

“Do I Have to Listen to the Sermon?”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Stepping out from church into a scudding storm, Emerson remarked that the good rain, like a bad preacher, does not know when to stop. Complaining about sermons is as old as preaching itself.

In his 15th century work *Ein Hakoreh*, Joseph ibn Shem Tov tells of a preacher who thought very highly of himself. Standing up to speak, the man said his sermon would be divided into three parts — the first would be comprehensible to him and to the congregation, the second only to him, and third neither of them would understand. Shem Tov adds that most of the sermons he hears are in the third category.

It is a comfort to every teacher (a position defined by Bergen Evans as “one who talks in other people’s sleep”) that the Talmud relates that Rabbi Akiva’s students would sometimes sleep in his class. Once during a sermon by Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, editor of the Mishna, his listeners fell asleep.

Leona Modena, the 17th century Italian rabbi, wrote that God surrounded Sinai with thunder and lightning because God knew when Jews hear words of Torah they tend to fall asleep. The prophet Joel tells us that in the time to come, “the young will have visions and the old will dream dreams.” Perhaps he simply means that as we listen to the great final prophecies, we will all nod slowly, fade gently, and get a good night’s sleep.