

Voice and the Rabbi: The Art of Delivering a Sermon

Sandra Kazan

What we will miss most is his voice...muscular...musical...
—Stephen Fried¹

Why is the rabbi's voice important? It can be an invitation to listen or to take a nap.

When I tell people I'm the voice and speech coach at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, inevitably the response is, "Oh, could my rabbi use you!"

Over the twenty-five years I've taught speech and communication at HUC, I've listened to hundreds of student sermons and coached rabbis who have congregations or are seeking congregation placement.

As a professional speaker, it is vital for the rabbi to have excellent oratorical skills engaging the congregation in a sermon that invites them to thought, feeling, and/or action. As Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus writes, "To reach the Jews in the pews," the rabbi must prepare a sermon "that will be compelling and meaningful and inspirational."²

Writing the sermon, however, is different than delivering it. A sermon is meant to be spoken and listened to, but all too often the sermon falls on deaf ears. How "compelling" and "inspirational" can the rabbi be if the rabbi's tone is monotonous; the range lacking in resonance; the vocal pattern repetitive; the speech mumbled and inarticulate; the speaking rate too rapid or slow; the vocal quality tense, nasal, and strident?

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For the rabbi, paying attention to the voice is as important as getting the body in shape at the gym. To develop and strengthen the voice, the rabbi must understand the importance of breath and how the voice works. Every voice is unique and every voice has potential.

The enemy of a free, resonant, and powerful voice is tension. The keys to release tension are relaxation and breathing exercises. Since the breath is the energy and support for the voice, the abdominal and rib cage muscles need to be released. This takes practice by doing challenging exercises for proper breath coordination to achieve optimal health and voice quality.

Legend has it that Demosthenes, the renowned Greek orator (384–322 B.C.E.), overcame his speech impediments—the inability to say the letter *r*, a weak voice, shortness of breath, and stammering—by developing a routine to master and improve his diction, voice, and gestures. He ran up and down steep hills to improve his lung capacity and practiced his speech with pebbles in his mouth to improve his articulation.

Today, we don't have to risk swallowing pebbles to improve lung capacity for vocal power and clarity of diction. We have other options. Speaking classical prose, Shakespeare, and poetry encourages the use of vocal dynamics, and adding extravagant physical body movement to these exercises can be freeing and fun. If your speech is mumbled and indistinct, you don't need to practice with pebbles. Put the index finger knuckle between your teeth when you speak and that will challenge and strengthen the articulators: the lips, tongue, jaw, and palate. Do this for a short time when practicing and then speak normally. Your speech will be considerably more precise.

The voice is connected to the body and the body connected to the voice. Therefore it's important to have awareness of centered body alignment, not only for the sake of appearance. If the ribs are slumped, the head held too high, or the shoulders tense, the voice will suffer. One exercise to help locate this center is flopping over like a rag doll as far down as you can without locking your knees. Then make sure you fully relax your head and neck and sigh out on a voiceless or whispered breath. Then sigh out on a gentle voiced sound (e.g., huh-huh-hum-mum-muh). Now, with eyes closed, slowly roll up your torso to a standing position, your chin parallel to the floor. Using your inner eye, find your center. When you feel physically centered, open your eyes.

Centering for body alignment gives a secure base from which to move. Often, if the speaker is not centered, there will be unnecessary and distracting movement. We begin watching the movement and stop listening to the words however well crafted they might be.

Tension murders the vibrations (resonance) of the voice. Ideally, the goal is to have a voice that resonates in the head, the front (mask) of the face, pharynx, and chest. To free unnecessary tension from the jaw and tongue and to discover the optimal pitch of your voice there are exercises in tongue stretching, yawning, and “word chewing.”³ The little sound of agreement, mm-hmm, can help focus your voice forward. Humming and sirening (moving up and down through your vocal range) on *ng* (as in *sing*) are two simple exercises to explore and stretch the vocal range from top to bottom. Chanting and singing the text of the sermon using the entire vocal range is also valuable. Once you have warmed up and sung your sermon, you will have a more resonant, expressive voice with natural phrasing. These techniques will also help you get to know the text more intimately.

Mend your speech a little, lest it may mar your fortunes.

—William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

The delivery of a sermon from a fully written out text makes it difficult to achieve eye contact with the congregation. If memorized, the result is usually mechanical and a deadly bore. The use of Phrase-A-Line,⁴ a spoken phrase on a line, centered in the middle of the page, makes the text easier for the eye to grasp.

