The Global Day of Jewish Learning
A project of the Aleph Society

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We Salute

The Matanel Foundation

For their generous support of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s Talmud project and all of his worldwide efforts.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

We are pleased and honored to acknowledge the cooperation and assistance of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, in its critical partnership in the Global Day of Jewish Learning in memory of Ralph Goldman and in its help in advancing Jewish learning worldwide.
We dedicate the Global Day of Jewish Learning to the memory of Ralph I Goldman, z”l.

There was only one title that Ralph Goldman claimed for himself: “civil servant of the Jewish people”. During his 100 years of life, Ralph both served and led the Jewish people, most notably at the helm of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. More than almost anyone, he helped steer the course of 20th century Jewry.

Ralph worked under Teddy Kollek (later the legendary Mayor of united Jerusalem) as a purveyor of ships, arms and goods during the War of Independence. He then served David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first Prime Minister, in securing American support for the newly-created Jewish State.

In later years, Ralph raised the funds to establish Israel’s high school system and its community centers. He promoted Israeli artists, writers and musicians. His wisdom and foresight — and his many communal connections — were key in establishing the Israel Museum. As the leader of the Joint, he created channels for Soviet Jews to emigrate and helped to lead the exodus of Ethiopian Jewry. Under Ralph’s aegis, the Joint expanded its work in Israel, Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Ralph adored the Jewish people — and profoundly loved its heritage. Steeped in the Bible, he would quote its verses in conversation. He opened cultural centers in the former Soviet Union. At a critical moment for the monumental endeavor of the Steinsaltz Hebrew Talmud — when a funding shortage threatened the entire enterprise — Ralph understood the enormous importance of this asset of Jewish culture and persuaded the JDC’s leadership to step in and make it accessible to every Jew.

We will always miss — we can never replace — Ralph’s shock of white hair, his dapper bow ties and his huge, huge grin. But as we name the Global Day of Jewish Learning in his memory, we are inspired by his life and lifted by his legacy.
The Aleph Society dedicates this curriculum in memory of Fanya Gottesfeld Heller z”l.

Fanya Gottesfeld Heller was a true champion of the Jewish people and our shared heritage.

As a Holocaust survivor, she saw the darkest of times, and so she dedicated her life to holding up the light of wisdom. A longtime friend of Rabbi Steinsaltz, Fanya was a staunch partner in his ongoing efforts to reconnect Jews to their heritage and of his Global Day of Jewish Learning. She was a treasured teacher, a storyteller, and a beloved mother, grandmother and great-grandmother.

“Grandchildren are the crown of their elders, and the glory of children is their parents.”
– Proverbs 17:6

In honor of Fanya Gottesfeld Heller’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren: their lives burnish the glory of those who perished in the Shoah.

Chana Hanina
Galia Hanina
Joseph Nathaniel Warren

Children of Shira and Steve Stein
Simcha Meir
Tamara Yocheved
Alter Elyahu Aryeh
Eitan Yosef
Talia
Rayna

Children of Aliza and Zev Ganz
Shmuel Yoel
Atara Rina
Daniel Yomtov
Yosef
Rachel

Children of Tamar and Josh Heller
Yakira Eliana
Gavriella Talia
Yehuda Meir
Sarah Avigayil
Yoel Natan

Children of Laura and Adam Hanina
Samuel Azriel
Charlotte Eliora
Lucy Yael
Yitzchak Binyamin

Children of Sarah Rose Warren Siebold and Mike Siebold
Noah Wilber

For her parents, Benjamin and Charlotte Gottesfeld z”l, these children are the greatest reward...
Indeed, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity...for there the Lord commanded the blessing of life, for eternity.

הנה מתרзов ושוחטים Сергей plastikes
כִּי שם ציווה יי את הברכה חיות ומשרעדם.

Psalms 133

In loving memory of Sam and Arie Halpern

After surviving the Shoah together, the Halpern brothers, together with their wives, dedicated themselves to rebuilding and strengthening the Jewish people through Jewish education, the State of Israel and countless acts of loving kindness and charity.

Like Moshe and Aaron, they supported each other throughout their lives and rejoiced in each other’s success.

We hope that today’s learning of our blessed Torah across the world elevates their souls and fosters unity and harmony amongst our people.
"The best way to build a solid and creative Jewish continuity is through a community of learning and practice. The Global Jewish learning day is a concrete expression of this conception and of a sincere feeling of Klal Israel, of a great global Jewish family."

[ Universidad Hebraica, in Mexico City, Mexico ]

[ Celebrating 10 Years ]

1,505 communities have participated

The Inaugural Global Day of Jewish Learning!

 Themes 2010–2019

2010

Ta'anit

Special siyyum with Rabbi Steinsaltz in Jerusalem, marking the completion of his Talmud translation

2011

Shema

First recorded video classes from Rabbi Steinsaltz

2012

Blessings & Gratitude

First virtual classroom event with an interactive curricular unit

2013

Creating Together: Jewish Approaches to Creativity and Collaboration

2014

Heroes & Villains, Saints & Fools: The People in The Book

Rabbi Steinsaltz taught two unique video classes

403 Russian-speaking communities have participated

[ Celebrating 10 Years ]
ars of Jewish Learning

The world shared an #AhavaMoment

Under the Same Sky: “The Earth is Full of Your Creations”

First year-long live broadcast series of monthly video learning

Extraordinary Passages: Texts & Travels

First Seminar in Saint Petersburg, September 2016

Curricular material available in French and German for the first time

Beauty & Ugliness

New calendar-based learning material developed

Speaking Volumes

117 VIDEOS BROADCAST

2015

Love: Devotion, Desire & Deception

First Seminar in Saint Petersburg, September 2016

Curricular material available in French and German for the first time

2016

2017

2018

2019

77 COUNTRIES HAVE PARTICIPATED

“The main result of the day was the strengthening of Jewish unity, the spiritual enrichment of the individual through the expansion of individual Jewish knowledge, as well as the possibility of mutual exchange of experience.”

[ Maccabi, in Zaporozhje, Ukraine ]
Preface

Welcome to the 10th annual Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz has laid down a challenge to Jews everywhere: “To take a step ahead in Jewish learning and commitment.” Each year we take that challenge in creating new and exciting ways to engage with our Jewish texts. This year we’ve chosen the theme of Speaking Volumes, because how we say and hear words matters.

The Global Day of Jewish Learning began in 2010 as a celebration of the Rabbi’s monumental work of translating the Talmud. It is now an annual celebration bringing Jews across the spectrum of beliefs and backgrounds together through our shared love of learning. 2018 saw more than 500 communities in 43 countries joining this truly worldwide movement. As the study of Torah is one of the few things that the entirety of our people can share, the Global Day is a day for all Jews to celebrate and cherish.

The Global Day is the work of many hands, internationally and in communities large and small. We appreciate the work being done on the ground to organize events in synagogues, JCCs, Hillels, Federations, Moishe Houses, community organizations, and homes all around the world. The success of the Global Day is due to all of your collective efforts. Thank you!

The Aleph Society, which spearheads the Global Day of Jewish Learning, is an affiliate of the Steinsaltz Center, which promotes the work of Rabbi Steinsaltz. We are grateful to Rabbi Menachem Even-Israel for his guidance and creativity. Several agencies and individuals were instrumental in the planning and outreach for the Global Day. Our deepest thanks go to our key international partner, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and to our organizing partners, the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) and Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. We are excited to again have JAFI's Partnership2Gether join us as a community partner. We appreciate the increased involvement this year of Kahal and Project Kesher. We are grateful to our 20+ supporting partners, including the rabbinic bodies of all the denominations, for promoting the Global Day to their constituencies. This is truly a collaborative effort.

Thank you to Aliza Sperling and Tammy Jacobowitz for contributing units to this curriculum; and to Rabbi Alex Israel, Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, and Rabbi David Wolpe for sharing their teachings. We appreciate Sandra Lilienthal for serving as Education Director. A special thank you to Lily Meyer for wearing many hats to support all our work and to Eliana Guralnik for all her work on this initiative. We also appreciate the input of Jeremy Borovitz, Yakov Ellenbogen, Howard Hirt, and Rabbi Josh Pernick. We greatly appreciate PJ Library and its work to prepare family engagement ideas for learning about words.

We wish you a wonderful day of learning on Sunday, November 17th and hope that the study of Speaking Volumes will offer us new insights into the power of words.

Margy-Ruth Davis and Karen Sponder
The Aleph Society
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The Aleph Society’s Mission & Ventures

The Aleph Society was founded in 1990 to further Rabbi Steinsaltz’s mission to “Let My People Know”. The Rabbi’s network of publishing ventures, scholarly work and schools spans the globe. After completing a 45-volume Hebrew translation and commentary on the Talmud, he has overseen translations of this masterwork into English, French, Russian, Italian and Spanish. He has written more than sixty other books that have been translated into a dozen languages. Thousands of students in Israel — from kindergarten to those in post-army advanced studies — have studied in institutions under his aegis. All of the Rabbi’s affiliate organizations are under the umbrella of the Steinsaltz Center in Jerusalem; its website, steinsaltz-center.org, offers a wealth of digital classes and lectures by the Rabbi and his colleagues.

The American-based Aleph Society sponsors informal education programs that reach a world-wide audience. The Global Day of Jewish Learning, now in its tenth year, is celebrated in over 500 communities, from Singapore to San Francisco and from Dallas to Djerba. Many, many thousands of Jews join together to study the same foundational texts, inspired to “take a step ahead” as Rabbi Steinsaltz has challenged us. A variety of materials are available at steinsaltz.org, including essays, videos and information about Rabbi Steinsaltz’s work.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz is internationally regarded as one of the leading scholars and rabbis both of this century, and of the last. As described in Newsweek, “Jewish lore is filled with tales of formidable rabbis. Probably none living today can compare in genius and influence to Adin Steinsaltz, whose extraordinary gifts as a scholar, teacher, scientist, writer, mystic and social critic have attracted disciples from all factions of Israeli society.”

Born in 1937 to a secular family, Rabbi Steinsaltz has authored more than 60 books and hundreds of articles on Jewish mysticism, religious thought, sociology, biography, and philosophy. The best known of these is his interpretation of the Talmud, the seminal work of Jewish culture. His The Thirteen Petalled Rose is considered a modern classic of Jewish mysticism.

He is the first person since the medieval sage Rashi to have completed a full translation of and commentary on the Babylonian Talmud and the Bible. The completion of the Steinsaltz Talmud was commemorated in 2010 by the inaugural Global Day of Jewish Learning, which has since become an annual international event in over 40 countries.

As of this year, all 46 volumes of the Koren Talmud Bavli, an English edition of the definitive Steinsaltz Hebrew Talmud, have been published. The debut volumes of the Steinsaltz Talmud garnered a 2012 National Jewish Book Award. By the end of 2019, the final two volumes of the groundbreaking Steinsaltz Tanakh will be published, giving more readers the chance to delve deeper into the Bible.

Other honors include Israel’s inaugural Israeli Presidential Award of Distinction, the Israel Prize and the French Order of Arts and Literature. Renowned as an original and open-minded thinker, Rabbi Steinsaltz has lectured and taught in hundreds of communities around the world. He lives in Jerusalem with his family.
Introduction for Facilitators & Educators

The theme of “Speaking Volumes” offers important material for any Jew to explore. At the same time, we do not expect every Global Day participant to feel the same way about these ideas. Therefore, facilitators are challenged to approach the text with nuanced perspectives and to lead a pluralistic conversation, allowing participants to express their ideas. How can a facilitator manage this?

- Opening the text for conversation, rather than offering an authoritative interpretation
- Allowing for different ideas to co-exist in the classroom, including different understandings about this theme
- Encouraging all involved to keep an open mind and allow themselves to be challenged by the ideas in the room and on the page
- Encouraging participants to learn from each other

The facilitator will also benefit from:

- Asking questions of participants; opening up questions for conversation; after reading a text, asking participants for reactions and questions
- Stepping back and calling on participants, rather than continually offering ideas
- Allowing silence; letting people sit with ideas and mull over their thoughts
- Ensuring that those in the room know each other’s names and use them; attributing ideas to those who first raise them

Leading Global Day conversations requires a balance between facilitation and teaching. Those leading these conversations “facilitate” when they make room for participants to speak their minds and ensure that the conversation has order. Teaching is also necessary. Through the Global Day, we hope that participants develop a commitment to and interest in Jewish texts, as well as an understanding that such texts are relevant to us today. We hope that they see that Jewish text-based conversations can enrich community life, that any of us can access texts — that they are not so intimidating — and that Jewish study links each of us to the Jewish people as a whole. Facilitators are responsible for conveying these ideas to participants.

Facilitators can convey these ideas in a variety of ways:

- Facilitators can begin conversations by asking: Has anyone studied texts like this before? What is it like? What are our associations with Jewish text study? What would it mean to study more? Facilitators can also close conversations in this way, helping participants to debrief the experience and to validate each other’s positive experiences or concerns.
- Particularly if the group has relatively little experience studying Jewish texts, the facilitator can say directly: Studying Jewish texts is not so scary!
- Facilitators should feel comfortable sharing their own experiences with text study.
- If the group includes community agency leaders, or individuals who are leaders in their own synagogues, the facilitator might lead a conversation about how each person might introduce more text study into their different organizations.

Facilitators should keep in mind these educational goals, asking participants questions and challenging them in ways that will help them think about these ideas. The hope is that these goals will be realized, and that the Talmud and Jewish texts will have gained thousands of students as a result of this great day.
Editor’s Note: Terminology and Translation

Throughout the curriculum we refer to God as “He.” We transliterate certain Hebrew words. Please feel free to adapt these and any other terminology to that which is most fitting for your community.

This curriculum uses English translations and commentaries on the Bible from The Steinsaltz Tanakh. The Steinsaltz Humash, published by Koren in 2018, is the first of three volumes of Tanakh. The second and third volumes of Nevi’im and Ketuvim are being published in 2019. The Steinsaltz Tanakh brings Rabbi Steinsaltz’s unique and humane outlook along with his sterling intellect to a Bible edition that is clear and concise.

The Sessions

To delve into the theme and to help participants see Jewish texts and narratives as relevant to their lives, the sessions address significant questions related to Speaking Volumes.

Each unit reviews primary ideas in different areas, and the units complement each other.

We have chosen texts that will challenge participants, raise key questions and help us to develop a richer understanding of the power of words, in ways that were relevant to the rabbis and will be relevant to us today. Each class contains a variety of texts that shed light on the theme — including texts from the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, medieval and modern commentators.

Session format:

- Facilitators’ guides contain background information, texts, conversation questions and directions to help you structure and frame each class.
- Sourcesheets for the participants immediately follow the facilitator’s guide in each unit.
- A breakdown of the sessions’ timing is provided to facilitators. While we outline 60 minutes for the adult sessions with some units offering additional content/time, we expect the facilitator to abridge or lengthen these sessions based on time allotted and/or the participants’ interests.

As you put together your outline for the conversation that you will lead, keep in mind:

- Don’t feel compelled to use each text and activity. Rather, use what makes sense and feels natural to you.
- Connect one text to the other. Often, the hardest part of these conversations is making the links between texts. Before leading the conversation, create a mental outline of how one text leads to the next, and of the points you are trying to make in teaching and leading.
- Feel free to share some of your own ideas and personal stories. Bringing yourself into the conversation helps participants see you as a genuine role model.
- Don’t be afraid to share your own questions about the texts. By sharing our questions, we assure students that one can live a rich Jewish life even with — and maybe only with — questions.

These texts have been chosen for their relevance to human experience. In the end, the true purpose of the day is to increase participants’ familiarity with and appreciation for Jewish text study and what texts can teach us about words, as well as to foster connections with Jewish tradition and insights for our lives. Each text is rich with nuance, and a serious reckoning with the text will certainly yield new perspectives and meaning.
Beyond a text-by-text class discussion, here are some alternative formats you might consider:

- Have the students prepare together in *chavruta* pairs, discussing the texts with questions you provide. Give them 20 to 30 minutes to prepare the sources and then bring them back together to share their insights. Monitor their progress so you know how many sources they have covered. Often you will find that they say they didn’t have enough time to review all the sources (this is a good thing!).
- Divide the class into small groups and assign a source or two to each group. Give each group 10 to 15 minutes to work together and then reconvene the entire class and ask each group to share their insights.
- Divide the class into small groups and have the entire class learn one or two sources (depending on the length) for five to seven minutes. Then bring them back for a debriefing which will also be five minutes at most. Do that for all the sources, leaving time for a 5 to 7 minute summary at the end.

**Video Classes: Global Day ON AIR**

To supplement this year's curriculum, there are video classes from educators teaching on the theme. Facilitators are encouraged to view the videos as inspiration for their own sessions, or to include the videos themselves as part of the schedule at a Global Day event.

Consider these pairings:

- Rabbi David Wolpe teaching “How Moses Learned to Speak”, which inspired our unit, “Moses: Not A Man of Words?”

These videos are part of a library of interactive material that facilitators and participants can access before November 17. This will allow for more time to plan the use of videos, as well as offer opportunities for “flipped classroom” learning.

Video sessions can also be used as they are, in full, on November 17, as though the speakers in the videos were there with you, guiding the learning. This may be especially helpful to communities with fewer educators available to teach or lead on the day. Live videos broadcast on November 17 can also be streamed in real-time, if your event venue allows for a large screen or a projector.

The Global Day ON AIR is a series of live webcasts of Jewish learning from around the world. Both leading up to and on November 17, renowned Jewish educators, rabbis, artists and thinkers ask the big questions in real time. Bring a featured speaker to your Global Day event with the Global Day ON AIR — no plane ticket necessary!
Using the Curriculum for All Learning Levels

**Beginning Adult Learners**

- Study “Names: Meaning and Memory”, as this session is intended to be an especially accessible starting point for new learners.
- Close a session by asking participants about their experience of text study, debriefing and helping participants look forward to studying again.

**Middle School Students**

The Middle School unit looks at a famous friendship in the Talmud that is tested when unkind things are said. Students have the opportunity to create a “play” and perform their interpretation of the story. Questions and activities can be adapted to suit the needs of different ages of Middle School students.

**Elementary School Students**

Elementary School students will get to know Moses as a man who was not comfortable with using words. His story can encourage children who are shy to speak up, and help everyone remember to use words instead of force.

**PJ Library**

PJ Library provides family engagement ideas for learning about words. Entry points into Speaking Volumes include: names, watching one's speech, creating the world with words, and more. They invite you to choose a book, craft meaningful discussion prompts, and mix and match activities to create a family program for children ages 2-8 and their parents or grandparents.
Facilitator's Note: This unit has four sections for a total of 75 minutes. For a 60-minute unit, omit Part Four.

Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Names are words we use to identify ourselves, distinguishing each of us from one another in a way that is fundamental to how we communicate. The names we are called, and the names we call others, demonstrate the nature of our relationships and how we view the world. Today we will use our own names as texts and compare them with examples of names and their usages in the Jewish canon. Let’s look at how names thread through the fabrics of identity, relationships and memory.

We begin by looking at the elements of our own names.

Ask participants to write down their full name, and to write a few things they know about each of their names, using the following questions as prompts:

1. Who gave you your name? Were you named after anyone in particular? How are you related? What do you know about them? Or is your name one from the Bible?
2. Do you know the origin of your family name? Does it come from a specific place or period in history? Does your name have a meaning in another language?
3. How do you introduce yourself to new people? Do you have different introductions for different situations? Do you go by your full name or do you shorten your name? Why or why not?
4. What are some nicknames you are often called? Who calls you those names?
5. Did you earn a title through your education or profession? Has your name changed through marriage or adoption?

Our names carry in them the histories and hopes of our families. They can tell a story about who we are, or where we’ve come from, or what we’ve achieved. Everyone wants to be known and remembered as individuals, and it is important to us to be remembered by name. Names are outward-facing, and we use them to distinguish ourselves from others or to be distinguished by others.

Keep these names and ideas in mind as we explore the meaning and significance of names.

Part One: Being Named (15 minutes)

The Bible does not often give great detail about the daily lives of its characters; several generations can pass in just one verse, with only a few people named in a list of “begats”. When we do get more detail, we know it is a significant moment. In our first text, we not only see the birth of Jacob and Esau, we are given a glimpse into how the children of Isaac and Rebecca received their names.

