before he ate of the Tree of Knowledge he had no conception of the meaning of life, or, to use the style of the masters of the *haggadah*, the Tree of Life was

encased and concealed in the Tree of Knowledge; Adam was therefore constrained to eat of the Tree of Knowledge in order to reach the Tree of Life [...]

I beg you to remember, and never to forget, that there can be no life without knowledge and no renaissance of our People and Land without a renaissance of Jewish learning.”²⁴

While the use of Jewish sources in the act of preaching is subject to misuse and exaggeration, at its root it is predicated on the notion that the tree of life may not and should not be removed from the tree of knowledge. The sources deployed – from every era of Jewish creativity and beyond – are a mark of the identity and integrity of the *derasha*.

6. Techniques

The contemporary preacher has many techniques at her disposal, and she is well advised to make use of those which suit her particular style. In my view, anything which stays within bounds of decency and appropriateness and helps focus the congregation on the structure, message and sources of the *derasha* is to be welcomed. This would certainly include the use of references to popular culture, use of interactive and other styles of presentation, humor, surprise, techniques involving the voice and the body, and more.

On occasion the techniques can swamp the core content of the *derasha*. If an amusing anecdote is the only thing remembered about a sermon ten minutes after its conclusion, then the sermon can be thought of as a failure. If on the other hand the anecdote (or gesture, or reference) helps bring the congregation to an enhanced state of attention, if it makes the teaching more accessible and more memorable, then it can be thought of as a success.

My aim here is not to dwell on the technical aspects of the craft of the *darshan*, although it is fascinating to note that in texts such as Jacob Zahalon’s *Guide for Preachers* from the seventeenth century does include such advice as this:

“[The preacher] should not eat that which would be difficult to digest [and cause him discomfort. For example,] he should not eat olives, nuts, or salty foods, or cheese or legumes, for all these [foods] are [rather] harsh and harmful to the voice, and [even] tend to restrict [free] movement of the lips and the tongue.”²⁵

Then, as now, the *derasha* was understood to be an exercise in communication, and as such it required attention to be paid to physical and technical aspects of the activity – the extent to which one’s voice can be heard as much as the degree to which one’s words excited interest and

²⁴ Louis Ginzberg, *On Jewish Law and Lore*, New York 1981, 123–124.

²⁵ Henry Adler Sosland, *A Guide for Preachers on Composing and Delivering Sermons – The Or ha-Darshanim of Jacob Zahalon*, New York 1987, 151.

engagement.

Like the dimensions discussed in the previous sections of this essay, neglect of the technical dimensions of delivering the *derasha* can render the whole enterprise futile. It may be that changes in cultural habits and mores will have a profound impact on the Jewish sermon. We live in a less frontal and declaratory age, and the *darshan* may seek ways to involve the congregation in various ways in the *derasha* – drama, modern communication technology, music, and more may find their way to the preacher’s toolkit. Attention to technical aspects is a necessary (though not sufficient) aspect of the preacher’s craft.

7. An Example

In this article I have presented a number of dimensions which anyone giving, listening to, or assessing a *derasha* may wish to bear in mind – its connection to the particular moment; its functions (further distinguished as contextual, intentional, educational, and symbolic); its message; sources; structure; and the techniques involved in its delivery. These categories help provide a heuristic for assessing the efficacy of the *derasha* and suggesting ways it might be improved.

I will conclude this essay by offering the outline of a *derasha* I gave in the Murstein Synagogue of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem. The date was July 4, 2015 the same weekend as the Jewish fast of the seventeenth of Tammuz, and the weekly portion was Balak (Num 22:2–25:9). It is worth noting that the sermon was delivered in English by a person of English extraction, to a congregation comprising a high percentage of Americans.

Every Sabbath begins with an act of separation and an act of connection. The lighting of the candles represents a break from the week, but the light generated is carried over from the workaday world into the world of Sabbath. Today I want to talk about separation and connection, sanctity and proximity.

Separation is a prevalent and sometimes painful topic – it relates to the people of Israel, the Palestinians and other peoples in the region. It relates today to the people of Greece, who risk being cut off from the rest of the world. And despite my accent, I want to give you another topical expression of separation, from a document promulgated on this day in 1776:

“When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to separate.”

It is interesting to note that the American Declaration of Independence gives such central significance to the issue of separation. Freedom and separation are profoundly related.

In this week's Torah portion, separation also plays an important role, for example in the memorable verse from the prophecy of Balaam:

For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations (Num 23:9).

The Hebrew phrase here is subject to many different interpretations. Some (like the Ari, Rabbi Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century) take it to mean that God does not account the same significance to the other nations as He does to the People Israel. Others interpret it as saying that the Jews are of little significance in the eyes of the nations. The twelfth century Rabbi Joseph Bechor Shor understood the verse as saying that the People of Israel are not a nation like the others, and therefore cannot be cursed as others are. It is as if the usual rules of history pertaining to the nations of the world do not apply to the Jews.

The founder of neo-Orthodoxy, Rabbi Raphael Samson Hirsch, offered an intriguing interpretation of our verse, extrapolating the idea that it behooves the Jewish people to act as an *am*, a national social entity, and not to be tempted to act as a *goy*, a political entity in the family of nations.

At least one Rabbinical reading offered a message of toleration from the words of Balaam. Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz (eighteenth century) argued that the fact that the Children of Israel sits apart should be interpreted as meaning that we hold no grudge against other peoples, that we do not wish for their downfall or discomfort. Rather, our interest is in living out our distinct destiny.