Then, with practice,
the eye can grasp several phrases at a glance.
This will help you speak with eyes up,
and keep genuine contact with the congregation.

Many students and rabbis have mastered this form and now even write their sermons in Phrase-A-Line. This freedom from the text makes it possible for you to be more fully present in the moment, engaging us in a meaningful conversation instead of delivering a lifeless reading on automatic pilot.

The challenge of filling a large space often makes the rabbi shout instead of talk to us. Consistent and unmodulated loudness actually makes the sermon harder to understand and robs the voice of flexibility of pitch, range, and phrasing. To fill the space, you must take the moment to take the space in, looking around and feeling the size of the space, breathing it in, and owning it. All too often, we mistake loudness for projection, but the way to really reach the congregation is to bring the congregation to you, focusing on what you have to say at the appropriate volume without unnecessary force or tension.

Remember: The sermon falls upon the ear, not the eye. The words you use must be concise and specific, the images vivid and evocative. For emphasis, it's also wise to remember the value of the effective pause. This moment gives the congregation a chance to reflect. This is not an empty pause. It is energy filled and can get as much attention as the spoken word.

When speaking from an outline or notes, the pitfalls are not finishing the thought and making distracting sounds (e.g., um, er, you know, and like). These are viruses that have crept into our speech as well as the all too familiar "up talk," where every statement ends in a question. Rehearsing with a tape recorder can be helpful to hear and identify how many times you fall into these traps.

Recently, a rabbinic student, nervous about delivering her senior sermon asked me, "Have you ever had a student who fainted or threw up?" As most of us have heard by now, public speaking is listed as Americans' greatest fear in *The Book of Lists*, ahead of snakes, height, and death.⁵ The good news is that there are physical exercises to modify nervousness. The normal rush of adrenaline most of us feel when speaking in public is useful. It gives us the energy we need to meet the situation. You can even think about it as a friend you can always count on to show up on time.

However, destructive nervousness with symptoms of panic, extreme dryness of mouth, shortness of breath, and trembling hands and knees can be frightening. This is caused by noradrenaline or norepinephrine, a chemical produced at the site of the solar plexus. To reduce or modify your anxiety, prior to giving your sermon, allow yourself to do three or four long slow exhalations of breath that will contract the abdominal muscles and help the nervous system return to a calmer, more confident state.

The culture of the rabbinate has changed over time. There are still congregations who want the preacher's voice to have a traditional, "stained glass" stentorian quality. However, what's encouraged now is a more personally authentic style, which still requires a free and resonant voice, clearly articulated diction, and a tone and way of communicating that makes the congregation feel you're talking *to* them, not *at* them.

To help you practice this less formal style, rehearse in front of a few friends for genuine critique and feedback and/or speak into a video camera or tape recorder as if you're having a conversation. Then listen to it and ask yourself if you were a member of the congregation, would you feel the rabbi was talking not only to a large audience but also to you. Rehearsing in front of a mirror can be helpful. Look at your eyes as if they were the eyes of someone else, and have an active conversation with that person. You can also speak your text to a photo of someone, or an object in your room.

The challenge you're faced with is how to reach the last row of the synagogue without losing intimacy or authenticity. Regardless of the size of the space, remember that if your breath is released from tension, it will support your voice and the energy of your voice will carry. This will free you of the burden of having to push or shout, allowing you to simply look at a few people with genuine eye contact, moving on to another few when you finish a thought. The content and language of the sermon should say what you mean and always be spoken with the strength and clarity of your convictions.

In today's media-dominated world with its spin and our short attention span, it's more incumbent than ever for the rabbi to remember these words from Isaiah: "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isa. 55:11)

Resources

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Notes

1. Stephen Fried, "Wolpe's Greatest Lessons as a Rabbi and Teacher Were Meant to Be Heard," *Jewish Daily Forward*, May 29, 2009, <http://www.forward.com/articles/106311/>.
- 2, Ellen Weinberg Dreyfuss, *CCAR Newsletter* 56, no. 10 (September 2009): page 1.
- 3, Fredrich Brodnitz, *Keep Your Voice Healthy*, 2nd ed. (Austin, TX: Pro-ed, 1988), 146–47.
4. Dorothy Sarnoff, *Never Be Nervous Again* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1987), 50–52.
5. David Wallechinsky, Irving Wallace and Amy Wallace, *The People's Almanac Presents The Book of Lists* (New York, William Morrow, 1977), pp. 469-470.