24 Her [Rebecca’s] days to give birth were complete, and behold, there were twins in her womb. 25 The first emerged with red skin, redder than that of an average person. And he was covered, all of him like a cloak of hair, as he was very hairy. And they called his name Esau, perhaps due to his hair [se’ar], or because he appeared mature, like an object that is fully fashioned [asui]. 26 And thereafter his brother emerged. Their birth, like her pregnancy, was unusual, as his hand was grasping Esau’s heel [akev]; and he called his name Jacob [Ya’akov]. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

Ask:

1. What does the text give as the inspiration or explanation for each of the boys’ names?
2. How are the names given to Jacob and Esau similar or different?

Jacob and Esau are given names that reflect an observation of the characteristics of their birth. Because the Bible does not always give us the reason for each name, it’s significant when it does happen. In reading more of Jacob’s story in the Book of Genesis, we know that he will eventually become a great patriarch of the Jewish people.

Our sages have also tried to tease apart the threads of his name for hints about Jacob’s destiny of greatness hidden within his birth. Rashi lived in France in the 11th century. He is an important commentator on the Bible and Talmud, and one of the most famous scholars in Jewish history. Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (c.1475-1550) was an Italian rabbi, commentator, philosopher and physician. He is noted for his mixture of new interpretations and comments from earlier rabbis, while remaining faithful to the original texts.

Read Texts #2 and #3 aloud.


טועבט נשוי. סותא שלאר ה-
uneavenport א$
ESAU’S HEEL — a sign that this one (Esau) will hardly have time to complete his period of domination before the other would rise and take it (his power) from him.


וירקאי שמוי יטועב יшеיר בנ𠮷ב תובשק כי זה התודה היה ויד אהוה בקעג אחוי שכרב אמרי ר. לא-ל. המ. כו.

And he called his name Jacob — The word means he [Jacob] will remain at the heel, and the tail-end. This is based on the future mode of the word.
Ask:

1. How does Rashi interpret the significance of Esau’s heel? Does the Sforno agree? How are the two interpretations similar or different?
2. What do the two sages’ interpretations tell you about how they understand Jacob’s personality and destiny?
3. Do you gravitate towards either of these sages’ readings? How might your own interpretation of Jacob’s character change depending on the commentary you read?

Names reflect our place in the world around us. What you call other people shows something about you, about your relationship to that person, and can affect how others feel about themselves. These two commentators read Names: Meaning and Memory

Part Two: Names and Relationships
(15 minutes)

The Talmud tells a story about Rav Rehumi. Let’s look at that story and then read a commentary that sheds some light on Rav Rehumi’s relationship with his wife. Dr. Ruth Calderon is a Talmud scholar and a former Member of Knesset (Israeli Parliament). In her book A Bride for One Night, Dr. Calderon delves into Talmudic stories in a way that connects them to our modern understandings.

Ask participants to read Texts #4 and #5 and answer the questions in chavruta.

Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.


This is as it is related about Rav Rehumi, who would commonly study before Rava in Mefoza: He was accustomed to come back to his home every year on the eve of Yom Kippur. One day he was particularly engrossed in the halakha he was studying, and so he remained in the study hall and did not go home. His wife was expecting him that day and continually said to herself: Now he is coming, now he is coming. But in the end, he did not come. She was distressed by this and a tear fell from her eye. At that exact moment, Rav Rehumi was sitting on the roof. The roof collapsed under him and he died. This teaches how much one must be careful, as he was punished severely for causing anguish to his wife, even inadvertently.
Much ink has been spilled on the battle that raged in Rav Rehumi’s soul. He was torn between the study house and his home, between the texts he learned, which took on a life of their own, and the woman who waited for him to return...

If Rav Rehumi achieved any fame, it is thanks to his wife, and if he acquired a reputation, it is as a tragic hero. His character seems to be a pun on his unique, extraordinary name: Rehumi in Aramaic means “love” and can be interpreted as either “loving” or “beloved.” Rehumi’s wife loved him. As such it is she who renders his name appropriate for him — she makes him “beloved.” Though nameless, and though described sparingly, she emerges as a character thanks to the skill of an anonymous master storyteller. Her great love enables her to overlook her husband’s failings, though she is not blind to them...

This is a story about a loving wife and a husband whose Torah renders him incapable of sensing another’s pain. A romantic reading will view Rav Rehumi as a man who had a poor sense of priorities, who preferred to devote himself to Torah instead of to a woman. A moralizing reading will blame him for sacrificing her good for his own. But I view him as a man who simply did not know what love is. The only area in which he was not mediocre was in his loving wife’s estimation. Only through her eyes was he deserving of his name. She allowed him to trample on her soul and, through this tragic story, to achieve immortality.

Ask in chavruta:

1. The Talmud says that Rav Rehumi’s wife felt anguish, caused inadvertently by his absence. How else might you describe her feelings?
2. Dr. Calderon points out the Aramaic meaning of Rav Rehumi’s name and connects that to how his relationship with his wife might have been. What do you think of this analysis? How does that change the nature of the story and your understanding of it?
3. What is the significance of Rav Rehumi having a name that is directly related to the plot of the story?

“Beloved” is something that we call those who are dearest to us — something between a name and a title, which we individually bestow on those we feel deserve it. In using a “name” like beloved or darling, we verbally assign a significance to the person and their role in the relationship.

Rehumi’s name may be an example of how a person can “become” one’s name. The meaning and significance of the relationship with his wife informs and shapes how he is remembered. It is because he is beloved by her that the tragedy of his death becomes something of Talmudic note. We will never know if his name was actually Rav Rehumi, or if he came to be known as Rehumi, “beloved” because of this story. Either way, the impact of the story is deepened when given the added weight of this destiny, and the tragedy of his wife’s loss is magnified when we look at her role in making Rehumi notable. The Latin saying “nomen est omen” implies that a person’s name foreshadows a person’s life or destiny. Our names carry within them the context of how we are connected to others.
Part Three: Acquiring a New Name (15 minutes)

We are given several names when we are born. Then we may gain other names later in life, like nicknames or titles. They often come from actions we’ve taken or traits that identify us. Names we acquire often reflect our experiences and become part of our identity. In the Torah, the names of the characters tell us important things about who they are and why they are important. Let’s return to the story of Jacob, and look closely at how he acquires a new name.

Read Text #6 aloud.


25 Jacob remained alone on the riverbank; and a mysterious, unnamed man wrestled with him until dawn. 26 He, the man, saw that he could not prevail against him, and therefore he touched, struck, Jacob and injured the joint of his thigh; and the joint of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated as he wrestled with him. Despite the great pain, Jacob remained standing and refused to be defeated. 27 He, the man, said: Release me, for the dawn has broken. Jacob felt that he was capable of subduing him, and he said: I will not release you unless you bless me. Jacob demanded submission, expressed in the form of a blessing. 28 He, the angel, said to him: What is your name? He said: Jacob. 29 He, the angel, said: No more shall Jacob be said to be your name; rather, you shall be called Israel; for you have striven [sarita] with God [Elokim] and with men, and you have prevailed.

Ask:

1. Who gives Jacob a new name? What is the new name and what does it mean?
2. How would you characterize Jacob’s attitude and actions that cause him to get this new name?
3. Think of the changes your name has undergone that show how you took on a challenge, or that reflect changes in your life. How does your own name’s changes help you understand the passage about Jacob’s name change?
4. What could a potential name change do to a person to inspire that person to act differently? (For example, once you have a title next to your name — Doctor, Rabbi, etc. — does that change the way you behave?)
5. What do we expect from others when we inform them that we have a title or signifier in our names? How does that affect what others see about us, or how we see others when they have that kind of name?

The angel, who is a representative from God, gives Jacob a new name. This new name is made of two Hebrew words. When the name “Israel” is said in Hebrew, the sounds of the Hebrew words for “strive” (שָׂרִ֧יתָ) and “God” (אֱלקֵים) are tied together, in the same way that their meanings are tied together. Jacob’s actions — when he wrestled with God’s angel — are recorded in his new name, Israel.

Our next text offers a different way of connecting the Hebrew roots of “Jacob” and “Israel”. This note by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz gives us detail about the linguistic root of the behavioral undertones of Jacob’s name change. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

32:28 No more shall Jacob be said to be your name, rather, Israel: ...After Jacob won their battle, the angel informed him that from now onward he would no longer be the one who follows behind [okev], the secondary brother who had to resort to subterfuge. His new name, Israel [Yisrael], is explained as referring to his successful contention with the angel and with man. The name also means straightness [yosher], as the twisted [akov] person had become straight. After having overcome the hurdle of his secondary status, Jacob was now the primary son and could therefore behave in a straightforward manner.

Ask:

1. Compare the root words of “Israel” suggested in the text of Genesis 25:29 (sarita and Elokim), and that suggested here (yashar). How does your understanding of the name differ, depending on the interpretation of the root of the word?
2. How would you characterize the relationship between Jacob’s “nature”, or the expectations of his behavior, and his names?
3. Does Text #7 support the notion that a name contains “destiny”? Why or why not?

Some life experiences can affect what we call ourselves, or how we are identified by name. For example, marriage, earning a title or degree, gaining a new sense of identity — these may be captured in our names as a lasting record of that change that everyone can see.

A change or addition in name creates a new identity to present to the world, but also changes a person’s sense of their own responsibilities. From this point on in Jacob’s life, he is still referred to by the name “Jacob”, while also being called “Israel” in other contexts. The duality of his name reflects the new duality of his role, both as a man and as a patriarch of the Jewish people.

Part Four: Remembering by Name (20 minutes)

An important part of Jewish tradition is remembering the names of those who have died. Let’s turn to a poem by Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky — Zelda, as she is known — a Russian-born poet who lived in Israel through the 20th century, and is celebrated for her unique linguistic style.

Ask different participants to read Text #8 aloud line-by-line.
Ask:

1. Do you have a name given to you “by the mountains” or “by the seasons of the year”? Which of the sources of names in this poem do you relate to most, or find most challenging?

2. How is a name given by God or parents similar to or different from a name given by “his clothes” or “the seasons of the year”?

3. Do you think the poet means that a person has one name with multiple sources, or many names? Why?

4. How does this poem inform your understanding of the names of Jacob and the naming of Rav Rehumi?

5. Which of the different names a person has is the most important to you? Why?

Each of us has a wide variety of names, reflecting various aspects of identity and action, relationships with people and places, and with the world around us. If we have many names given to us by others, are we remembered by all of them or only one? Or are we remembered by different names by different people?
The Book of Isaiah shows us that being remembered by name is a way to exist beyond life and death. In this passage you may recognize the phrase, “yad vashem — a monument and a name” from hearing about Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

» Ask a participant to read Text #9 aloud.


וְנָתַֽתִּ֨י לָהֶ֜ם בְּבֵיתִ֤י וּבְחֽוֹמֹתַי֙ יָד֙ וָשֵׁ֔ם ט֖וֹב מִבָּנִ֣ים וּמִבָּנ֑וֹת שֵׁ֤ם עוֹלָם֙ אֶתֶּ֔ר לֹ֥א יִכָּרֵֽת׃

I will give them, in My House and within My walls, a monument and a name better than sons or daughters. I will give them an everlasting name which shall not perish.

» Ask:

1. Why is it important to be remembered by name? What are ways that you remember loved ones and/or wish to be remembered?
2. Have you ever participated in reading names at a Holocaust memorial event? How would you describe the experience?
3. How is the reading of names on Holocaust Memorial Day connected to our tradition of the “everlasting name”?

Zelda’s poem concludes with the final name a person is given, that which is “given by our death.” The poem has since become an iconic part of the annual memorial services in Israel for Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom HaShoah). It is also a tradition of Holocaust memorials worldwide to read aloud the names of those who were murdered. Beyond killing the Jews, the perpetrators of the Holocaust wanted to erase their memory. One of Yad Vashem’s central tasks is to restore the individual identity of each victim, starting with their names. To date, more than 4 million names have been recorded.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

» Ask:

1. How has today’s exploration helped you better understand the possible meanings of names?
2. Which of today’s texts about names did you find most interesting or challenging? Why?

Our names are more than just identifiers — they can signify our relationships and our achievements. Whether we acquire a name at birth or through changes in life, the different ways in which names are used can show us how we perceive each other. We cherish our names, as they contain within them our histories and the legacies we wish to leave to the world.
Names: Meaning and Memory

Part One: Being Named


24 Her [Rebecca’s] days to give birth were complete, and behold, there were twins in her womb. 25 The first emerged with red skin, redder than that of an average person. And he was covered, all of him like a cloak of hair, as he was very hairy. And they called his name Esau, perhaps due to his hair [se’ar], or because he appeared mature, like an object that is fully fashioned [asul]. 26 And thereafter his brother emerged. Their birth, like her pregnancy, was unusual, as his hand was grasping Esau’s heel [akev]; and he called his name Jacob [Ya’akov]. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.


But he called his name Esau – a sign that this one (Esau) will hardly have time to complete his period of domination before the other would rise and take it (his power) from him.


And he called his name Jacob — The word means he [Jacob] will remain at the heel, and the tail-end. This is based on the future mode of the word.

Part Two: Names and Relationships


This is as it is related about Rav Rehumi, who would commonly study before Rava in Mehoza: He was accustomed to come back to his home every year on the eve of Yom Kippur. One day he was particularly engrossed in the halakha he was studying, and so he remained in the study hall and did not go home. His wife was expecting him that day and continually said to herself: Now he is coming, now he is coming. But in the end, he did not come. She was distressed by this and a tear fell from her eye. At that exact moment, Rav Rehumi was sitting on the roof. The roof collapsed under him and he died. This teaches how much one must be careful, as he was punished severely for causing anguish to his wife, even inadvertently.

Much ink has been spilled on the battle that raged in Rav Rehumi’s soul. He was torn between the study house and his home, between the texts he learned, which took on a life of their own, and the woman who waited for him to return…

If Rav Rehumi achieved any fame, it is thanks to his wife, and if he acquired a reputation, it is as a tragic hero. His character seems to be a pun on his unique, extraordinary name: Rehumi in Aramaic means “love” and can be interpreted as either “loving” or “beloved.” Rehumi’s wife loved him. As such it is she who renders his name appropriate for him — she makes him “beloved.” Though nameless, and though described sparingly, she emerges as a character thanks to the skill of an anonymous master storyteller. Her great love enables her to overlook her husband’s failings, though she is not blind to them…

This is a story about a loving wife and a husband whose Torah renders him incapable of sensing another’s pain. A romantic reading will view Rav Rehumi as a man who had a poor sense of priorities, who preferred to devote himself to Torah instead of to a woman. A moralizing reading will blame him for sacrificing her good for his own. But I view him as a man who simply did not know what love is. The only area in which he was not mediocre was in his loving wife’s estimation. Only through her eyes was he deserving of his name. She allowed him to trample on her soul and, through this tragic story, to achieve immortality.

Part Three: Acquiring a New Name


25 Jacob remained alone on the riverbank; and a mysterious, unnamed man wrestled with him until dawn. 26 He, the man, saw that he could not prevail against him, and therefore he touched, struck, Jacob and injured the joint of his thigh; and the joint of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated as he wrestled with him. Despite the great pain, Jacob remained standing and refused to be defeated. 27 He, the man, said: Release me, for the dawn has broken. Jacob felt that he was capable of subduing him, and he said: I will not release you unless you bless me. Jacob demanded submission, expressed in the form of a blessing. 28 He, the angel, said to him: What is your name? He said: Jacob. 29 He, the angel, said: No more shall Jacob be said to be your name; rather, you shall be called Israel; for you have striven [sarita] with God [Elokim] and with men, and you have prevailed.


32:28 No more shall Jacob be said to be your name, rather, Israel: ...After Jacob won their battle, the angel informed him that from now onward he would no longer be the one who follows behind [okev], the secondary brother who had to resort to subterfuge. His new name, Israel [Yisrael], is explained as referring to his successful contention with the angel and with man. The name also means straightness [yosher], as the twisted [akov] person had become straight. After having overcome the hurdle of his secondary status, Jacob was now the primary son and could therefore behave in a straightforward manner.
Part Four: Remembering by Name


Each of us has a name given by God
and given by our parents
Each of us has a name
given by our stature and our smile
and given by what we wear
Each of us has a name
given by the mountains
and given by our walls
Each of us has a name
given by the stars
and given by our neighbors
Each of us has a name
given by our sins
and given by our longing
Each of us has a name
given by our enemies
and given by our love
Each of us has a name
given by our celebrations
and given by our work
Each of us has a name
given by the seasons
and given by our blindness
Each of us has a name
given by the sea
and given by
our death.


וְנָתַתִּי לָהֶם בְּבֵיתִי וּבְחֽוֹמֹתַי֙ יָ֣ד וָשֵׁ֔ם ט֖וֹב מִבָּנִ֣ים וּמִבָּנ֑וֹת שֵׁ֤ם עוֹלָם֙ אֶתֶּן־ל֔וֹ אֲשֶׁ֖ר לֹ֥א יִכָּרֵֽת׃

I will give them, in My House and within My walls, a monument and a name better than sons or daughters. I will give them an everlasting name which shall not perish.
Moses: Not a Man of Words?

Based on a Video Class by Rabbi David Wolpe

Facilitator's Note: This unit is presented as a 85-minute session. For a 65-minute session, omit Part Two.

Introduction: Moses, Man of Action (10 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

When we think of great teachers, we most likely remember them by their words. Moses is regarded as the greatest of the Jewish teachers, and is often called Moshe Rabbeinu, or “Moses our Teacher”. He is remembered for his direct conversations with God, for writing the tablets of the Torah for the Children of Israel, for dictating the Book of Deuteronomy, and for saying the famous line to Pharaoh, “Let my people go!”

It might surprise you, then, to learn that Moses did not think of himself as a man of words.

Today, we will look closely at the life and words of Moses in the Bible, the tension between his actions and his words, and what we can learn about the role of words and actions in leadership.

Let’s begin with the first example of Moses taking action where, perhaps, words might have served better. As a young man raised in the palace of the Pharaoh, Moses would have been recognizable as a member of the royal household. Here, we see his budding curiosity about his mother’s people, and what happens when he is confronted with the brutal treatment they receive at the hands of his adoptive nation.

Read Text #1 aloud.


11 Despite being raised by Pharaoh’s daughter as a son of the Egyptian aristocracy, Moses was aware of his Hebrew ethnicity: It was in those days, Moses grew to adulthood, and he went out to his brethren. Until now, because the lowly Hebrews did not enter the court of Pharaoh, Moses was unfamiliar with them. And he saw their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew man from his brethren. 12 He, Moses, turned this way and that, and he saw that there was no one in the vicinity. He smote the Egyptian, killing him. And Moses then hid him by burying the body in the sand, and he assumed that this was the conclusion of this incident.

13 He emerged on the second day, and behold, two Hebrew men were fighting. And he, Moses, said to the wicked one, the one who struck the other: Why do you strike your neighbor? 14 He, the assailant, said: Who appointed you to be a leader and a judge over us, that you see fit to judge me? Do you propose to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian? Moses was frightened, because he knew he had broken the law, and he said: Indeed, although I thought my actions went unseen, the matter is known. 15 Pharaoh heard this matter, and he sought to kill Moses. Moses fled from Pharaoh, and he settled in the land of Midyan, and since he was a total stranger, he sat beside the well, which was an informal meeting place.
16 The priest of Midyan had seven daughters, who shepherded his flock. They came to the well, drew water, and filled the troughs to give their father’s flock to drink. Moses stood and rescued them. Despite being completely unfamiliar with these girls, he responded to the injustice occurring before him. And not only did he save them, but he also gave their flock to drink.

Ask:

1. In these three situations, what is Moses’ response? How do the situations differ?
2. What are some similarities and differences in how Moses responds to each situation?
3. What do you think motivates Moses to act as he does?

Moses responds to these situations by rushing into action. There is no indication in the text that he was asked to help; rather, he chose to involve himself. While these instances are sometimes described as his desire to intercede in the face of injustice, in our discussion today we should note another significant point: his first response is a physical action, rather than using words to solve an issue. First, he kills the Egyptian whom he sees beating a Hebrew, rather than using his position as a member of Pharaoh’s court to order the slave-master to stop. Next, when he learns that his crime has been discovered, he flees from Egypt instead of arguing in defense of his actions. Then, he protects the daughters of the priest of Midian at the water-well without so much as introducing himself first. A pattern is emerging: Moses is someone who does not address problems with words. Rather, Moses acts.