This brief selection of interpretations of one verse from our portion demonstrate the broad range of approaches elicited by Balaam's vision of Jewish separation – for some this is a commentary on Divine will, for others a reflection on non-Jewish attitudes. For some it demonstrates the preferred status of the Jews, and for others it is taken as a warning and a call for humility and toleration.

In our day, it seems that separation is an unmitigated evil. Consider the scourge of racism gripping so many part of the world. In the immediate aftermath of the dreadful shootings in Charleston, it is hard not to bring this plague to mind, and we know with a heavy heart that this plague has not passed over the doorposts of the Israelites, as more and more expressions of fanatical separatism are to be found within our own society. And a glance at what is being perpetrated in the Middle East in the name of purity and separation is enough to show how pernicious and dangerous this threat has become.

In the face of all these examples, it is tempting to conclude that wherever barriers exist, they should be removed. However, Jewish tradition has long maintained the importance of some kinds of separation and distinction. Indeed, separation is the very first act of creation, and it is difficult to think of Jewish civilization without this urge to draw lines of distinction, along with lines of comparison.

Sometimes the breaking down of barriers is regarded as tragic. Tomorrow we will be marking the seventeenth day of Tammuz. According to the Mishnah one of the five sad events which took place on this day was that the city walls were breached ahead of the destruction of the Temple. In this part of the communal memory of the Jews, the tearing down of divisions is experienced as trauma and catastrophe.

Every Sabbath begins with an act of separation and connection, and so every Sabbath ends. The ritual of *Havdalah*, separation, is also a way of connecting with a long tradition of those who have marked the distinction between the Day of Rest and the working week in previous ages, and who do so today in very different situations than our own.

While it is tempting as liberals to adopt a position of intractable opposition to all separation, I want to suggest that as Jews and as thoughtful human beings that is too sweeping and indiscriminate a stance. I am well aware that in this city, a kilometer or two from where we pray today, there is a separation wall dividing populations. The debate about the effectiveness of this measure, and whether it is primarily connected to security or to political interests, is a debate I will not enter here. But I will say that separation enforced by concrete cannot last for long. I believe that we will need to find a way to reach out beyond the barriers and find each other in openness and dialogue.

Even closer to this place is another wall, a remnant of the ancient Temple. I hope that it stays for centuries and millennia – not rebuilt as a new center for animal sacrifices, but not removed either. While the words of the poet Robert Frost may resonate with us, we may ask when they do and do not apply:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That wants it down!

I believe that even liberals and moderns, maybe especially we, need to make distinctions about distinctions. It would be convenient and simple to take an intransigent stance and speak for strict divisions in every walk of life. It is even more tempting to call for the blurring of every distinction (so many interesting things happen when traditional distinctions are challenged and undermined!). But neither of these options can work if adopted without nuance, without reflection.

As we make our Havdalah, our ceremony of distinction later today, may we know how to distinguish between a breach and a breakthrough, between a distinction of identity and a barrier of prejudice.

Balaam's prophecy of separation resonates as strongly in the 21st century as it ever has before. So much of what is taking place around us, in this society and elsewhere, could be described as the politics of separation. How can our people dwell in its singularity but not hide behind a fence? How might we envisage a future in which each of us can follow our particular path, yet feel part of a human enterprise larger in scale and significance than our own personal track?

On this day marked by some as a celebration of independence and separation, on this day of Balaam's blessing and his curse, on this day when the breach of the wall is called to mind, on this Sabbath of separation and connection, may our separations bring us closer to each other, to the Other, and indeed to the God of possibility, of solidarity, of unity.

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Since the author of this *derasha* is unlikely to be offended, I can reveal that it was not chosen for inclusion in this essay because of any particular virtue or quality. Instead, the intention is to consider a particular example in the light of the dimensions set out in this article. Rather than express a simple opinion of aesthetic preference, it may be helpful to the *darshan* for a sympathetic yet critical listener to ask – have you captured something about the particular web of moments spun on that particular day? Have you a clear sense of the kind of outcome you were attempting to engender with your remarks? Does the *derasha* fit into the context of the service during which it was delivered? Do the sources you have chosen enrich or overwhelm your argument? Is there, indeed, a structured argument which moves from A to B to C in a way which your listeners have a chance of following? Do you have a message worth delivering? Have you employed literary and performative techniques which help people to hear and engage with your words? These and other generative questions may help the *darshanit* reflect on her craft and ensure that a venerable tradition continues to be vital and resonant. They may also help the listener reflect on what would constitute a worthwhile claim on fifteen minutes of their Sabbath rest.

In this article I have not related to the *derasha* as a religious act, but it is with this notion that I would like to bring this survey of key dimensions of the Jewish sermon to a close. In his article about Leo Baeck as a preacher, Walter Homolka offers a moving evocation of a man bringing great qualities of mind and spirit to the act of preaching.²⁶ This image of a modern Jew confronting modernity both in its sublime and demonic forms and bringing forth words of truth and tradition

²⁶ *Walter Homolka, Leo Baeck – Preacher and Teacher of Preaching*, in: Deeg/idem/Schöttler (eds), *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity* (note 1), 136–154.

is a powerful one. Baeck and many others offer an example not of ‘effective public speaking’ but rather of something more elemental and more profound: the conviction that words can bolster and maintain, comfort and support, challenge and undermine. Words may even create, although the preacher would do well to avoid comparisons with the Creator, Who spoke and the world came to be. Before standing before busy and thoughtful people and taking minutes of their time, it behooves a person to place their efforts in a spiritual perspective. If a poor *derasha* is a waste of time, a worthy one can be a sanctification of time. Can there be a greater ambition than to utter a true word of Torah?

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