Moses is a man who will use action instead of words. What will happen, then, when he is commanded to speak?

Part One: Speaking with God at the Burning Bush (25 minutes)

After the incident at the well, we learn that Moses marries one of the girls he rushed in to rescue — Tzipporah. Moses becomes a shepherd to his father-in-law’s flock and is herding in the wilderness when he receives a revelation at the burning bush. When God appears to Moses in the burning bush, He commands him to speak to Pharaoh and lead the Jewish people out of Egypt.


16 God now instructs Moses: Go and gather the elders of Israel and say to them: The Lord, God of your forefathers, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, appeared to me, saying: I have remembered you, and I have also considered what is being done to you in Egypt, your suffering. 17 I said: I will take you up out of the affliction of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites and the Hitites and the Emorites and the Perizites and the Hivites and the Yevusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.
18 God saw that Moses was hesitant, so He assured Moses: They will listen to your voice and you shall go, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him: The Lord, God of the Hebrews, happened upon us, He has revealed Himself to us and given us a message. Now, please, let us go a journey of three days in the wilderness and we will sacrifice to the Lord our God. 19 And I know that the king of Egypt will not allow you to go, except if I force him to do so with a powerful hand. 20 I will send forth My hand, and smite Egypt with all My wonders that I will perform in its midst; and thereafter he will send you forth.

Ask:

1. What is God asking Moses to do?
2. What is the “speech” He commands Moses to give? Who is the speech for?

So how does Moses respond to this command? Let’s look at what happens by reading Text #3 together in chavruta. Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.

Read Text #3 in chavruta.


10 Moses said to the Lord: Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words. I have never been able to express myself eloquently, neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am unfit for this mission, as I am cumbrous of speech and cumbrous of tongue. 11 The Lord said to him: Who gives a mouth to a person? Or who renders one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12 Now, go, and I will be with your mouth and I will instruct you that which you shall say. I will guide you throughout your mission. 13 Despite all the assurances of God, Moses did not want to accept his task: He said: Please, my Lord, please send by means of anyone else whom You will send.

Discuss the following questions in chavruta:

1. How would you characterize the way Moses speaks to God? (e.g. articulate, pleading, negotiating, defiant, etc...)
2. What part of God’s instructions is Moses resisting? What are some reasons why Moses could be uncomfortable with speaking?
3. How is Moses’ reaction here different from the way he reacted in Text #1? Why do you think he acts differently?
4. What could Moses have been so concerned about that he would rather argue with God than try to speak? What does that tell you about how Moses relates to other people? What does this tell you about Moses’ relationship with God?
5. Do you think Moses being a reluctant speaker would make him a better, or more compelling, leader? Why?
Moses: Not a Man of Words?

Bring the group back together and ask a few pairs to share their responses.

When God comes to Moses at the burning bush, Moses’ initial response is to say “Lo ish devarim anochi — I am not a man of words.” God is asking him to both speak with Pharaoh and to speak to the Jewish people. Moses tries as hard as he can to get out of doing so. The primary argument that Moses makes is that he is someone who is uncomfortable with words and with speech. Moses says he is kvad pe’h, which is translated here as “cumbrous of tongue” or, literally “tongue-heavy.” We have seen Moses take actions where we might have expected him to use words, but here we have a declaration by Moses himself that he is uncomfortable with articulating words, with speaking aloud to others.

Not everyone is comfortable with communicating in public, and among those people who are, not all of them have a special way with words. Moses is one who skips the steps of communicating and jumps right into action — and he knows it. Each of us has a certain awareness of our comfort levels with speech or action, and it can take some truly remarkable circumstances to get us out of our comfort zones. Yet Moses, even when face-to-face with God, who gives him a direct command, still argues that he’s not the right choice. Why is Moses so insistent?

Part Two: Understanding Moses’ Reluctance and God’s Insistence
(20 minutes)

Let’s look again at the two verses of Exodus 4:10–11 to see how three of our sages interpret Moses’ reluctance and his conversation with God.

The first commentator is Moshe ben Nahman, also called Nachmanides or the Ramban, who was a 13th century Spanish scholar, physician, Sephardic rabbi and kabbalist. He was an important figure in rebuilding Jewish life in Jerusalem after the city’s destruction in 1099.

Ask different participants to read Texts #4a and #4b aloud.


Moses said to the Lord: Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words. Neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant, as I am cumbrous of speech and cumbrous of tongue.


But the straightforward meaning is “I was slow of speech in times past, since my youth; all the more so now that I am old. Even today, now that You have spoken to Your servant to ask me to go before Pharaoh to speak in Your name, you have not removed this impediment from me. How can I go before him like this?” But Moses so wanted not to go that he did not pray to the Blessed One to remove his slowness of speech. He assumed he could get out of going because of his speech impediment. For surely the Lord of All could not send an emissary of uncircumcised lips to an emperor...
Moses: Not a Man of Words?

Ask:

1. What do you think “neither yesterday nor the day before nor since you have spoken to your servant” means?
2. How does Ramban’s commentary characterize Moses’ argument? How does the Ramban show Moses’ own assessment of his abilities? Do you agree with Moses in the Ramban’s portrayal?

Moses uses many words to convey his reluctance. He seems to be conveying that not being someone who is comfortable using words is something that has always been a part of him. The Ramban imagines that, even after experiencing the miracle of revelation, Moses feels exactly the same way about not being a “man of words” as he did before — that someone of unrefined speech isn’t fit to go before Pharaoh and argue on behalf of a nation. The power of meeting God face-to-face does not transform Moses into a more dignified emissary, and Moses uses that as an excuse not to go at all. Our next commentaries expand upon God’s response to Moses.

Isaac Abarbanel was a 15th century diplomat and scholar. Born to a wealthy Iberian banking family, he and his brothers fled to Italy during the Inquisition, and it was there that he wrote his Perush, commentaries on the Five Books of Moses. Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor was a 12th century commentator and poet. A student of both Rabbeinu Tam and the Rashbam, Bekhor Shor was noted for his highly intelligent critical explanations of the Bible.

Ask different participants to read Texts #5a, #5b and #5c aloud.


The Lord said to him: Who gives a mouth to a person? Or who renders one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?


The Ran spoke correctly in his explanation of this interaction. The reason that God responded in this manner, by saying “who gives man the powers of speech”, is God’s way of saying that the loss of abilities of speech isn’t a purely natural occurrence, but rather happened under God’s supervision, because it is in God’s power to give man the powers of speech, and God is the one who is able to take away a person’s powers of speech intentionally and with purpose.


Who gives man speech — If I had willed it, you would already be able to speak well, but that is not what I desired. It serves to honor me that a person who does not have effective powers of speech will speak on my behalf, and will actualize my desires, and through his hand these great accomplishments will be achieved.
Moses: Not a Man of Words?

Part Three: Striking or Speaking to Rocks (20 minutes)

Moses may be afraid of what others will think of him if he speaks poorly, or with a stutter, or if they don’t believe what he says. The social judgement of how we are seen and heard by others is something we can all understand. God wants someone who will speak, not someone who will wage war, to confront Pharaoh. There is no negotiation or compromise on the use of words, but God assures Moses that he won’t be alone. Moses will have His guidance and will indeed be listened to. God sees the greatness that Moses will reach, even if Moses himself does not.

The Book of Exodus continues with Moses leading the Children of Israel out of Egypt, the Parting of the Red Sea and journeying into the desert on the way to the Promised Land. Moses can perform miracles with his staff, and he rallies his people to follow him into the great unknown. Yet, does Moses ever overcome his reluctance to speak?

We can consider many of the next steps in the story to be part of Moses gradually getting an education in how to speak. In addition to taking action, he needs to be able to teach and to use words in order to lead effectively. Let’s keep this in mind as we read Texts #6 and #7, where God asks Moses to speak to a rock in order for it to bring forth water.

Ask different participants to read Texts #6 and #7 aloud.


1 The entire congregation of the children of Israel traveled from the wilderness of Tzin on their travels, at the word of the Lord, by the guidance of the pillar of cloud; they encamped in Refidim, and here again, there was no water for the people to drink. 2 The people quarreled with Moses and said: Give us water that we may drink. Moses said to them: Why do you quarrel with me? You know that these matters are not in my control. And furthermore, why do you try the Lord, rather than trusting Him? 3 They remained there, and the request turned into a complaint. The people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses and said: Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill me and my children and my livestock with thirst? Their language was becoming belligerent and confrontational. 4 Moses cried out to the Lord, saying: What shall I do for this people? A moment more and they will stone me. 5 The Lord said to Moses: Pass before the people ceremoniously, and take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. This procession of Moses with his staff and the elders was meant
to remind everyone that he was acting as the messenger of God.

6 Behold, I am standing before you there upon the rock at Horev, Mount Sinai; you will feel My presence there; and you shall strike the rock, and when you do so water will emerge from it, and the people will drink. Moses did so before the eyes of the elders of Israel. The elders saw with their own eyes the water flow from the rock as Moses struck it.

7 Pursuant to this, he called the place Masa, trial, and Meriva, quarrel, due to the quarrel of the children of Israel, and due to their trying of the Lord, saying: Is the Lord among us, or not?


The people quarreled with Moses, and they said, saying: If only we had perished in the perishing of our brethren before the Lord. Why did you bring the assembly of the Lord to this wilderness, that we and our animals should die there? Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is not a place of seed, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates. Now, we are neither in Egypt nor in Canaan, and there is no water to drink. Moses and Aaron came from before the assembly, and were forced by the angry crowd to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell upon their faces in prayer, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Take the staff with which you performed all the miracles and wonders, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aaron our brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, and it, the rock, will provide its water. You will thereby extract water for them from the rock and you shall give drink to the congregation and their animals. Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as He had commanded him. Moses and Aaron assembled the assembly before the rock, and said to them: Hear now, defiant ones: From this rock will we bring out water for you. Moses raised his hand, and he struck the rock with his staff twice; a great deal of water came out, and the congregation and their animals drank. Although the rock miraculously provided water, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron: Because you did not cause the people to have faith in Me, to sanctify Me before the eyes of the children of Israel; therefore, you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them. These are the waters of dispute, where the children of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and He was sanctified through them.

Ask:

1. Compare these two cases of Moses striking a rock to draw out water. What are the similarities and differences?
2. In each instance, how does Moses speak to the people? How do the people respond to his words? What is Moses concerned that the people will do?
3. In the second instance, what is the difference between what God wanted Moses to say and what Moses said? What does that tell us about Moses’ intention?
4. What is the real purpose of speaking to the rock that God gives in Numbers 20:12? What is the connection between that reason and Moses’ past actions/instructions?
Moses: Not a Man of Words?

5. The word used here, to “strike” (yach — יַּךְ), is the same word as in Text #1 when Moses struck the Egyptian. How are these instances of striking similar and different? What is the role of words in these two texts?

6. What is the connection between taking action and using words? Which is more powerful? When? Why?

7. What do these episodes tell us about Moses and his ability to use words? Does he develop in his ability after taking on this leadership role at the burning bush?

Unlike the previous occasion when God instructed Moses to hit the rock, here Moses is told specifically to speak to the rock, but he strikes it instead. But God is asking Moses to help him do more than quench the thirst of the people. God says, “You did not sanctify me in the midst of the community,” and therefore, Moses did not do what He had really asked. As a consequence, Moses will not get to see the Promised Land. In this instance, Moses is not teaching the Law, but instead doing what he thinks will appease the people, and so he fails the “test” of speaking to the rock.

Conclusion (10 minutes)

Though Moses does not enter the Promised Land, he is still the leader of the people and serves as a voice for God. The last of the “Five Books of Moses” — the Torah — is the Book of Deuteronomy, Devarim. Ironically for Moses, the book is called “Words” (devarim), and is almost entirely comprised of speeches given by Moses, in a kind of farewell to the Children of Israel. In this way, he becomes a man of words. After speaking for himself and then in the voice of God, Moses blesses his people and dies on the peak of Mount Nevo, within sight of the Promised Land.

As a man quick to spring into action, Moses struggles with becoming a leader who will liberate his people, because that is his true task. God does not just order Moses to give speeches. Moses is commanded to speak and to lead his people. God is also not commanding Moses to be inactive: he must physically bring his people out of Egypt, and perform miracles to demonstrate God’s power.

Ask:

1. Looking at the life and words of Moses, how are both words and actions powerful?
2. Think about the “teachers” in your life, and whether they taught you with words or with actions. How did those different approaches affect the way you learned?
3. Think about how you influence or teach others with your words and your actions. Is one more effective than the other? Why or why not?

There is a balance between teaching with words and leading with action. For someone who is “cumbrous of tongue,” the fear of failure and the pressure of being a leader understandably affect how Moses sees himself, and the decisions he makes. Yet, in rising to the challenge despite his fears and limitations, Moses becomes the leader he was chosen to be.
Moses: Not a Man of Words?

Introduction: Moses, Man of Action


11 Despite being raised by Pharaoh’s daughter as a son of the Egyptian aristocracy, Moses was aware of his Hebrew ethnicity: It was in those days, Moses grew to adulthood, and he went out to his brethren. Until now, because the lowly Hebrews did not enter the court of Pharaoh, Moses was unfamiliar with them. And he saw their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew man from his brethren. At this point, Moses felt a solidarity with the Hebrews. He turned this way and that, and he saw that there was no one in the vicinity. He smote the Egyptian, killing him. And Moses then hid him by burying the body in the sand, and he assumed that this was the conclusion of this incident.

13 He emerged on the second day, and behold, two Hebrew men were fighting. And he said to the wicked one, the one who struck the other: Why do you strike your neighbor? He, the assailant, said: Who appointed you to be a leader and a judge over us, that you see fit to judge me? Do you propose to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian? Moses was frightened, because he knew he had broken the law, and he said: Indeed, although I thought my actions went unseen, the matter is known. Pharaoh heard this matter, and he sought to kill Moses. Moses fled from Pharaoh, and he settled in the land of Midyan, and since he was a total stranger, he sat beside the well, which was an informal meeting place.

16 The priest of Midyan had seven daughters, who shepherded his flock. They came to the well, drew water, and filled the troughs to give their father’s flock to drink. The shepherds came and drove them away; Moses stood and rescued them. Despite being completely unfamiliar with these girls, he responded to the injustice occurring before him. And not only did he save them, but he also gave their flock to drink.

Part One: Speaking with God at the Burning Bush


16 God now instructs Moses: Go and gather the elders of Israel and say to them: The Lord, God of your forefathers, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, appeared to me, saying: I have remembered you, and I have also considered what is being done to you in Egypt, your suffering. I will take you up out of the affliction of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Emorites and the Perizites and the Hivites and the Yevusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.
18 God saw that Moses was hesitant, so He assured Moses: They will listen to your voice and you shall go, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him: The Lord, God of the Hebrews, happened upon us, He has revealed Himself to us and given us a message. Now, please, let us go a journey of three days in the wilderness and we will sacrifice to the Lord our God. 19 And I know that the king of Egypt will not allow you to go, except if I force him to do so with a powerful hand. 20 I will send forth My hand, and smite Egypt with all My wonders that I will perform in its midst; and thereafter he will send you forth.


10 Moses said to the Lord: Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words. I have never been able to express myself eloquently, neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am unfit for this mission, as I am cumbrous of speech and cumbrous of tongue. 11 The Lord said to him: Who gives a mouth to a person? Or who renders one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12 Now, go, and I will be with your mouth and I will instruct you that which you shall say. I will guide you throughout your mission.

Part Two: Understanding Moses’ Reluctance and God’s Insistence


Moses said to the Lord: Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words. Neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant, as I am cumbrous of speech and cumbrous of tongue.


But the straightforward meaning is “I was slow of speech in times past, since my youth; all the more so now that I am old. Even today, now that You have spoken to Your servant to ask me to go before Pharaoh to speak in Your name, you have not removed this impediment from me. How can I go before him like this?” But Moses so wanted not to go that he did not pray to the Blessed One to remove his slowness of speech. He assumed he could get out of going because of his speech impediment. For surely the Lord of All could not send an emissary of uncircumcised lips to an emperor...

וַיֹּ֨אמֶר ה' אֵלָ֗יו מִ֣י שָׂ֣ם פֶּה לָֽאָדָם֒ א֚וֹ מִֽי־יָשׂ֣וּם אִלֵ֔ם א֣וֹ חֵרֵ֔שׁ א֥וֹ פִקֵּ֖חַ א֣וֹ עִוֵּ֑ר הֲלֹ֥א אָנֹכִ֖י ה'׃

The Lord said to him: Who gives a mouth to a person? Or who renders one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?


האמנם דברי הר''ן צדקו בטעם הענין ולזה כיון ית' بما שהשיבו בכאן מי שם פה לאדם ר''ל כי האלמות והעברת הדבור בו לא היה בלבד מפועל הטבע אבל היה דבר מושגח מהש''י מכוון ממנו לתכלית משובה כי הוא השם פה לאדם והוא אשר שם האלם בכוונה והשגחה

The Ran spoke correctly in his explanation of this interaction. The reason that God responded in this manner, by saying “who gives man the powers of speech”, is God’s way of saying that the loss of abilities of speech isn’t a purely natural occurrence, but rather happened under God’s supervision, because it is in God’s power to give man the powers of speech, and God is the one who is able to take away a person’s powers of speech intentionally and with purpose.


מי שם פה לאדם. כלל' אתיי ראה כי זה הניב יפה כי איני רוצה שזה כבודי שאדם שאין לו לא פה ולא לשון יעשה שיחותי וישלים חפצי ויעשה

Who gives man speech — If I had willed it, you would already be able to speak well, but that is not what I desired. It serves to honor me that a person who does not have effective powers of speech will speak on my behalf, and will actualize my desires, and through his hand these great accomplishments will be achieved.

Part Three: Striking or Speaking to Rocks


1 The entire congregation of the children of Israel traveled from the wilderness of Tzin on their travels, at the word of the Lord, by the guidance of the pillar of cloud; they encamped in Refidim, and here again, there was no water for the people to drink. 2 The people quarreled with Moses and said: Give us water that we may drink. Moses said to them: Why do you quarrel with me? You know that these matters are not in my control. And furthermore, why do you try the Lord, rather than trusting Him? 3 They remained there, and the request turned into a complaint. The people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses and said: Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill me and my children and my livestock with thirst? Their language was becoming belligerent and confrontational. 4 Moses cried out to the Lord, saying: What shall I do for this people? A moment
more and they will stone me. 5 The Lord said to Moses: Pass before the people ceremoniously, and take
with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. This
procession of Moses with his staff and the elders was meant to remind everyone that he was acting as the messenger
of God. 6 Behold, I am standing before you there upon the rock at Horev, Mount Sinai; you will feel My presence
there; and you shall strike the rock, and when you do so water will emerge from it, and the people will drink.
Moses did so before the eyes of the elders of Israel. The elders saw with their own eyes the water flow from
the rock as Moses struck it. 7 Pursuant to this, he called the place Masa, trial, and Meriva, quarrel, due to the quarrel
of the children of Israel, and due to their trying of the Lord, saying: Is the Lord among us, or not?

Text #7: Numbers 20:3-13. English translation [bold text] and abridged commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin

3 The people quarreled with Moses, and they said: If only we had perished in the perishing of our
brethren before the Lord. 4 Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is not
a place of seed, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates. Now, we are neither in Egypt nor in Canaan, and there is no
water to drink. 6 Moses and Aaron came from before the assembly, and were forced by the angry crowd
to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell upon their faces in prayer, and the glory of the Lord appeared
to them. 7 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 8 Take the staff with which you performed all the miracles and wonders,
and assemble the congregation, you, and Aaron our brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, and it,
the rock, will provide its water. You will thereby extract water for them from the rock and you shall give drink to
the congregation and their animals. 9 Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as He had commanded him.
10 Moses and Aaron assembled the assembly before the rock, and said to them: Hear now, defiant ones: From
this rock will we bring out water for you. 11 Moses raised his hand, and he struck the rock with his staff twice;
a great deal of water came out, and the congregation and their animals drank. 12 Although the rock miraculously
provided water, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron: Because you did not cause the people to have faith in Me, to
sanctify Me before the eyes of the children of Israel; therefore, you shall not bring this assembly into the land
that I have given them. 13 These are the waters of dispute, where the children of Israel quarreled with the Lord,
and He was sanctified through them.
By Rabbanit Aliza Sperling

Facilitator’s Notes:

This unit is presented as a 75-minute session. For a 60-minute session, omit Part Three.

In this unit’s discussion about reactions to tragedy, you may find an interesting opening to discuss the role of silence in mourning practices and traditions. The unit itself does not cover mourning, but you can adapt the direction of the unit to suit your audience’s needs.

If you are interested in exploring further the incident of Nadav and Avihu, see “Balancing Love and Obedience: The Curious Case of Nadav and Avihu,” also by Aliza Sperling, in our 2015 curriculum.

Introduction: Aaron the Speaker (10 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Silence can be a kind of speech. What is unsaid is often as important as what is said, and when we read the Bible there are many silences within the narratives. Today, we will look at one particular instance of silence: the silence of Aaron.

Aaron, the older brother of Moses, was the first High Priest of the Jewish people. After the Children of Israel leave Egypt, they enter the desert where they build the Mishkan (portable sanctuary), God’s dwelling place among the Israelites in the desert and the “place of meeting”. Aaron and his sons, who are also priests, are present at the inauguration of the Tabernacle. An unexpected disaster occurs when Nadav and Avihu, two of the priests and Aaron’s sons, bring a “strange fire” and are consumed by a fire from above. The Torah relates Aaron’s response to this tragedy in two words: “Vayidom Aharon — and Aaron was silent”.

Before we examine Aaron’s silence, let’s look at his role as someone who is identified with speech. We begin where God tells Moses, Aaron’s brother, to speak to the Egyptian Pharaoh on behalf of the Children of Israel.

Read Text #1 aloud.

The Silence of Aaron

10 Moses said to the Lord: Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words. Neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant as I am cumbrous of speech and cumbrous of tongue. 11 The Lord said to him: Who gives a mouth to a person? Or who renders one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12 Now, go, and I will be with your mouth and I will instruct you that which you shall say. 13 He said: Please, my Lord, please send by means of whom You will send. 14 The wrath of the Lord was enflamed against Moses and He said: Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak. And also, here he is going out to meet you; he will see you, and he will rejoice in his heart. 15 You shall speak to him, and you shall place the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will instruct you that which you shall do. 16 He shall speak to the people for you, and he shall be a mouth to speak for you, and you shall be a leader for him.

Ask:

1. Moses describes himself as not being “a man of words”. How does the text then describe Aaron? 2. What does it mean for Aaron to be a “mouth” for Moses?

In this text, Moses declares that he is “not a man of words” and that he does not believe he will be able to be the speaker for his people. The text then introduces Aaron when God points out that he has the skills necessary to communicate a holy message, and assigns Aaron to be a “mouth” for Moses, who is destined to be the leader. Aaron is recognized as the best speaker, even by God. So what does it mean, then, when the “mouth” says nothing?

Part One: The Death of Aaron’s Sons (10 minutes)

Let us look closely at an extraordinary incident in which Aaron responds with silence.

Read text #2 aloud.


9:22 Aaron raised his hands toward the people and blessed them. And he descended from performing the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offerings. 23 Moses and Aaron came into the Tent of Meeting and emerged and blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to the entire people. 24 Fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fats; all the people saw it and sang praise, and fell upon their faces. 10:1 Each of the sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, took his fire-pan and placed it in fire, and placed incense upon, and they offered before the Lord strange fire that He had not commanded them. 2 Fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed them. And they died before the Lord. 3 Moses said to Aaron: This is that which the Lord spoke, saying: Through those who are near to Me I will be sanctified. And before all the people I will be glorified; and Aaron was silent.
Part Two: The Meaning of Two Words (25 minutes)

The Torah relates Aaron’s response to this tragedy in two words: Vayidom Aharon. Our sages offer many explanations for Aaron’s reaction. Let’s read and compare some commentaries offering different perspectives on Aaron’s silence.

Ask participants to read and discuss Texts #3 through #7 in chavruta and discuss the questions that follow.

Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.

Our first commentator is the Ramban, Moshe ben Nahman, also called Nachmanides, who was a 13th century Spanish scholar, physician, Sephardic rabbi and kabbalist. He was an important figure in rebuilding Jewish life in Jerusalem after the city’s destruction in 1099.

The second is Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and for his work on Jewish mysticism. Our third commentary is from the Rashbam, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, an 11th century Talmud scholar and grandson of Rashi.

The fourth is from Isaac Abarbanel, a 15th century diplomat and scholar. Born to a wealthy Iberian banking family, he and his brothers fled to Italy during the Inquisition, and it was there that he wrote his Perush, commentaries on the Five Books of Moses. Last we hear from Rabbi Eliezer Lipman Lichtenstein, an 18th century Polish commentator and scholar, in his Shem Olam, a commentary on Vayikra (Leviticus).

Text #3: Ramban. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

ויתן “וידום אהרן” – שהיה בוכה בקול, ואז שתק.

And the reason [that] “Aaron was silent [vayidom]” — for he had been weeping aloud, and then he was silent.

Text #4: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

It is possible that before this statement, Aaron cried in shock at the sudden deaths of his sons, but upon hearing Moses’ statement he voiced no complaints and remained silent. There is no doubt that Aaron’s silence stemmed not from indifference, but from his acceptance of this divine decree.
The Silence of Aaron

Text #5: Rashbam. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

And Aaron was silent — out of grief; and he did not weep or mourn, for as it is written in Ezekiel: “Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes in a plague, etc...sigh in silence, make no mourning for the dead” (Ez. 24:16-17). Here, too, he was silent although he wished to grieve and weep.


The meaning of “Vayidom Aharon” is that his heart turned to inanimate stone, and he did not raise his voice in weeping and mourning as a father mourning for his sons. He also did not accept comfort from Moshe because his soul had left him and he had no speech, and therefore the verse says “Vayidom Aharon,” from the language of domem (inanimate) and quiet.


Scripture chose vayidom rather than vayishtok (synonyms of silence). The latter signifies the abstention from speaking, weeping, moaning or any other outward manifestation as “They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man” (Psalms 107:27), followed by, “then are they glad because vayishtoku — they are quiet” (ibid., 30). The verb domem however, connotes inner peace and calm...Accordingly Scripture describes the saintly Aaron as vayidom and not merely as vayishtok, thus emphasizing that his heart and soul were at peace within, that rather than questioning the standards of God, he justified the Divine verdict.

Ask in chavruta:

1. Why do you think Aaron was silent?
2. What is each of the commentators saying? What are the differences between the interpretations? What are some similarities? Use the chart to help you.
3. How might Aaron’s silence be a form of communication? What is he communicating?
4. Think back to your own interpretation of Aaron’s silence. Do you identify more with one commentator’s approach than the others? Has your understanding changed in reading any of these commentaries? Why or why not?
5. Compare your own interpretation with that of your chavruta. Where do you agree or disagree?
6. Aaron, who has been described as a “mouth”, must remain silent in a moment that would normally cause a person to at least cry out. Does that change the significance of the story for you? How might it inform your understanding of Aaron’s character?
The Silence of Aaron

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The text itself is sparse, offering us only two words about Aaron’s silence; it is silent in its absence of additional details. The range of interpretations and understandings of the commentaries, along with our own readings, show the ongoing process of trying to unpack the meaning of these two words. The commentators found these brief two words in response to such tragedy to be something challenging, and something they wished to better understand. The commentaries vary, but none of the commentators suggest that Aaron’s silence was unfeeling; many even view it as a forceful act of willpower. More than a role-reversal where the “mouth” did not speak, Aaron’s silence communicates its own meaning. More than an absence of words, he abstains from speaking.

Part Three: The Reactions of Others (15 minutes)

In examining Aaron’s personal experience of his loss, we may also wonder about the reactions of other witnesses, such as Moses. Text #8 tells us how Moses responded.

☐ Ask a participant to read Text #8 aloud.


1 Each of the sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, took his fire-pan and placed it in fire, and placed incense upon, and they offered before the Lord strange fire that He had not commanded them. 2 Fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed them. And they died before the Lord. 3 Moses said to Aaron: This incident is that about which the Lord spoke, saying: Through those who are near to Me I will be sanctified. That is, My sanctity will manifest among those who are close to Me, and then before all the people I will be glorified; and Aaron was silent. 4 Moses called Mishael and Eltzafan, the sons of Uzziel, an uncle of Aaron. They
were Levites and family members. And Moses said to them: Approach, carry your brethren from inside the Sanctuary to outside the camp. They approached and carried them by their tunics to outside the camp, as Moses had spoken. It is clear from the verse that Aaron’s sons were not burned in an ordinary manner, as they were carried out in their garments, indicating that the garments were whole and durable enough to pull their wearers with them. Moses said to Aaron, and to Elazar and to Itamar, his, Aaron’s other, sons: Despite the tragedy that has occurred, you shall not grow out the hair of your heads. And you shall not rend your garments that you will not die. If you observe the usual customs of mourning, you will be liable to death, and not only will you be punished, but He will rage against all the congregation as you are now their priests. And your brethren, the entire house of Israel, shall weep the burning that the Lord has burned. Mourning and weeping are of course a natural response to death. However, you have been consecrated, and you must remain in your posts. Consequently, you must not let their deaths affect you. From the entrance of the Tent of Meeting you shall not emerge so that you not die, as the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you. They acted in accordance with the word of Moses.

Ask:

1. When does Moses react in the chain of events?
2. What are the instructions Moses gives at this tragic moment?
3. Do you think any of those instructions contribute to Aaron’s silence?

While the text gives us Moses and Aaron’s reactions, the Bible is silent about the reaction of Elisheva, Nadav and Avihu’s mother (Exodus 6:23). The Midrash fills in this gap, in its expansion on Songs of Songs (Shir Hashirim) 3:6, which describes a woman rising from the desert like a column of smoke. Our sages connect this woman to Elisheva.

Ask different participants to read Text #9a and #9b aloud.


Who is this coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke? This is not regular smoke, but perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, fragrant spices, and with all the powders of the merchant.


Who is she coming — The text speaks of Elisheva the daughter of Aminadav, who saw five joys in one day. She saw her brother in law a king, her brother a prince, her husband a high priest, and her two sons deputy high priests, and Pinhas her grandson the war priest. When her sons went in to offer sacrifices they were burned and her joy became mourning, then she became like a pillar of smoke.
The “columns of smoke” in Song of Songs evokes a particular image — that of incense at a temple altar. The smoke seen in the wilderness is not billowing like a campfire, or high like a wildfire. Instead, it is in a steady column, undisturbed by the wind. It smells fragrant, like precious spices used for the incense of sacred rituals. Such incense would have been present in the Tabernacle where Nadav and Avihu presented their strange fire. The image of a column or a pillar also echoes the shape of a person standing, or the space where a person once was. Our sages commenting on Song of Songs connect the imagery of this eerie smoke with the presence of Elisheva in the Tabernacle.

**Ask:**

1. What do you think the Midrash means when it says that Elisheva “became like a pillar of smoke”?
2. What is the difference between Aaron’s silence and Elisheva’s?
3. Compare the descriptions of Moses, Aaron and Elisheva’s responses. Which resonates most with you? Why?

Moses’ immediate reaction stands in stark contrast to that of his brother’s. Where Moses takes charge and gives instructions quickly, Aaron remains silent. Our sages imagine that Elisheva, who we do not see or hear from, dissolved into smoke with grief.

**Conclusion: “A Powerful Silence”** (15 minutes)

What happens when someone chooses to stay silent rather than express him/herself verbally? In an interview, Elie Wiesel discusses the power of silence, and how it can become a powerful method of communication. Elie Wiesel (1928–2016) was a Nobel Laureate, author, philosopher and Holocaust survivor.

**Text #10: Elie Wiesel, interview with American Academy of Achievement, 1996.**

You can be a silent witness, which means silence itself can become a way of communication. There is so much in silence. There is an archeology of silence. There is a geography of silence. There is a theology of silence. There is a history of silence. Silence is universal and you can work within it, within its own parameters and its own context, and make that silence into a testimony. Job was silent after he lost his children and everything, his fortune and his health. Job, for seven days and seven nights he was silent, and his three friends who came to visit him were also silent. That must have been a powerful silence, a brilliant silence.

**Ask:**

1. Do you agree with Elie Wiesel that there are times when silence is “powerful” or “brilliant”?
2. Do you think silence can express thoughts and feelings in the same way words express them? Why or why not?
3. What are some situations when you have chosen to use silence as a way to communicate a message?
4. When have you received silence in response to something you said or did? What impact did that have on you?
5. How do you think Elie Wiesel’s words here apply to Aaron’s silence as we’ve learned about it today?
Introduction: Aaron the Speaker


10 Moses said to the Lord: Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words. Neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant as I am cumbrous of speech and cumbrous of tongue. 11 The Lord said to him: Who gives a mouth to a person? Or who renders one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12 Now, go, and I will be with your mouth and I will instruct you that which you shall say. 13 He said: Please, my Lord, please send by means of whom You will send. 14 The wrath of the Lord was enflamed against Moses and He said: Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak. And also, here he is going out to meet you; he will see you, and he will rejoice in his heart. 15 You shall speak to him, and you shall place the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and his mouth, and I will instruct you that which you shall do. 16 He shall speak to the people for you, and he shall be a mouth to speak for you, and you shall be a leader for him.

Part One: The Death of Aaron’s Sons


9:22 Aaron raised his hands toward the people and blessed them. And he descended from performing the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offerings. 23 Moses and Aaron came into the Tent of Meeting and emerged and blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to the entire people. 24 Fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fats; all the people saw it and sang praise, and fell upon their faces.

10:1 Each of the sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, took his fire-pan and placed it in fire, and placed incense upon, and they offered before the Lord strange fire that He had not commanded them. 2 Fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed them. And they died before the Lord. 3 Moses said to Aaron: This is that which the Lord spoke, saying: Through those who are near to Me I will be sanctified. And before all the people I will be glorified; and Aaron was silent.
Part Two: The Meaning of Two Words

Text #3: Ramban. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

And the reason [that] “Aaron was silent [vayidom]” — for he had been weeping aloud, and then he was silent.

Text #4: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

It is possible that before this statement, Aaron cried in shock at the sudden deaths of his sons, but upon hearing Moses’ statement he voiced no complaints and remained silent. There is no doubt that Aaron’s silence stemmed not from indifference, but from his acceptance of this divine decree.

Text #5: Rashbam. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

And Aaron was silent — out of grief; and he did not weep or mourn, for as it is written in Ezekiel: “Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes in a plague, etc...sigh in silence, make no mourning for the dead” (Ez. 24:16-17). Here, too, he was silent although he wished to grieve and weep.


The meaning of “Vayidom Aharon” is that his heart turned to inanimate stone, and he did not raise his voice in weeping and mourning as a father mourning for his sons. He also did not accept comfort from Moshe because his soul had left him and he had no speech, and therefore the verse says “Vayidom Aharon,” from the language of domem (inanimate) and quiet.


Scripture chose vayidom rather than vayishtok (synonyms of silence). The latter signifies the abstention from speaking, weeping, moaning or any other outward manifestation as “They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man” (Psalms 107:27), followed by, “then are they glad because vayishtoku — they are quiet” (ibid., 30). The verb domem however, connotes inner peace and calm...Accordingly Scripture describes the saintly Aaron as vayidom and not merely as vayishtok, thus emphasizing that his heart and soul were at peace within, that rather than questioning the standards of God, he justified the Divine verdict.
Part Three: The Reactions of Others


1 Each of the sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, took his fire-pan and placed it in fire, and placed incense upon, and they offered before the Lord strange fire that He had not commanded them. 2 Fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed them. And they died before the Lord. 3 Moses said to Aaron: This incident is that about which the Lord spoke, saying: Through those who are near to Me I will be sanctified. That is, My sanctity will manifest among those who are close to Me, and then before all the people I will be glorified; and Aaron was silent. 4 Moses called Mishael and Eltzafan, the sons of Uzziel, an uncle of Aaron. They were Levites and family members. And Moses said to them: Approach, carry your brethren from inside the Sanctuary to outside the camp. 5 They approached and carried them by their tunics to outside the camp, as Moses had spoken. 6 It is clear from the verse that Aaron’s sons were not burned in an ordinary manner, as they were carried out in their garments, indicating that the garments were whole and durable enough to pull their wearers with them. Moses said to Aaron, and to Elazar and to Itamar, his, Aaron’s other, sons: Despite the tragedy that has occurred, you shall not grow out the hair of your heads. And you shall not rend your garments that you will not die. If you observe the usual customs of mourning, you will be liable to death, and not only will you be punished, but He will rage against all the congregation as you are now their priests. And your brethren, the entire house of Israel, shall weep the burning that the Lord has burned. Mourning and weeping are of course a natural response to death. However, you have been consecrated, and you must remain in your posts. Consequently, you must not let their deaths affect you. 7 From the entrance of the Tent of Meeting you shall not emerge so that you not die, as the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you. They acted in accordance with the word of Moses.


Who is this coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke? This is not regular smoke, but perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, fragrant spices, and with all the powders of the merchant.


Who is she coming — The text speaks of Elisheva the daughter of Aminadav, who saw five joys in one day. She saw her brother in law a king, her brother a prince, her husband a high priest, and her two sons deputy high priests, and Pinhas her grandson the war priest. When her sons went in to offer sacrifices they were burned and her joy became mourning, then she became like a pillar of smoke.
Conclusion: “A Powerful Silence”

Text #10: Elie Wiesel, interview with American Academy of Achievement, 1996.

You can be a silent witness, which means silence itself can become a way of communication. There is so much in silence. There is an archeology of silence. There is a geography of silence. There is a theology of silence. There is a history of silence. Silence is universal and you can work within it, within its own parameters and its own context, and make that silence into a testimony. Job was silent after he lost his children and everything, his fortune and his health. Job, for seven days and seven nights he was silent, and his three friends who came to visit him were also silent. That must have been a powerful silence, a brilliant silence.

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Hurling Words Towards Heaven: Hannah’s Prayer

Introduction (5 minutes)

Facilitator’s Notes: If your participants are unfamiliar with the story of Hannah and her role in the Book of Samuel, use the following paragraph as a quick introduction, or give your own summary. We use the spelling “Hannah”, although different sources use alternate spellings such as Hanna, or Chana.

In the Bible, the Book of Samuel begins with the story of the prophet Samuel’s mother, Hannah. When we first encounter her, she is unable to have children, which causes her immense grief. In her distress, she prays to God for a son. She eventually gives birth to Samuel, who becomes one of the greatest leaders and prophets of the Jewish people.

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Today we will look at how Hannah uses words to pray and engage with the Divine. Before we explore how Hannah prays, and what we can learn from her prayers, let’s look briefly at our own experiences of prayer.

Ask:

1. What words or ideas come to mind when you hear the word “prayer”?  
2. What are some words you would use to describe an ideal experience of prayer?

In the Talmud, the biblical figure of Hannah is held up as a model for how to pray. Though she appears in the Bible only briefly, her prayers in the Book of Samuel make a lasting impression. How do our expectations for prayer compare with some of the guiding halakhot (laws) the Talmud derives from Hannah’s prayer?

Read Text #1 aloud.


Rav Hamnuna said: How many great halakhot are there to learn from these verses from Hannah’s prayer. For so it says: “And Hanna spoke in her heart, only her lips moved and her voice could not be heard, so Eli thought her to be drunk.” (Shmuel 1:13). The Gemara specifies: From this verse, “And Hanna spoke in her heart” we learn that one who prays must direct his heart in his prayer. And from this verse, “Only her lips moved,” we learn that one who prays must articulate his words with his lips, not only with his heart.

And from this verse, “And her voice could not be heard” we learn that it is forbidden to raise one’s voice in prayer for the Amida prayer must be said silently. And from this verse, “So Eli thought her to be drunk,” we learn that a drunken person is prohibited from prayer, which is why he rebuked her.

The Sages of the Talmud identified elements of Hannah’s prayer that informed how they approached personal communication with God. What is so remarkable about Hannah’s prayer? Let’s look at the text to find out.
Part One: Hannah Prays (15 minutes)

The Book of Samuel opens with Elkana and his wives, Hannah and Penina, and his children from Penina, on a pilgrimage to the temple in Shiloh. At the Temple, they make sacrifices and feast together, but the festivities remind Hannah that she is childless. In her distress, Hannah enters the Temple to speak to God. There, she prays in an unconventional manner.

Read Text #2 aloud.


9 Hannah arose after eating in Shilo, and after drinking, when the tense family meal had ended. And Eli the priest was sitting on the chair near the doorpost of the Sanctuary of the Lord. 10 Hannah went inside [the Sanctuary] as she was embittered, hurt, and forlorn, Ho, and was weeping. 11 She vowed, saying: Lord of hosts, if You see the suffering of Your maidservant, and you remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and You give Your maidservant substantial offspring, a worthy, strong child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor will not come upon his head.

12 And it was as she was praying extensively before the Lord, Eli was watching her mouth. 13 Hannah, she was speaking quietly in her heart; only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard; and Eli therefore thought her to be drunk. 14 Eli said to her: Until when will you become drunk and act in an intoxicated manner? And if you are already drunk, remove the influence of your wine from yourself. It is unfitting to be drunk anywhere, certainly not in the house of God. 15 Hannah answered and said: No, my lord, you mistake me. I am an embittered woman; I did not drink wine or intoxicating drink at all, but instead I poured out my soul before the Lord. 16 Do not deem your maidservant to be a wicked woman who came drunk to the Tabernacle, for it is due to the extent of my grievance, the bitterness of my soul, and my anger that I have spoken at great length until now.

17 When Eli heard her answer given in an entirely sober manner, he regretted his accusation. Eli answered and said: Go in peace. Eli immediately added words of encouragement for the future. And may the God of Israel grant your request that you requested of Him. I do not know what you requested, but I bless you that God should give you your wish. 18 She said: May your maidservant find favor in your eyes. May your words come to pass. The woman went on her way, and she ate as usual, and her face was no longer downcast as it was. Now she had renewed confidence and hope.

19 They, the whole family, arose early in the morning, and prostrated themselves before the Lord upon their departure from the Tabernacle, and they returned, and came to their house to Rama. Elkana was intimate with Hannah his wife and on this occasion the Lord remembered her. 20 It was with the passage of the seasons, when another year had passed, that Hannah conceived and bore a son; she called his name Samuel [Šemuel], for she explained: I requested him [še’iltiv] from the Lord.

THE GLOBAL DAY OF JEWISH LEARNING
November 17, 2019 www.theglobalday.org
Hurling Words Towards Heaven: Hannah's Prayer

Ask:

1. What surprises you about Hannah’s prayer? What are some words you would use to characterize her prayer?
2. What is Hannah’s state of mind during this prayer? What are the actions Hannah takes in this prayer?
3. Even after Hannah explains what she was doing, why is Eli still surprised by her manner of prayer?
4. Hannah explains that her child’s name is from the phrase “I requested him from the Lord”. Does that surprise you in any way? According to that explanation, who is she giving credit to for her son’s existence?

Given Eli’s reaction to Hannah’s way of praying, we can see that her prayer is unconventional — both in the way she prays and the words she uses. Hannah’s words are forceful, and her emotions charge the conversation with God and the interaction with Eli. She is bringing her grievances and giving them directly to God in anger, and Eli is completely surprised by this method and attitude.

Part Two: Hurling Words at God (20 minutes)

Can emotions be transmitted in a prayer? Can a human even dare to be angry at God? How can Hannah’s manner of praying be one that the Talmud would want us to learn from? Let us see what other commentators have made of this remarkable situation.

In Text #3 we return to the Talmud. Texts #4 and #5 are from Rabbi Yehiel E. Poupko, Judaic Scholar at the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

Ask participants to read and discuss Texts #3, #4 and #5 in chavruta, and discuss the questions that follow.

Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.


Having explained the unusual expression, “in her heart,” the Gemara cites what Rabbi Elazar said regarding another uncommon usage that appears regarding Hanna: Hanna hurled words toward Heaven, which is to say, she spoke brazenly against God. As it is said: “And she prayed unto the Lord,” which connotes that she hurled words toward Heaven.


Heti’akh, “hurling!” Imagine that — a pious Jew hurling words at God! Rabbi Eleazar bases his statement on the use of the preposition al, “upon,” rather than el, “to.” His description of Chana in prayer is supported by the verb “to pray”, le-hitpalel, whose root is pll. This is a complex and difficult word. Its various uses and contexts have shaped its meanings and functions. While “prayer” may be the only available word for translating the Hebrew word tefila, it is tepid and weak, decidedly inadequate...Prayer implies speech that moves in only one direction, from the petitioner to the one in power...Tefila takes place in and for the relationship between God and person. Tefila is the relationship.
Chana confronts God. At first we can only imagine what she says. Initially, the text does not present the content of her tefila. Possibly it is just despair. We know that she is direct with God in her bitterness. Only after she pours forth her desolation to God does she turn to Him with something other than the appeal of the petitioner. She presents her prayer request in a manner not often seen in TaNaKh. She does not merely seek something from God. Rather, in exchange for a request granted, she offers God something in return: if you give me, I will give you. This kind of prayer expresses both judgment and intercession. As she seeks something from God, Chana judges her circumstance and concludes, like others in TaNaKh, that her situation is unjust.

Ask:

1. Do these commentaries change how you interpret Hannah’s emotional state? How or why?
2. We read that Hannah hurls words at God. What does it mean to speak to God in anger?
   What are the sages saying in this text about how we approach God with our words?
3. Do you believe it is presumptuous to “hurl words” or negotiate with God during prayer?
   Are you surprised that the Sages have not condemned Hannah for her chutzpah?
4. Does seeing tefila as “the relationship” change your understanding of prayer at all? If it is a relationship, can prayer be a “quid pro quo” exchange or a negotiation with God? Why or why not?

The Talmud does not shy away from the notion that prayer is something “in the heart”, and that it is full of emotion. The Talmud says that Hannah “hurls” her words at God, highlighting the emotional stress that she feels, connecting her urge to pray to the need to unburden her heart. According to Rabbi Poupko, that is the essence of prayer. To say that tefila is simply prayer is not enough. Tefila is the relationship, not only the words that are said in a prayer.

What, then, can Hannah’s prayer teach us about the way we pray today?

Conclusion (20 minutes)

Let’s read from two essays about prayer by contemporary commentators. The first is from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), a Polish-born philosopher, author, teacher and civil rights activist in America. The next is from Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

Read text #6 and #7 aloud.


Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehood. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, and the vision.
...No matter whether we acknowledge it or not, each of us has a personal relationship with God. My relationship is always personal and private; precisely because He is so infinite and unlimited, He relates personally and specifically to me. It always is a one-to-one relationship, when I am by myself as well as when I am in a crowd; somehow we are always alone together.

That is why prayer, no matter the form, is so important. Prayer is always a conversation with God. It is the way we relate feelings, fears or aspirations, or make requests. There is also prayer for one’s community, for one’s own nation or for the world as a whole. And prayer can also be a different sort of conversation: an urge to say thank you, to say: how good it is that You are there...

More than that — we can appeal. Human beings have the right (perhaps also the duty) to converse with God, to ask things from Him and also to complain to Him, to claim: “You’re not right.” It is the same right that a child has to cry and to say, “Why do other kids get more?” A human being is entitled to complain. God wants us to be honest with Him. But still and all, He cannot be judged.

Ask:

1. Rabbi Heschel says prayer is a subversive act. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. Rabbi Steinsaltz says that prayer is always a conversation. What do you think that means? How might that affect the way you pray?

Rabbi Heschel and Rabbi Steinsaltz, like the prayer of Hannah, challenge us to understand prayer as more than saying “Can I have this please?” Prayer is thoughtful; it is work of the heart, a relationship, a revolution, a conversation, and more. Hannah is not afraid to bring her full self to God. She is willing to hurl her words at God to show what is in her heart, and in those words show the active nature of her relationship with God. Hannah is a model of Jewish prayer precisely because she demanded what she needed and brought her whole self into the experience, not despite it.

Reflect with your chavruta partner:

1. What do you gain when you view prayer as “work of the heart”? How might this affect the way you experience private, spontaneous prayer? How might it change the way you approach prescribed or public prayers?
2. What does it mean to be “real” in prayer? What is difficult about bringing our whole selves into prayer? What is empowering about it?
3. Is there anything you’ve learned from Hannah about how the words we use in prayer affect how we engage the Divine? Is there anything from today’s learning that you might take into your next experience of prayer?
Hurling Words Towards Heaven: Hannah’s Prayer

Introduction


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**Part Two: Hurling Words at God**

**Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 31b.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

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Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

What can Jewish texts teach us about the ways in which our words can cause harm? Today we’ll use a unique story in the Talmud to explore the Jewish understanding of different ways we can wound others with words.

Part One: Biblical Origins of Mistreatment (10 minutes)

The traditions and laws around hurtful words extend from the laws regarding fairness in financial dealings. In the Book of Leviticus, we encounter the instructions for the Jubilee — the seventh shmita year (in which the shmita is a “sabbath” year in a cycle of seven years). Within the details of how to calculate the value of land during the Jubilee year, there are specific prohibitions against charging an unfair price.

Read Text #1 aloud.


13 In this Jubilee Year you shall return each man to his ancestral portion. 14 If you sell a sale item to your counterpart, or acquire from the hand of your counterpart, you shall not exploit [tonu] one another. 15 On the basis of the number of years after the Jubilee you shall acquire from your counterpart. 16 According to the abundance of years, you shall increase its price, and according to the paucity of the years you shall decrease its price, as it is the number of crops he is selling to you. 17 You shall not wrong [tonu] one another, and you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God.

Both verses 14 and 17 use the word tonu (תונא), translated here as both “to exploit” and “to wrong”. Tonu comes from ona’a (אונאה), which means to mistreat or wrong another.

Ask:

1. Verse 14 says “you shall not exploit one another”, referring to financial exploitation. What are some ways this form of exploitation can hurt others?
2. Verse 17 says “you shall not wrong one another”. How might the types of “wrong” expressed in verses 14 and 17 differ?
3. What might be the significance of “and you shall fear your God”?
Hurtful Words

Both verses 14 and 17 forbid financial exploitation, overcharging, and unfair profit margins: you should not take advantage of an unsuspecting customer. Verse 17 may seem like a repetition, yet it speaks of abuse or exploitation without a specific financial application, and instead brings the fear of God into consideration. This repetition emphasizes the importance of this idea of ona’a, and forms the basis of many laws that pertain to how we are expected to treat each other.

In this unit, we will look at how the concept of ona’a, mistreatment or exploitation, applies to how we speak to each other.

Part Two: Introducing “Verbal Mistreatment” (20 minutes)

The Talmud expands on a very specific way of understanding the word ona’a, which means “to wrong”, showing how the model of behavior in financial dealings should also be applied to our verbal interactions.

➢ Read Texts #2 and #3 aloud.

Text #2: Babylonian Talmud *Bava Metzia* 58b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*.

**MISHNA** Just as there is a prohibition against exploitation [ona’a](https://example.com) in buying and selling, so is there ona’a in statements, i.e., verbal mistreatment. The mishna proceeds to cite examples of verbal mistreatment. One may not say to a seller: For how much are you selling this item, if he does not wish to purchase it. He thereby upsets the seller when the deal fails to materialize. The mishna lists other examples: If one is a penitent, another may not say to him: Remember your earlier deeds. If one is the child of converts, another may not say to him: Remember the deeds of your ancestors, as it is stated: “And a convert shall you accustom,” (Exodus 22:20).

Text #3: Babylonian Talmud *Bava Metzia* 58b, *Gemara*. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*.

How so? If one is a penitent, another may not say to him: Remember your earlier deeds. If one is the child of converts, another may not say to him: Remember the deed of your ancestors. If one is a convert and he came to study Torah, one may not say to him: Does the mouth that ate unslaughtered carcasses and animals that had wounds that would have caused them to die within twelve months [terefot](https://example.com), and repugnant creatures, and creeping animals, comes to study Torah that was stated from the mouth of the Almighty?
Hurtful Words

Ask:

1. Financial negotiations are a form of speech in which harm can be done. In what ways can that be hurtful?
2. How does Text #2 make connections between financial harm and verbal mistreatment?
3. How might it be hurtful to remind a penitent or a convert of their former life?

The Mishna connects an injunction against financial mistreatment with cautioning against verbal mistreatment and oppression. The Talmud goes on to describe different people who may be mistreated verbally. Listed in Text #3 were the “penitent” and the “convert”; later it mentions people suffering from an illness, people conducting commercial transactions, and donkey drivers. What ties them all together is their lower social status, which makes them more vulnerable to harm.

It is interesting to note how the Talmud specifies that it is the responsibility of those who would use those hurtful words to check their behavior, rather than for the target of abuse to defend themselves. The words we choose, and who we say them to, matter.

Read Text #4 aloud.


Verbal mistreatment is not typically obvious, and it is difficult to ascertain the intent of the offender, as the matter is given to the heart of each individual, as only he knows what his intention was when he spoke. And with regard to any matter given to the heart, it is stated: “And you shall fear your God” (Leviticus 25:17), as God is privy to the intent of the heart.

Rabbi Yoĥanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai: Greater is the transgression of verbal mistreatment than the transgression of monetary exploitation, as with regard to this, verbal mistreatment, it is stated: “And you shall fear your God.” But with regard to that, monetary exploitation, it is not stated: “And you shall fear your God.” And Rabbi Elazar said this explanation: This, verbal mistreatment, affects one’s body; but that, monetary exploitation, affects one’s money. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani says: This, monetary exploitation, is given to restitution; but that, verbal mistreatment, is not given to restitution.

Ask:

1. The Talmud describes examples of verbal mistreatment that have monetary and non-monetary consequences. How are they similar and how are they different?
2. This text states that verbal mistreatment is more harmful than financial mistreatment. Compared with your own life experiences, do you agree or disagree? Why?
3. How would you define “matter given to the heart”?
Hurtful Words

According to Text #4, “Monetary exploitation is given to restitution,” meaning that you can get your money back, or claim money to compensate for financial harm done to you. In cases of verbal mistreatment, however, the Talmud says that money cannot help you undo the harm caused by words. Because words hurt a person rather than that person’s things or finances, money is therefore not sufficient to compensate for that harm. There is weight to our words.

Part Three: A Talmudic Tale of Verbal Mistreatment (15 minutes)

Let’s turn now to a story told in the Talmud about two scholars, Rabbi Yoḥanan and his brother-in-law Reish Lakish. As you read this story, pay close attention to how they speak to each other and consider whether or not intention matters.

Rabbi Yoḥanan bar Nappaḥa was one of the greatest scholars of the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. He studied under the leading teachers in Tiberias and later became the head of the yeshiva there.

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, often referred to as Reish Lakish, led an extraordinary life. His childhood was one of poverty under Roman occupation. Too poor to continue his Torah study, he became the leader of a gang of highway robbers. He resumed his Torah study under his friend Rabbi Yohanan, and later taught with him as a colleague.

Ask participants to read and discuss Text #5 in chavruta and discuss the questions that follow.

Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.
Hurtful Words

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 84a. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Gemara relates: One day, Rabbi Yoḥanan was bathing in the Jordan River. Reish Lakish saw him and jumped into the Jordan, pursuing him. At that time, Reish Lakish was the leader of a band of marauders. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to Reish Lakish: Your strength is fit for Torah study. Reish Lakish said to him: Your beauty is fit for women. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: If you return to the pursuit of Torah, I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beautiful than I am. Reish Lakish accepted upon himself to study Torah. Subsequently, Reish Lakish wanted to jump back out of the river to bring back his clothes, but he was unable to return, as he had lost his physical strength as soon as he accepted the responsibility to study Torah upon himself.

Rabbi Yoḥanan taught Reish Lakish Bible, and taught him Mishna, and turned him into a great man. Eventually, Reish Lakish became one of the outstanding Torah scholars of his generation. One day the Sages of the study hall were engaging in a dispute concerning the following baraita: With regard to the sword, the knife, the dagger [vehaqipon], the spear, a hand sickle, and a harvest sickle, from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity? The baraita answers: It is from the time of the completion of their manufacture, which is the halakha with regard to metal vessels in general. These Sages inquired: And when is the completion of their manufacture? Rabbi Yoḥanan says: It is from when one fires these items in the furnace. Reish Lakish said: It is from when one scours them in water, after they have been fired in the furnace. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to Reish Lakish: A bandit knows about his banditry, i.e., you are an expert in weaponry because you were a bandit in your youth. Reish Lakish said to Rabbi Yoḥanan: What benefit did you provide me by bringing me close to Torah? There, among the bandits, they called me: Leader of the bandits, and here, too, they call me: Leader of the bandits. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: I provided benefit to you, as I brought you close to God, under the wings of the Divine Presence.

Discuss in chavuruta:

1. With your chavuruta, alternate the way you read Rabbi Yoḥanan and Rabbi Lakish’s lines — say them with different emphasis, at different volumes, with different tones. How does tone affect the way you gauge intent?
2. What do you think was the intent behind Rabbi Yoḥanan’s statement, “A bandit knows about his banditry”?
3. Which of the categories of verbal mistreatment that we have discussed best describes what Rabbi Yoḥanan says to Reish Lakish?
4. How does Reish Lakish react? Why might Reish Lakish have been particularly sensitive to these words?
5. In this story, does intention matter if the words spoken are heard as an insult? How else might intent be misconstrued? What about accidental offense? In your own life, which matters more: intent or perception?

Bring the group back together and have some of the chavuruta pairs share their answers.
Part Four: Intent and Word Choice (20 minutes)

In the story of Rabbi Yoĥanan and Reish Lakish, the intent behind Rabbi Yoĥanan’s insult of “a bandit knows his banditry” is unclear. We can’t truly know what Rabbi Yoĥanan intended by those words, which themselves are not overtly cruel. We are also still uncertain as to why Reish Lakish reacted as he did. The Talmud story continues by showing the consequences of this exchange, which may help us understand the way they spoke.

Ask a participant or two to read Text #6 aloud.


As a result of the quarrel, Rabbi Yoĥanan was offended, which in turn affected Reish Lakish, who fell ill. Rabbi Yoĥanan’s sister, who was Reish Lakish’s wife, came crying to Rabbi Yoĥanan, begging that he pray for Reish Lakish’s recovery. She said to him: Do this for the sake of my children, so that they should have a father. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to her the verse: “Leave your fatherless children, I will rear them” (Jeremiah 49:11), i.e., I will take care of them. She said to him: Do so for the sake of my widowhood. He said to her the rest of the verse: “And let your widows trust in Me.”

Ultimately, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, Reish Lakish, died. Rabbi Yoĥanan was sorely pained over losing him. The Rabbis said: Who will go to calm Rabbi Yoĥanan’s mind and comfort him over his loss? They said: Let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, as his statements are sharp, i.e., he is clever and will be able to serve as a substitute for Reish Lakish.

Ask:

1. How would you characterize the way Rabbi Yoĥanan speaks to his sister? Do his words to his sister change the way you perceive Rabbi Yoĥanan? Why or why not?
2. The text says that Rabbi Yoĥanan was “sorely pained” to lose Reish Lakish. Does his reaction change how you perceive Rabbi Yoĥanan and the way he spoke? Why or why not?

Let’s read from the Shulĥan Arukh, the 16th century Code of Jewish Law, written by Rabbi Yosef Karo. He offers an example of how intent may still matter in our words, regardless of how those words are perceived.

Ask a participant to read Text #7 aloud.

Text #7: Shulĥan Arukh. Hoshen Mishpat 228:5.

Be careful not to call a person by a distasteful nickname, even if this is a nickname that he is commonly called, if your intention is to embarrass him.
Ask:

1. What are some things that can be said with the same words, but where different intentions change their meaning entirely? Can the intent be heard?
2. What would you consider to be a “distasteful nickname”? Have you ever had one or used one for someone else? How did it make you feel to be called by that name? Or, did you consider how calling someone that name might affect them?

The *Shulḥan Arukh* notes that a nickname can touch on a sore point for a person, even if that name is commonly used. When a nickname is used with the intention to hurt, it ceases to be just a name and becomes a way to highlight a negative trait, such that a person may suffer from having it pointed out.

This is similar to the situation that arose in the story between Rabbi Yoḥanan and Reish Lakish. Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz gives us a remarkable insight into Reish Lakish and his name. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and for his work on Jewish mysticism.


“Reish Lakish” was a nickname; but unlike the nicknames of other sages, which were usually mere abbreviations of their names, his had additional significance. The name Rabbi Shimon was shortened to the initials ReiSh, and Lakish was his father’s name. But this nickname “Reish” (which, in Aramaic, means “head” or “leader”) no doubt hinted to his role as head and leader of a group, and not necessarily of yeshiva students or Torah sages. The name expressed the general esteem towards Reish Lakish as a great man with a history as a leader of ruffians. Thus, although Reish Lakish was indeed well respected and his resolute personality elicited awe, this combination of associations — of his early past on the one hand, and his current scholarly image on the other — made for the unique composite of “Reish Lakish”.

Ask:

1. The nickname “Reish Lakish” is one that connotes Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish was connected to a gang of bandits. How does this example relate to what the *Shulhan Arukh* says about nicknames? How does this knowledge compliment or complicate your understanding of Texts #5 and #6?
2. If Reish Lakish was already sensitive about his history as a bandit, do you think his reaction can be considered more reasonable? Why or why not?
3. Knowing this about Reish Lakish’s nickname, do you think it was Rabbi Yoḥanan’s intention to offend by saying “a bandit knows about his banditry”? Why or why not?

Reish Lakish’s nickname and his place in society made him more sensitive to how others perceived him. In saying “A bandit knows about his banditry,” Rabbi Yoḥanan pointed an arrow directly at his shady past as a “leader of ruffians” by referencing the double meaning of his nickname. Even if our words seem innocent and the intent behind them is not to offend or harm, we should still try to avoid harming others in this way. Furthermore, even if the words we use are not inherently hurtful, we should be cautious and avoid using words to deliberately embarrass others.
Conclusion (10 minutes)

Ask:

1. Based on what we’ve read today, how do you now understand “verbal mistreatment”?
2. After today’s discussion, do you think it is even possible to avoid hurtful words? Why or why not?
3. If it is so difficult to avoid hurting with our words, why is it important that we try not to do so anyway?
4. What are some ways you might become more aware of the words you choose?

Words can cause emotional harm, psychological injury, financial damage, or even physical harm. The Talmud connects these forms of injury back to the ways in which we choose and use our words. We must pay attention when choosing our words, whether or not we intend for those words to cause harm.

For more lessons and resources from Rabbi Alex Israel, visit his website www.alexisrael.org.
Part One: Biblical Origins of Mistreatment


13 In this Jubilee Year you shall return each man to his ancestral portion. 14 If you sell a sale item to your counterpart, or acquire from the hand of your counterpart, you shall not exploit [tonu] one another. 15 On the basis of the number of years after the Jubilee you shall acquire from your counterpart. 16 According to the abundance of years, you shall increase its price, and according to the paucity of the years you shall decrease its price, as it is the number of crops he is selling to you. 17 You shall not wrong [tonu] one another, and you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God.

Part Two: Introducing “Verbal Mistreatment”

Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 58b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

MISHNA Just as there is a prohibition against exploitation [ona’a] in buying and selling, so is there ona’a in statements, i.e., verbal mistreatment. The mishna proceeds to cite examples of verbal mistreatment. One may not say to a seller: For how much are you selling this item, if he does not wish to purchase it. He thereby upsets the seller when the deal fails to materialize. The mishna lists other examples: If one is a penitent, another may not say to him: Remember your earlier deeds. If one is the child of converts, another may not say to him: Remember the deeds of your ancestors, as it is stated: “And a convert shall you neither mistreat, nor shall you oppress him” (Exodus 22:20).


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Hurtful Words

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Part Four: Intent and Word Choice


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Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Today we will look more closely at how the Jewish text tradition of midrash (rabbinic interpretation) opens up phrases and ideas in the Bible to a variety of possible meanings. We’ll read different interpretations side by side and consider how each one can shape our understanding of the source text.

Let’s begin with a thought from Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz on how the Jewish text tradition is sustained by generations of readers and thinkers who continually wrestle with the sources. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

Read Text #1 aloud.


The Jewish tradition is full and complete — not because it relies only on an ancient single source, the Bible, but because it is open to additions. All the accumulated oral traditions are considered part of the original written Torah. Even details of the oral Torah, obviously belonging to a much later period, are considered to be continuations of the original revelation. It is all the same revelation, written or oral, and includes the ancient text and the ever-changing unwritten social form and custom.

Ask:

1. What does it mean for a text like the Bible to be “open to additions”?
2. Can you think of any examples of art or literature that are based on or responding to earlier works? (e.g. novels, plays, songs, movies, essays…) In what ways could they be continuations or extensions of the original?
3. What might it mean to consider interpretations of the Bible to be continuations of the original revelation?

When we consume media or art that reacts to an older source, such as historical events, musical traditions, or a canonical work of literature, we engage with both the source material and the work of interpretation. That engagement can range from having a debate with friends over whether we like or dislike an interpretation, to creating entirely new works of art in order to express our newfound understanding. While our individual opinions are part of keeping the canon relevant, creating new works that affect others' interpretations more broadly is a way of adding to the canon.

How might such a process of interpretation and re-interpretation also apply to how we read the Bible?
Part One: The Source Text (10 minutes)

Let’s do a close reading together of the Bible’s description of the creation of humankind.

Read Text #2 aloud.


26 God said: Let Us make Man in Our image, in Our likeness. And let them dominate over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the animals, and over all the earth, and over every crawling creature that crawls upon the earth. 27 God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him: Male and female He created them.

Ask:

1. What are some of the verbs used to describe the way Man is created? Are there any other unusual linguistic or literary devices?
2. What are the ways that human beings are connected to animals? What are the ways that the verses set up a relationship of difference?
3. How are human beings expected to relate to each other? How are we expected to relate to God?

In Genesis 1:26, humans are the only ones who are described as being created B’tselem Elokim, translated here as “in the image of God”. But what does that mean, and why is it important to know the meaning? And who is it who does the interpreting?

The Sages — generations of rabbis who have discussed, written about and commented on the core Jewish texts for thousands of years — invite us into a kind of reading experience that widens our attention span for words, their meanings, and possible interpretations. These discussions and commentaries are each known as a midrash, and are collectively referred to as The Midrash.

For the rabbis, readers activate the Bible, draw latent meaning from it, apply it, personalize it, connect with it. This does not mean that anything goes, or that there are no rules to interpretation. There are rules. And the rabbis of the Midrash regularly contest each other’s interpretations. But their claim is this: the words of the Bible are not meant to be read once, explained, and put away.

Let’s look more closely at the phrase B’tselem Elokim, through the works of scholars and commentators. As we explore, think about how you would interpret the meaning of “in the image of God.”
Part Two : Reading into B’telem Elokim (40 minutes)

We begin with the Mishna, which here addresses the question of why the human population began with one person. The Mishna is the written collection of the Jewish oral law, edited in the 3rd century CE.

Text #3: Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 37a.

The mishna cites another reason Adam the first man was created alone: And this was done due to the importance of maintaining peace among people, so that one person will not say to another: My father, i.e., progenitor, is greater than your father. And it was also so that the heretics who believe in multiple gods will not say: There are many authorities in Heaven, and each created a different person.

And this serves to tell of the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, as when a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, stamped all people with the seal of Adam the first man, as all of them are his offspring, and not one of them is similar to another. Therefore, since all humanity descends from one person, each and every person is obligated to say: The world was created for me, as one person can be the source of all humanity, and recognize the significance of his actions.

**Ask:**

1. If humans are stamped with the seal of Adam, who was created “in the image of God”, then in whose image do you think humans are made — God’s or Adam’s? Why?
2. Whether created in the image of God or in the image of Adam, what does the Mishna say about how the descendants of Adam should view themselves? Does that change if you make a distinction between God’s image and Adam’s image? Why or why not?

In Text #3, the idea of man being created as one (as opposed to in a community) is combined with B’tselem Elokim to suggest that each person is unique and fundamentally equal to every other human being. The Mishna presents a metaphor of a seal used to stamp a coin, and offers two ways to interpret that metaphor: that each human is stamped with the same seal of God, or that each human is stamped with the seal of Adam, who was the one made in the image of God.

What makes the stamped image B’tselem Elokim is that God makes every human being totally different from every other one — and at the same time, we each come from the same place, have the same value. Each of us is, in effect, the entire world.

Let’s examine three commentaries with different perspectives and approaches, and compare their interpretations of B’tselem Elokim.
Our first commentary is from Maimonides (also known as Rambam), who lived in Spain and Egypt in the 12th century. He was a physician and philosopher whose extensive works have been an essential influence within Judaism. The second commentary comes from the *Meshekh Hokhma*, a philosophical commentary on the Torah by Rabbi Meir Simcha HaKohen (1843–1926). A Lithuanian scholar who became the chief rabbi of Dvinsk, he was renowned for his knowledge of the Talmud. The third commentary is from Rabbi Steinsaltz.

*Ask participants to read and discuss Texts #4, #5, and #6 in *chavruta*, and discuss the questions that follow.*

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Some have been of the opinion that by the Hebrew *ẓelem*, the shape and figure of a thing is to be understood, and this explanation led men to believe in the corporeality [of the Divine Being]: for they thought that the words “Let us make man in our *ẓelem*” (Genesis 1:26), implied that God had the form of a human being, i.e., that He had figure and shape, and that, consequently, He was corporeal...

As man’s distinction consists in a property which no other creature on earth possesses, viz., intellectual perception, in the exercise of which he does not employ his senses, nor move his hand or his foot, this perception has been compared — though only apparently, not in truth — to the Divine perception, which requires no corporeal organ. On this account, i.e., on account of the Divine intellect with which man has been endowed, he is said to have been made in the form and likeness of the Almighty, but far from it be the notion that the Supreme Being is corporeal, having a material form.

**Text #5: Rabbi Meir Simcha HaKohen. Meshekh Hokhma, Bereshit 7.**

Let us make man in our image: The image of God refers to man’s ability to choose freely without his nature coercing him, to act out of free will and intellect... It is this alone that we know, that free will results from divine constriction, that God, may He be blessed, leaves room for His creatures to act in the manner of their choosing... He therefore said to Himself, “Let us make man in Our image,” that is to say, the Torah speaks in the language of men, for He said, “Let us leave room for man to choose, that he not be forced in his actions and obligated in his thoughts, and that he have the free will to do good or evil as he desires, and that he be able to do things against his nature and against what is regarded as upright in the eyes of God.

Let Us make man: Many explanations have been offered for the verse's use of the plural form “Us.” One explanation is that in addition to man’s living soul, which gives him his will, the creation of man introduced a new concept into the universe, namely, the ability to choose freely and affect the world. Creation, which until this point was a delicately balanced ecosystem, was suddenly exposed to a free, independent being, man. In considering the introduction of this foreign element, whose unique character will be revealed later, the Midrash suggests that God sought the advice of His angels, as it were, and asked their opinion with regard to the creation of man (see Bereshit Rabba 17:19). A more poetic explanation appears in an early midrash: God turned to the entire world and said: Let us all make man. Since man incorporates all of Creation, all creatures have some connection to him. For the creation of man, the lion donated some of its might, the fox gave part of its cunning, the snake its poison, the lamb its innocence, and the butterfly its flight. According to this midrash, man was created in the image and likeness of all the creatures of the world (see Zohar 3:238b; Yalkut Shimon, Bereshit 13).

In Our image, in Our likeness: Although in a physiological sense man is very similar to other living creatures, he is nevertheless a category of being to himself. Unlike other creations, man was fashioned in the image of God, not in terms of his appearance, but in terms of his essence. Aside from man’s superior intelligence, this likeness is expressed principally in man’s freedom to choose. This quality is unique to man and God. The rest of creation moves within its respective circles, always subject to a long chain of cause and effect. Humans are not bound by these chains.

Ask in chavruta:

1. What does each text give as the meaning of B’tselem Elokim? Do they say what B’tselem Elokim is not?
2. How are these commentaries similar and different? Does one particularly resonate with you?
3. How does it change how you originally understood the phrase B’tselem Elokim when you read Text #2?
4. What is the impact of their interpretation on your understanding of humankind? How does it capture the essence of being a human?

Bring the group back together and ask some pairs to share their thoughts.

Maimonides rejects the literal interpretation of “tselem”: that if people were created in the image of God, then God must then have a human form. Instead, according to Maimonides, human beings are in the image of God because we are endowed with an intellect that resembles the Divine. Humans have a level of intellectual perception that has some resemblance to Divine perception; this intellectual likeness includes the ability to perceive and abstract. Humankind’s “likeness” is not physical but intellectual – our abilities are in the likeness of God, not our faces or bodies.

The Meshekh Hokhma interprets “the image of God” as having free will — the ability to choose — an ability given by God to humankind. Because God also has free will, this is a way in which human beings resemble God.

Maimonides and Rabbi HaKohen agree that B’tselem Elokim is incorporeal. Maimonides is talking about intelligence, Rabbi HaKohen about acting with free will. Rabbi Steinsaltz connects these two things by saying that free will is an expression of that intelligence. All of creation is represented in our personalities, in these collective likenesses.

Our next text is from Rabbi Joseph Ber Soleveitchik (1903–1993), who was an American Talmudist, scholar and philosopher. He is best known for his works synthesizing Jewish law and modern thought. In this text, Rabbi Soleveitchik considers what it means for humans to be creative.
The Torah describes the creation at length in order to teach us a very important lesson – “to walk in all His ways” — and to instruct man to imitate his Creator and be himself a creator. A person should not shake his head saying that this demand of man is impossible, for he cannot imitate his Creator in creativity...The Torah, nevertheless, demands of man and commands him to tirelessly exert himself to cling to the traits of the Holy One, blessed be He, and be a creator.

**Ask:**

1. How does the human trait of creativity inform your understanding of *B’tselem Elokim*?
2. Does this text change or enhance your reading of the previous texts or the process of midrash? How and why?

**Part Three: Not One Empty Word** (10 minutes)

Now that we’ve looked at the act of interpretation, how does this fit with our understanding of the tradition, and where we fit into that timeline? How does midrash connect to our lives?

Let’s read what Moses says to the People of Israel when he completes giving all the words and teachings to them and what Rashi derives from it. Rashi lived in France in the 11th century. He is an important commentator on the Bible and Talmud, and one of the most famous scholars in Jewish history.

**Text #8:** Deuteronomy 32:45–47. English translation [bold text] and abridged commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in The Steinsaltz Humash, Koren Publishers Jerusalem.

> וַיְכַ֣ל מֹשֶׁ֗ה לְדַבֵּ֛ר אֶת־כָּל־הַדְּבָרִ֥ים הָאֵ֖לֶּה אֶל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵֽל׃ וַיֹּ֤אמֶר אֲלֵהֶם֙ שִׂ֣ימוּ לְבַבְכֶ֔ם לְכָל־הַדְּבָרִ֔ים אֲשֶׁ֤ר אָנֹכִ֛י מֵעִ֥יד בָּכֶ֖ם הַיּ֑וֹם אֲשֶׁ֤ר תְּצַוֻּם֙ אֶת־בְּנֵיכֶ֔ם לִשְׁמֹ֣ר לַעֲשׂ֔וֹת אֶת־כָּל־דִּבְרֵ֖י הַתּוֹרָ֥ה הַזֹּֽאת׃ כִּ֠י לֹֽא־דָבָ֨ר רֵ֥ק הוּא מִכֶּ֔ם כִּי־ה֖וּא חַיֵּיכֶ֑ם וּבַדָּבָ֣ר הַזֶּ֗ה תַּאֲרִ֤יכוּ יָמִים֙ עַל־הָ֣אֲדָמָ֔ה אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּ֤ם עֹבְרִ֨ים אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּ֛ן שָׁ֖מָּה לְרִשְׁתָּֽהּ׃

45 Moses finished speaking all these matters to all Israel. 46 He, Moses, again said to them: Set your heart to all the matters that I attest to you today. Diligently observe these matters, and ensure that you will command them to your children, to take care to perform all the words of this Torah in the future...47 For it is not an empty thing for you, as it is your life. And through this matter you will extend your days on the land that you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of it.

FOR IT IS NOT A VAIN [EMPTY] THING FOR YOU – it is not for nothing that you are to occupy yourselves laboriously with it, because much reward depends on it, живи (life is the reward). Another explanation: There is not one empty (ריק, i.e., apparently superfluous) word in the Torah that, if you properly expound it, has not a grant of reward attached to it for doing so.

Ask:

1. Rashi offers two reasons why the words of the Torah are not “empty.” Which resonates with you more? Why?
2. Does Rashi’s interpretation of the reader’s role change how you perceive the texts we’ve looked at together? Do the commentaries we’ve read on B’tselem Elokim influence how you interpret Rashi’s statement? How so?

Rashi interprets the command in Deuteronomy as more than just “obey the law”. For Rashi, the labor of personally struggling with the Torah is a long and necessary process, because the reward is so great. On the other hand, the task of reading and interpreting the Torah is rewarding because there is so much meaning in every single word of the Torah, just waiting for you to explore. “Not one empty word” means that each and every word in the Torah has room for discovery and new understandings.

Conclusion (10 minutes)

Ask:

1. After today’s experience of exploring the commentaries on a single line of text, what insights have you gained into the way you excavate meaning from the layers of text? How has the idea of “not one empty word” changed or enhanced the way you approach reading?
2. In what ways does Bible study require the creativity Rabbi Soloveitchik describes? As a reader, what is your responsibility in the process of generating meaning?
3. Think back to our first text by Rabbi Steinsaltz. Having experienced this process of midrashic reading, what might “continuations of the original revelation” mean to you now?

Thinking back to what Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote, reading the Bible — striving to do so, and studying it yourself — is a holy act. Its holiness is reflected in the creativity it takes to find the meanings within each word. As Rashi reminds us, they are anything but “empty”. We can read, and speak to each other, and ask questions. When we say we are created B’tselem Elokim, it is not to say that our faces look like God’s own face, but that our minds are capable of the creativity shown by God. Therefore, we are given that same responsibility: that we actively engage with our texts, and bring to them our very selves. The volumes of text are full of words that each speak volumes — each word, each idea of the Bible generates even more interpretations of meaning and significance.
Introduction


The Jewish tradition is full and complete — not because it relies only on an ancient single source, the Bible, but because it is open to additions. All the accumulated oral traditions are considered part of the original written Torah. Even details of the oral Torah, obviously belonging to a much later period, are considered to be continuations of the original revelation. It is all the same revelation, written or oral, and includes the ancient text and the ever-changing unwritten social form and custom.

Part One: The Source Text


26 God said: Let Us make Man in Our image, in Our likeness. And let them dominate over the fish of the sea, and over the animals, and over all the earth, and over every crawling creature that crawls upon the earth. 27 God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created them.

Part Two: Reading into B’tselem Elokim

Text #3: Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 37a.

The mishna cites another reason Adam the first man was created alone: And this was done due to the importance of maintaining peace among people, so that one person will not say to another: My father, i.e., progenitor, is greater than your father. And it was also so that the heretics who believe in multiple gods will not say: There are many authorities in Heaven, and each created a different person.

And this serves to tell of the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, as when a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, stamped all people with the seal of Adam the first man, as all of them are his offspring, and not one of them is similar to another. Therefore, since all humanity descends from one person, each and every person is obligated to say: The world was created for me, as one person can be the source of all humanity, and recognize the significance of his actions.
Some have been of the opinion that by the Hebrew הצלם, the shape and figure of a thing is to be understood, and this explanation led men to believe in the corporeality of the Divine Being: for they thought that the words “Let us make man in our הצלם” (Genesis 1:26), implied that God had the form of a human being, i.e., that He had figure and shape, and that, consequently, He was corporeal...

As man’s distinction consists in a property which no other creature on earth possesses, viz., intellectual perception, in the exercise of which he does not employ his senses, nor move his hand or his foot, this perception has been compared — though only apparently, not in truth — to the Divine perception, which requires no corporeal organ. On this account, i.e., on account of the Divine intellect with which man has been endowed, he is said to have been made in the form and likeness of the Almighty, but far from it be the notion that the Supreme Being is corporeal, having a material form.

Let us make man in our image: The image of God refers to man’s ability to choose freely without his nature coercing him, to act out of free will and intellect. It is this alone that we know, that free will results from divine constriction, that God, may He be blessed, leaves room for His creatures to act in the manner of their choosing... He therefore said to Himself, “Let us make man in Our image,” that is to say, the Torah speaks in the language of men, for He said, “Let us leave room for man to choose, that he not be forced in his actions and obligated in his thoughts, and that he have the free will to do good or evil as he desires, and that he be able to do things against his nature and against what is regarded as upright in the eyes of God.
The Torah describes the creation at length in order to teach us a very important lesson — “to walk in all His ways” — and to instruct man to imitate his Creator and be himself a creator. A person should not shake his head saying that this demand of man is impossible, for he cannot imitate his Creator in creativity...The Torah, nevertheless, demands of man and commands him to tirelessly exert himself to cling to the traits of the Holy One, blessed be He, and be a creator.

Part Three: Not One Empty Word


45 Moses finished speaking all these matters to all Israel. 46 He, Moses, again said to them: Set your heart to all the matters that I attest to you today. Diligently observe these matters, and ensure that you will command them to your children, to take care to perform all the words of this Torah in the future...47 For it is not an empty thing for you, as it is your life. And through this matter you will extend your days on the land that you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of it.


FOR IT IS NOT A VAIN [EMPTY] THING FOR YOU – it is not for nothing that you are to occupy yourselves laboriously with it, because much reward depends on it, because you are commanded, FOR IT IS YOUR LIFE (life is the reward). Another explanation: There is not one empty (יְעָשֵׁה מִיַּצֵּר i.e., apparently superfluous) word in the Torah that, if you properly expound it, has not a grant of reward attached to it for doing so.
Facilitator's Note: This unit can be used to open up a discussion with students about bullying. The unit is focused on the ways words can hurt, and looks at the role of intent behind our words, but does not address bullying directly.

Introduction (8 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Names are words we use to identify ourselves and each other. In life we have more than just the names our parents give us — we acquire other names through the relationships we build. What someone calls us can define or even change how we view ourselves. Sometimes the words and names we choose to use can push the boundaries of those relationships.

Today we’ll look closely at how our names, what we call each other, and the intentions behind our words are connected to the relationships we have with people around us. What do the names we use say about our relationships? How can words hurt? Do our intentions matter when we speak? And what do Jewish texts have to say about all of this?

ACTIVITY #1: WHAT’S MY NAME?

Let’s begin by looking at our own names. Names are outward-facing, and we use them to distinguish ourselves from others, or be distinguished by others.

- Hand out the Activity Sheet (included at the end of this unit) for students to complete. When they have finished, ask a few students to share their answers.

Names can have an impact on us, and different names can change how we feel in the moment. Names can have meanings that change, depending on who says the name.

- Ask the group:

1. Who calls you by your full name? When does that happen? How does that make you feel?
2. What do you call your parents? Your teachers? How do those names reflect your relationship with them?
3. Do you act differently when people call you by different names? How?
4. Do you have different nicknames for your friends? When do you switch between names?

Keep these names and ideas in mind as we explore the significance of names and words in our relationships.

Part One: A Talmudic Tale of Two Best Friends (30 minutes)

Two central figures in the Talmud are Rabbi Yoḥanan and Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, who is also called Reish Lakish. They appear throughout the Talmud, usually in the middle of a disagreement, but they are great friends nonetheless. In fact they’re family: Reish Lakish is married to Rabbi Yoḥanan’s sister. Their good-natured arguments are always in the context of studying, and because they disagree they push each other to be better scholars. They question each other constantly, which forces them both to clarify and think again about what they say.
The Talmud relates debates between Rabbi Yoĥanan and Reish Lakish to demonstrate how Jewish laws were decided, or even to show why there’s still no agreement on what a line of Torah might mean. Let’s read from the Talmud to see how Rabbi Yoĥanan and Reish Lakish met.

Facilitator’s Note: This story from the Talmud is included in-full at the end of the curriculum, accompanied by biographical information about the main characters, and notes on the language used. Feel free to share the resource with your students in its entirety, or adapt the supplemental information to suit your students’ comprehension levels. The information in the supplement has been incorporated into the discussion questions and activity guides that follow.

For a quick summary of the biographies of the two main characters, use the following paragraphs.

Rabbi Yoĥanan bar Nappaĥa was one of the greatest scholars in the Talmud. He lived in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, in Tiberias. Throughout his life, Rabbi Yoĥanan was famous for being extremely handsome, with many stories in the Talmud recounting his physical beauty. Rabbi Yoĥanan studied under the leading teachers of the yeshiva in Tiberias, where he eventually became the head of the school. For a long time Rabbi Yoĥanan was the foremost rabbinic scholar in the Jewish world, not only in Eretz Yisrael but in Babylonia as well, and many Babylonian scholars emigrated to Eretz Yisrael to study with him.

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, often referred to as Reish Lakish, was among the greatest scholars in Eretz Yisrael. He led an extraordinary life: his childhood was one of poverty under Roman occupation; too poor to continue his Torah study, he sold himself to a circus as a gladiator, where he gained some fame for his incredible strength, and also was the leader of a gang of highway robbers. He resumed his Torah study under his friend Rabbi Yoĥanan, and later taught with him as a colleague. Reish Lakish was well known for his strict piety. He married Rabbi Yoĥanan’s sister, who was said to be even more beautiful than her brother.

Read Text #1 aloud.

Text #1: Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 84a. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Gemara relates: One day, Rabbi Yoĥanan went to the Jordan River. Reish Lakish saw him and jumped into the Jordan, pursuing him. At that time, Reish Lakish was the leader of a band of marauders. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to Reish Lakish: Your strength is fit for Torah study. Reish Lakish said to him: Your beauty is fit for women. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to him: If you return to the pursuit of Torah, I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beautiful than I am. Reish Lakish accepted upon himself to study Torah.

Reish Lakish, who was a robber at the time, might have mistaken the famously-beautiful Rabbi Yoĥanan for a woman. Imagine his surprise at finding that it was a rabbi!

Reish Lakish was known for his physical strength. Rabbi Yoĥanan tells him that if he applied the same energy in physical training into Torah study, then Reish Lakish could be a great scholar. Rabbi Yoĥanan offers to teach Reish Lakish, and also introduces his new friend to his sister. Reish Lakish does indeed turn his full effort to Torah study and becomes a brilliant rabbi in his own right.
**Ask:**

1. Why do you think Reish Lakish jumped into the river to follow Rabbi Yoḥanan? What might Reish Lakish mean when he says, “Your beauty is fit for women”?
2. Rabbi Yoḥanan was surprised to meet a famous robber. What do you think he meant by “Your strength is fit for Torah study”?
3. How would you describe the way Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yoḥanan speak to each other? (e.g. teasing, insulting, joking, etc...)

**Facilitator’s Note:** Depending on the time available to you and the engagement level of your participants, the following section has several options. You may choose to do Activity #2, in which participants will adapt the story into a play, or choose to adapt it yourself for them to perform. Alternatively, participants can read the text itself and discuss it in chavruta.

Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.

**ACTIVITY #2: A TALMUDIC TALE, ON STAGE!**

Depending on the number of participants and the amount of time you have, split the participants into groups of about 6, or into two groups. As a group, ask them to read Text #2 (on the next page) and adapt the story into a short play of about 5 minutes. Participants should assign themselves roles such as directors, script writers and actors. They can add modern language or extra dialogue to help them communicate their ideas.

**You will need:**
- Copies of the text to hand out (see the source sheet at the end of this unit)
- Notepads or lined paper on which to write the scripts out, or type and print out the scripts
- An area of the room to call the “stage”
- An area of the room to call the “audience”
- (Optional) Costume elements such as false beards, plain sheets to stand in for togas or prayer shawls
- (Optional) Prop elements such as a fake sword or spear

Ask participants to assign themselves roles in their groups. There can be more than one of each of these suggestions, and each student can fill more than one role:

- Script writer
- Director
- Costume/set designer
- Narrator
- Rabbi Yoḥanan
- Reish Lakish
- Yeshiva students/other sages

**Steps:**

1. **Read Text #2** as a group and use the discussion questions to help each other understand the story.
2. Remember what you thought of Rabbi Yoḥanan and Reish Lakish after discussing Text #1. When you read Text #2, think about how their history together influences the way they speak to each other.
The Names We Call Each Other (Middle School)

3. **Adapt the story into a short scene** of a play that shows how Rabbi Yoĥanan and Reish Lakish got into this argument. Use some of the answers to the discussion questions to help you figure out what’s going on.

4. Show how you understand their relationship and the argument by adding some additional dialogue or action.

5. In writing the script and performing it, give some thought to directions about how loud or soft to say certain lines, or about what tone to use when saying them.

**Performing the plays:**

If time allows, invite the groups to each perform their scenes. If time is constrained, ask one or two groups to volunteer to perform. Ask participants in the audience to make note of how each different staging interprets the friendship, argument and falling out between the two main characters. How is it different from their own interpretations?

**Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 84a.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Rabbi Yohanan taught Reish Lakish Bible, and taught him Mishna, and turned him into a great man. Eventually, Reish Lakish became one of the outstanding Torah scholars of his generation. **One day** the Sages of the study hall were engaging in a dispute concerning the following baraita: With regard to the sword, the knife, the dagger [veḥapigyon], the spear, a hand sickle, and a harvest sickle, from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity? **The baraita** answers: It is from the time of the completion of their manufacture, which is the halakha with regard to metal vessels in general.

These Sages inquired: And when is the completion of their manufacture? Rabbi Yohanan says: It is from when one fires these items in the furnace. Reish Lakish said: It is from when one scours them in water, after they have been fired in the furnace. Rabbi Yohanan said to Reish Lakish: A bandit knows about his banditry, i.e., you are an expert in weaponry because you were a bandit in your youth. Reish Lakish said to Rabbi Yohanan: What benefit did you provide me by bringing me close to Torah? There, among the bandits, they called me: Leader of the bandits, and here, too, they call me: Leader of the bandits. Rabbi Yohanan said to him: I provided benefit to you, as I brought you close to God, under the wings of the Divine Presence.

As a result of the quarrel, Rabbi Yohanan was offended, which in turn affected Reish Lakish, who fell ill.

**Discuss as a group or chavurta:**

1. Briefly summarize this story. What is the chain of events?
2. How would you describe what Rabbi Yohanan says to Reish Lakish? What was the context?
3. What is the difference between what was said and what was heard?
4. How would you describe the way Reish Lakish responds? How does his personal history connect to that?
5. What do you think “A bandit knows about his banditry” means?
6. Do you think Rabbi Yohanan meant to hurt Reish Lakish’s feelings?
7. Why does Reish Lakish get sick after the argument? Do you think either of the friends is responsible? Why or why not?
After the performances, group discussion, or chavruta, bring the class back together and share some of the responses.

When you read the story to yourself, you hear Rabbi Yohanan’s voice a certain way. The tone and way in which Rabbi Yohanan says, “A bandit knows about his banditry,” changes how we interpret his intentions, and how we understand the way Reish Lakish reacted to those words.

Because this happened so long ago, and all we have is this story to tell us that there was an argument like this one, we can’t know for sure what Rabbi Yohanan’s intention was, and what Reish Lakish really thought. What we do know is that the words caused harm. Even if Rabbi Yohanan didn’t mean to hurt his friend’s feelings, or if he was only joking, or if he thought Reish Lakish wouldn’t mind the reference, Reish Lakish still interpreted the words as being a reference to his personal history. Then, Reish Lakish said that what Rabbi Yohanan did for him wasn’t special, which Rabbi Yohanan felt offended by. Reish Lakish felt so bad about offending his friend that he was heartbroken and sick about it.

Ask:

1. What is the difference between reading dialogue and hearing it out loud? How does tone affect the way we understand the real meaning of what a person says?
2. What are some situations where you are expressing a thought with written words that could be misunderstood if your tone isn’t clear?
3. Have you ever misunderstood another person’s words because you couldn’t tell what their tone was? What happened?
4. When we communicate through text messages or post online, what are some ways we can be more clear about the “real” meaning of what we’re saying?

Part Two: Watching Our Words (20 minutes)

Why is it important not to hurt each other with our words? Can we make up for that harm? What happens if we didn’t mean to cause harm? Let’s look more closely at “verbal mistreatment” and whether or not intent matters.

Read Texts #3 and #4 aloud.


Rabbi Yohanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai: Greater is the transgression of verbal mistreatment than the transgression of monetary exploitation, as with regard to this, verbal mistreatment, it is stated: “And you shall fear your God.” But with regard to that, monetary exploitation, it is not stated: “And you shall fear your God.” And Rabbi Elazar said this explanation: This, verbal mistreatment, affects one’s body; but that, monetary exploitation, affects one’s money. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani says: This, monetary exploitation, is given to restitution; but that, verbal mistreatment, is not given to restitution.
**The Names We Call Each Other (Middle School)**

**Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 58b.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

There are different ways to hurt someone, including ways involving money (like stealing or charging unfair prices or not paying them enough for their work). The Talmud draws a line between “monetary exploitation” and “verbal mistreatment”. The text says, “And you shall fear your God” as a way of showing that there is a Jewish legal consequence for these kinds of harm, but that verbal mistreatment has an added layer of spiritual consequences.

According to Text #3, “Monetary exploitation is given to restitution,” meaning that you can get your money back, or claim money to compensate for financial harm done. In cases of verbal mistreatment, however, the Talmud says that money cannot help you undo the harm caused by words. There is weight to our words. Words hurt a person rather than that person’s things or finances, and money isn’t enough to compensate for that harm.

Even if the words seem innocent and the intent behind them is not to offend or harm, we must try to avoid harming others in this way. Also, even if the words are not inherently hurtful, we must also try to avoid using words to embarrass others.

**Ask:**

1. Why do you think money and words are compared here? What are the similarities and differences between doing damage with money/things and words?
2. What does the Talmud say are the consequences of monetary exploitation? What are the consequences of verbal mistreatment? How are they different or similar?
3. This text states that verbal mistreatment is greater than financial mistreatment. Compared with your own life experiences, do you agree or disagree? Why?

So if mistreating people with words is worse than mistreating them with money, how does that affect the way we should speak to each other? Let’s read another text that gets at how we can put different meanings behind everyday words, and that our intentions can make regular words into hurtful words. Text #5 is from the Shulhan Arukh, the 16th century Code of Jewish Law, written by Rabbi Yosef Karo.
Ask a participant to read Text #5 aloud.

**Text #5: Shulḥan Arukh. Hoshen Mishpat 228:5.**

יזהר שלא לכנות שם רע לחבירו אע"פ שהוא רגיל тому כנוי אם כוונתו לביישו אסור

Be careful not to call a person by a distasteful nickname, even if this is a nickname that he is commonly called, if your intention is to embarrass him.

Ask:

1. What are some things that can be said with the same words, but where different intentions change their meaning altogether? Can the intent be heard?
2. Is there a difference between saying something that offends accidentally, and meaning to offend someone?
3. How can it be difficult to understand someone's intentions when saying something that can be perceived as hurtful? Why use a distasteful name at all if we don't intend to embarrass?
4. Think back to the story of Rabbi Yoḥanan and Reish Lakish. Do Texts #3, #4 or #5 change the way you interpret their behavior? How and why?
5. How might today's discussion change the way you express your own intentions?

**Conclusion (2 minutes)**

When we look at the examples from the Talmud, even over the great distance of time we can see how emotional hurt is real. The conversation about intentions — whether good or bad — shows that we have to pay attention when choosing our words. Just because someone is a friend doesn’t mean you can’t hurt them by reminding them of something they don’t want to be reminded of. Just because someone is called a nickname on a regular basis doesn’t mean we get to use that name as an insult. Just because we didn’t mean to hurt someone’s feelings with words, doesn’t mean they can’t feel hurt by them anyway.
Part One: A Talmudic Tale of Two Best Friends

Text #1: Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 84a. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavi.  

The Gemara relates: One day, Rabbi Yoĥanan was bathing in the Jordan River. Reish Lakish saw him and jumped into the Jordan, pursuing him. At that time, Reish Lakish was the leader of a band of marauders. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to Reish Lakish: Your strength is fit for Torah study. Reish Lakish said to him: Your beauty is fit for women. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to him: If you return to the pursuit of Torah, I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beautiful than I am. Reish Lakish accepted upon himself to study Torah.

Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 84a. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavi.  

Rabbi Yoĥanan taught Reish Lakish Bible, and taught him Mishna, and turned him into a great man. Eventually, Reish Lakish became one of the outstanding Torah scholars of his generation. One day the Sages of the study hall were engaging in a dispute concerning the following baraita: With regard to the sword, the knife, the dagger [vehapigyon], the spear, a hand sickle, and a harvest sickle, from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity? The baraita answers: It is from the time of the completion of their manufacture, which is the halakha with regard to metal vessels in general.

These Sages inquired: And when is the completion of their manufacture? Rabbi Yoĥanan says: It is from when one fires these items in the furnace. Reish Lakish said: It is from when one scours them in water, after they have been fired in the furnace. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to Reish Lakish: A bandit knows about his banditry, i.e., you are an expert in weaponry because you were a bandit in your youth. Reish Lakish said to Rabbi Yoĥanan: What benefit did you provide me by bringing me close to Torah? There, among the bandits, they called me: Leader of the bandits, and here, too, they call me: Leader of the bandits. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to him: I provided benefit to you, as I brought you close to God, under the wings of the Divine Presence.

As a result of the quarrel, Rabbi Yoĥanan was offended, which in turn affected Reish Lakish, who fell ill.
Part Two: Watching Our Words


Rabbi Yoḥanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai:
Greater is the transgression of verbal mistreatment than the transgression of monetary exploitation, as with regard to this, verbal mistreatment, it is stated: “And you shall fear your God.” But with regard to that, monetary exploitation, it is not stated: “And you shall fear your God.” And Rabbi Elazar said this explanation: This, verbal mistreatment, affects one’s body; but that, monetary exploitation, affects one’s money. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani says: This, monetary exploitation, is given to restitution; but that, verbal mistreatment, is not given to restitution.


How so? If one is a penitent, another may not say to him: Remember your earlier deeds. If one is the child of converts, another may not say to him: Remember the deed of your ancestors. If one is a convert and he came to study Torah, one may not say to him: Does the mouth that ate unslaughtered carcasses and animals that had wounds that would have caused them to die within twelve months, and repugnant creatures, and creeping animals, comes to study Torah that was stated from the mouth of the Almighty?

Verbal mistreatment is not typically obvious, and it is difficult to ascertain the intent of the offender, as the matter is given to the heart of each individual, as only he knows what his intention was when he spoke. And with regard to any matter given to the heart, it is stated: “And you shall fear your God” (Leviticus 25:17), as God is privy to the intent of the heart.

Text #5: Shulḥan Arukh. Hoshen Mishpat 228:5.

Be careful not to call a person by a distasteful nickname, even if this is a nickname that he is commonly called, if your intention is to embarrass him.
ACTIVITY #1: WHAT'S MY NAME?

My first name is _________________________________________________________________

That name means/I was named after ________________________________________________

My family name is _______________________________________________________________________

That name comes from _____________________________________________ (e.g. another language or country)

I have another name: _______________________________________________________________________

(e.g. a Hebrew or middle name)

That name means/I was named after ________________________________________________

My parents call me _________________________________________________________________

When I introduce myself to new people, I call myself _________________________________________________________________

Some nicknames that people call me are:

1. ________________________________________________________________________________

2. ________________________________________________________________________________

3. ________________________________________________________________________________

My favorite name to be called is: ________________________________, because _________________________________________________________________
Introduction (2 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

We all know the story of Moses, who said to Pharaoh: “Let my people go!” He’s famous for being a great leader who could speak directly to God and for giving us the Ten Commandments.

It might surprise you to find out that Moses wasn’t confident about speaking to people, and sometimes he used actions where he should have used words.

What can we learn from Moses about how we express ourselves and how we act with other people?

Part One: Speaking to People Can Be Hard (25 minutes)

God appears to Moses in the Burning Bush to tell Moses that he’s been chosen to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt. In order to do so, Moses is told to gather his people together and tell them about the plan. God commands Moses to speak to the leaders of the Jewish people, and to speak to Pharaoh on his people’s behalf.

God is asking Moses to give a speech to the leaders of the Children of Israel. Moses must then tell Pharaoh to let them leave Egypt, in order to free his people from slavery. In this important moment, how does Moses react to the news that he’s going to be the leader and have to give a speech?

➢ Ask three participants to read Text #1 as a dialogue between God and Moses, and a narrator.


10 Moses said to the Lord: Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words. I have never been able to express myself eloquently, neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am unfit for this mission, as I am cumbrous of speech and cumbrous of tongue.

11 The Lord said to him: Who gives a mouth to a person? Or who renders one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12 Now, go, and I will be with your mouth and I will instruct you that which you shall say.

13 Despite all the assurances of God, Moses did not want to accept his task: He said: Please, my Lord, please send by means of anyone else whom You will send.
Ask:

1. How would you describe the way Moses speaks to God in Text #1? (e.g. arguing, whining, pleading, etc...)
2. What part of God's instructions is Moses having trouble with?
3. What are some reasons why Moses might not want to speak to people? Do you think he didn’t want to, or that he couldn’t? (e.g. did he have a speech impediment? Did he speak a different language than Hebrew? Did he have a funny accent? Was he worried that people wouldn’t believe him?)
4. Are you comfortable speaking in front of other people? Why or why not?

Moses is worried about speaking to the gathered people and speaking to Pharaoh because he thinks he isn’t a “man of words”. Moses tells God that he’s not the right person for the task of speaking to others, or on behalf of his entire people. He says that words are difficult for him to use.

The Hebrew phrase he uses is “kvad pe’h” which literally translates to “tongue-heavy”, or “cumbrous of tongue”. The word “cumbrous”, which is related to the word “cumbersome”, means awkwardly shaped, clunky, difficult to carry, or hard to manage. It could be because Moses actually had a physical difficulty with speaking, and wasn’t able to get the words out. Maybe he only spoke Egyptian, since he was raised in Pharaoh’s palace, and couldn’t speak to the Children of Israel because they spoke Hebrew. Maybe he was just afraid that people wouldn’t believe what he said.

Whatever the reason, God is asking him to help the Jewish people but Moses tries as hard as he can to get out of it. Moses argues that he is too uncomfortable with speaking out loud to others.

Not everyone is comfortable with speaking in front of others. Moses would much rather skip right to the action. Moses is so uncomfortable with words that he’d rather argue with God, to His face!

Let’s ask questions in chavruta. Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.

With your partner, read the text from the Bible again (Text #2a) then compare it to the commentary in Text #2b. The author of the commentary is Isaac Abarbanel, a 15th century diplomat and scholar from Spain who wrote commentaries on the Five Books of Moses.

Read Text #2a and #2b in chavruta.


וַיֹּ֨אמֶר ה' אֵלָ֗יו מִ֣י שָׂ֣ם פֶּה֮ לָֽאָדָם֒ א֚וֹ מִֽי־יָשָׁו֡ אִלֵּ֔ם א֣וֹ חֵרֵ֔שׁ א֥וֹ פִּקֵּ֖חַ א֣וֹ עִוֵּ֑ר הֲלֹ֥א אָנֹכִ֖י ה'׃

11 The Lord said to him: Who gives a mouth to a person? Or who renders one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?
**Text #2b: Abarbanel. Commentary on Exodus 4:10.**

...“Who gives man the powers of speech” is God’s way of saying that the loss of abilities of speech isn’t a purely natural occurrence, but rather happened under God’s supervision...

**Ask:**

1. What do you think God is saying when he asks Moses, “Who gives a mouth to a person?”
2. Why do you think God didn’t just turn Moses into a better speaker?

**Bring the group back together and ask a few chavruta pairs to share their answers.**

Moses may be afraid of what others will think of him if he messes up his speech, or if he sounds weird, or if they don’t believe what he says. We can all understand why Moses might be worried about being judged by others.

What would you say to Moses, to encourage him? Let’s write a message to Moses.

**ACTIVITY #1: WRITE A MESSAGE TO MOSES**

**You will need:**

- Paper for folding and decorating as a greeting card
- Pens, markers, crayons, pencils, other decorating materials, etc.
- A whiteboard and markers for brainstorming
- (Optional) Pre-fold the paper into greeting card sizes, print card templates, or use blank greeting cards

**Steps:**

1. As a group, brainstorm a few encouraging phrases that would be nice on a card.
2. Write the phrases or words on the board, and let the participants pick their favorites to write on the greeting cards.
3. Address the cards to Moses, encouraging him not to be afraid to speak up, or not to be embarrassed.
4. Bring the group back together and ask them to share some of their messages of encouragement.

**Part Two: Listening Carefully (20 minutes)**

Eventually, Moses does what God commands and the Book of Exodus continues with Moses leading the Children of Israel out of Egypt. Moses can perform miracles with his staff, and he uses it to part the Red Sea, taking his people into the desert on the way to the Promised Land. As the leader, Moses is in charge of everyone’s safety, even when things get difficult. How is a leader supposed to address the concerns of his people? How does Moses manage?

Let’s keep this in mind as we read Text #3. After 40 years of wandering in the desert, God tells Moses to speak to a rock to bring out water.
Read Text #3 aloud.


3 The people quarreled with Moses, and they said: If only we had perished in the perishing of our brethren before the Lord. 4 Why did you bring the assembly of the Lord to this wilderness, that we and our animals should die there? 5 Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is not a place of seed, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates.

Now, we are neither in Egypt nor in Canaan, and there is no water to drink. 6 Moses and Aaron came from before the assembly, and were forced by the angry crowd to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell upon their faces in prayer, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. 7 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 8 Take the staff with which you performed all the miracles and wonders, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aaron our brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, and it, the rock, will provide its water. You will thereby extract water for them from the rock and you shall give drink to the congregation and their animals.

9 Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as He had commanded him. 10 Moses and Aaron assembled the assembly before the rock, and said to them: Hear now, defiant ones: From this rock will we bring out water for you. 11 Moses raised his hand, and he struck the rock with his staff twice; a great deal of water came out, and the congregation and their animals drank. 12 Although the rock miraculously provided water, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron: Because you did not cause the people to have faith in Me, to sanctify Me before the eyes of the children of Israel; therefore, you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.

Ask:

1. How would you describe the way the people speak to Moses? What are they asking for?
2. How would you describe the way Moses speaks to the people? What is Moses worried that the people will do? How do the people respond to his words?
3. What did God tell Moses to do? What did Moses actually do? How are those different?
4. Moses performed a miracle and brought water out of a rock, which calmed the people down. But in the end of the story, God isn’t pleased with Moses. Why do you think that is?
5. Have you ever been frustrated with other people? What do you do in those situations?
6. What is the difference between using words and using force to get your point across?

Moses is told specifically to speak to the rock, but he hits it instead. Moses was too frustrated to listen to and follow the instructions God had given him. The consequence is that Moses will not get to see the Promised Land, even though he was the leader who brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt. Moses doesn’t get to enter the Promised Land because he didn’t do what God had instructed him to do.
There are times when we feel frustrated by a situation, and get a strong urge to do something quickly in the moment. It's important to think clearly and figure out the right thing to say or do, before going ahead. Maybe a situation calls for words instead of actions. Or maybe we need to be careful about the words we choose to say in a tough situation.

**Conclusion (13 minutes)**

**ACTIVITY #2: REMINDER ROCKS**

**Supplies:**
- Rocks, flat stones, or classroom clay flattened into rock shapes, one for each participant
- Paint or paint pens, and other decorating supplies

**Steps:**
1. Look back at the whiteboard where you brainstormed encouraging phrases for Moses.
2. Write your favorite of those words on the rock, and decorate it.

When your rock is dry you can take it home or bring it to school. When you’re frustrated, just remember this rock. Like Moses, you might want to hit the rock in frustration. Instead, try talking to it first. Maybe you’ll find the right words to say, or you’ll feel calmer, or you’ll get some confidence.

**Ask:**
1. Of all the things we learned about words today, which one do you think applies most to your own behavior?
2. Think about how you communicate with your words and your actions. Is one more effective than the other? Why?
Part One: Speaking to People Can Be Hard


10 Moses said to the Lord: Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words. I have never been able to express myself eloquently, neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am unfit for this mission, as I am cumbrous of speech and cumbrous of tongue.

11 The Lord said to him: Who gives a mouth to a person? Or who renders one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?


...מי שם פה לאדם ר”ל כי האלמות והעברת הדבור בו לא היה עוד מזמן_VOLATILEombok, ואת הוא הניב כלו כי.:...  

...“Who gives man the powers of speech” is God’s way of saying that the loss of abilities of speech isn’t a purely natural occurrence, but rather happened under God’s supervision...

3 The people quarreled with Moses, and they said: If only we had perished in the perishing of our brethren before the Lord. 4 Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is not a place of seed, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates.

5 Now, we are neither in Egypt nor in Canaan, and there is no water to drink. 6 Moses and Aaron came from before the assembly, and were forced by the angry crowd to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they fell upon their faces in prayer, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them.

7 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 8 Take the staff with which you performed all the miracles and wonders, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aaron our brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, and it, the rock, will provide its water. You will thereby extract water for them from the rock and you shall give drink to the congregation and their animals.

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Teaching it to our children means also making them partners in what is so very important.

— Rabbi Steinsaltz

PJ Library Curriculum

NOV. 17. 19
PJ Library Book List

For more resources and activities for these books, visit www.PJLibrary.org

Names
Books about the names we call people and animals.

A Song for My Sister (ages 5–6)
Mira’s wish for a baby in the family comes true, but who knew how much noise she would make? No matter what Mira and her parents do, the baby’s reaction is WAAAAA. On the day of her simchat bat (Jewish welcoming ceremony for a baby girl) Mira finally finds the answer to all the wailing!

The First Gift (ages 3–6)
As a boy relates the first gift his parents gave him, his name, he recounts how names came to be and considers the many names a person may be called.

Adam’s Animals (ages 4–5)
Here in the Garden of Eden, Adam has a big job: God has asked him to name all the animals from A to Z! Some of them you’ve heard of... and some may be new to you.

Speaking with People and Friends
Books about saying hello, saying “I’m sorry”, or using words to build relationships.

Say Hello, Lily (ages 4–5)
Lily wants to accompany her mother on her visits as she volunteers at Shalom House, an assisted living facility. The kindness and patience shown by the elderly residents help Lily overcome her shyness.

Snow in Jerusalem (ages 5–6)
Two boys living in Jerusalem — one Muslim, the other Jewish — are surprised to discover they’ve been looking after the same stray cat.

Are We Still Friends? (ages 4–5)
Beatrice and Abel are the finest of friends — until a misunderstanding gets in the way. How will they reconcile in time for a fresh start in the new year? Every young child (and many grownups!) will relate to this dilemma.

Watching One’s Words
Books about being careful with what we say.

A Sack Full of Feathers (ages 5–8)
Yankel loves to spread the rumors he hears when he’s in his father’s store in the shtetl. But he doesn’t realize how harmful this can be, so the rabbi decides to teach him an important lesson.

Never Say a Mean Word Again (ages 7–8)
This classic tale from medieval Spain has a classic message: The best antidote to meanness is kindness.

Creating the World with Words

And There Was Evening, And There Was Morning (ages 7–8)
When God created the world, each day began in the evening – just as days in the Jewish calendar still do today. This book’s beautiful, high-concept design gives new life to the words of an ancient story.

Learning New Words in Hebrew

Everybody Says Shalom (ages 4–5)
The first thing to know about Israel? Everybody says shalom — a little word that means so many things — and there are so many places to see and visit.
The First Gift by A.S. Gadot

PROGRAM FOCUS
Age group: Ages 3–6
Time frame: 60–90 minutes
Central value: The importance of names (Shem Tov)

Synopsis
A boy tells about the first gift he ever received — his name! Named after the legendary King David, little David introduces the concept of names and where they come from and how nicknames evolve. He also introduces names from other cultures and gives facts about Jewish naming customs, all in a picture-book format. The colorful illustrations that easily take us from biblical to present time are a great lead-in for a family discussion about roots and history.

Goals
- Encourage families to celebrate their names
- Explore how names define us and our roles and responsibilities in life
- Introduce Jewish naming customs and how they can be integrated into diverse families

Guide written by
Kitty Wolf

Plan in advance

Prepare the Location
Ideally there should be 2 program spaces: a place for families to sit together to listen to the story as well as a place for tables where participants can work on the activities together.

- Arrange chairs or have floor space where families can sit and listen to the story.
- Have tables available for families to sit and work together.
- Have the craft materials listed below placed on each table for the introductory activity and ready for any follow-up activities you are planning to do.

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Collect Hebrew Resources
This book introduces the concept of Hebrew names. If you plan to do an activity that uses Hebrew, you should have the following resources:

- At least one person who knows Hebrew letters and sounds
- Copies of the attached Hebrew Chart for each family
- A Hebrew name list
  - Online, see www.kveller.com/jewish-baby-name-finder
  - See also The New Jewish Baby Book: Names, Ceremonies & Customs—A Guide for Today’s Families, 2nd Edition by Anita Diamant (Jewish Lights Publications)

Prepare Name Tag Activity
- Gift tags, 5”x7” — use the template here or use ready-made tags
- Markers and scissors
- Yarn or ribbon
- Materials for decoration like stickers, crayons, etc...

Prepare Hebrew Bracelets
**MATERIALS**
- Hebrew letter beads, or blank beads large enough to write on
- Decorative beads or charms
- Elastic string
- Optional: Permanent markers to write Hebrew letters

Prepare Family Name Tree
**MATERIALS**
- Tree branches with many twigs — ask families to choose one on their way in, or have a selection ready for the day
- Green craft paper or artificial leaves
- Scissors
- Hole puncher
- Yarn
- Plastic or foam cup
- Play-dough or modeling clay
Introduce the story

INTRODUCTION
The story we will be reading today is about names. Everyone has a name. It is the first gift we receive from our parents. The names we are given plus the names and nicknames we acquire over our lifetime define who we are. One of the first words a child learns is his/her own name. Before we read our story, we are going to make name tags in the shape of big gift tags (for our “first gift”). Let’s begin this activity by learning about our names and how we got them.

➢ What is your first name? Middle name?
➢ Are you named after a special person?
➢ Do you know the meaning of your name(s)?
➢ Do you have a nickname?
➢ Do you have a Hebrew name? What do you know about it? (who you are named after, etc.)
➢ What else are you called (daughter, son, sweetheart, mom, dad, honey bun, etc.)?
➢ Anything else about your names you can think of?
➢ You are only one person. Why do you have many names?

Our story celebrates how special our names are. As we read we will be learning many things about names… So put on your nametags and let’s begin!

Introduce with an activity

Make Name Tags

DIRECTIONS
1. Invite families to introduce themselves by sharing their first name and any nicknames they have.
2. Give each participating family a blank gift tag and decorating supplies.
3. Have each participant write his/her given name in large letters on the tag. Add other names or nicknames around the primary name, or on the back of the card. For younger participants, have a grown-up help them write their name.
4. Decorate the tags.
5. Participants can wear or hold the tags as you read the story

Read the story

Encourage Participation
Read the story. As you come to each name, ask the participants if they have a special name that the indicated person calls them and if so to tell it to the group.
Example: “His mother called him Davey”
Pause and ask: Do you have a special name that your mother calls you?

Discussion after the Story

The book tells us about all kinds of names. Children in different countries have different names. Do any of you have a name from another country? The boy, David, in our story, has a Hebrew name. Some of us may have a Hebrew name ourselves. (Look at the nametags for Biblical names like David, Rachel, Sarah, Joshua, Ben, etc. on the nametags and name them). At the back of our book is a section Jewish naming customs. Let me read it to you. (Read the last page.)

Some of us may have been given special Hebrew names in addition to their regular name. Does anyone have a special Hebrew name to share?

Have several copies of Hebrew name books and/or lists available for reference.

Follow Up

ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES

Make Hebrew Bead Bracelets

INTRODUCTION

We have just talked about Hebrew names. Now let’s make name bracelets using these Hebrew letters.

DIRECTIONS

1. Pass out copies of the Hebrew letter chart (see the end of this guide). You may wish to explain that Hebrew is read from right to left, and that vowel sounds are not written out as letters.
2. Some children may not have a Hebrew name, and may spell out their given name in Hebrew letters. Give each family the opportunity to decide what name to make.
3. Choose the beads that spell the child’s name. If you are using blank beads, write one letter on each bead.
4. Measure a length of elastic string around the child’s wrist, making sure to leave enough to tie the bracelet into a loop at the end. Cut the desired length of string and knot one end.
5. String the letter beads together, and add decorative beads or charms as desired.
6. When the bracelet is complete, tie the ends together. The bracelet is ready!
Make Family Name Tree

INTRODUCTION

We have just talked about our names. Do you know the names of other people in your family? How are you related to them? Let’s make a family tree and see.

DIRECTIONS

1. Have each family select a branch.
2. Fill the cups with clay and give one to each participating family.
3. Insert a branch into the clay, and mold the clay around the branch to keep it upright.
4. Cut out leaf shapes from the green paper, or use artificial leaves. Using the hole-puncher or scissors, make a hole at the end of each leaf and tie a short loop of string.
5. Each leaf should be big enough to write a family member’s name on it. Make sure there are enough leaves for siblings, parents, and grandparents, or more! Write the name of each family member on a leaf. You might want to include each person’s relationship to the child, e.g. “Grandmother — Judy Cohen”.
6. Hang the leaves on the branches using the string. Place the oldest generation at the root, and the child at the top, showing how they “branch” from each other like a tree.
7. *For variations on this project, consider using photos of family members cut out into leaf shapes, or use fruit or flower shapes to represent people.
The Aleph-Bet

- **Hey** (ה) - H as in "House"
- **Dalet** (ד) - D as in "Dad"
- **Gimmel** (ג) - G as in "Girl"
- **Vet** (ו) - V as in "Vine"
- **Bet** (ב) - B as in "Boy"
- **Aleph** (א) - Silent letter

- **Yod** (י) - Y as in "Yes"
- **Tet** (ת) - T as in "Tall"
- **Chet** (ך) - CH as in "BaCH"
- **Zayin** (צ) - Z as in "Zebra"
- **Vav** (ו) - V as in "Vine"

- **Mem Sofit** (מ) - M as in "Mom"
- **Mem** (מ) - L as in "Look"
- **Lamed** (ל) - CH as in "BaCH"
- **Kaf** (ך) - K as in "Kitty"

- **Ayin** (א) - Silent Letter
- **Samech** (ם) - S as in "Sun"
- **Nun Sofit** (נ) - N as in "No"

- **Qof** (ף) - Kas in "Kitty"
- **Tsaadle Sofit** (ס) - TS as in "nuTS"
- **Fey Sofit** (ס) - F as in "Food"
- **Pey** (פ) - P as in "People"

- **Tav** (ת) - T as in "Tall"
- **Sin** (ש) - S as in "Sun"
- **Shin** (ש) - SH as in "Shape"
- **Resh** (ר) - R as in "Reel"
Folktales play a central role in Jewish literature. In many of these stories, as in this one, the rabbi is the central wise man of the shtetl (Yiddish for "little Jewish town"), though his counsel often seems silly or ill-advised at first. In this story, the rabbi teaches not by rebuking, but by allowing the child to see the hidden power of his actions.

**LASHON HARA**

*Lashon Hara*, translated literally as “bad tongue,” refers to Jewish teachings about gossip and speaking ill of another person. In the Bible we read, “You shall not go as a gossip among your people” (Leviticus 19:16). Certainly one should not say callous untruths about another individual. The Talmud (book of rabbinic writings) goes further and instructs that we not speak negatively about another person even if the content of what is said is true. Judaism understands that this is a tall order: all of us are tempted by (and may even find pleasure in) *lashon hara*, which is why refraining from it truly elevates us to a higher standard of ethical living.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN READING**

Ask your children questions such as:

- What were the three stories Yankel overheard and shared with his friends?
- How did the stories change from the truth?
- Even if the stories Yankel heard were true, why should he not have shared them with others?
- Why couldn’t Yankel collect the feathers after he dispersed them?
- What was the lesson the rabbi taught Yankel?

Ask your children to describe some situations from school or activities with friends where *lashon hara* was taking place. Now that they know the lesson Yankel learned, how might your children have responded differently? Role-play some situations so that your children can begin to develop skills to deal with someone speaking unkindly about another.
And There Was Evening, and There Was Morning

written by
Harriet Cohen Helfand
and Ellen Kahan Zager

illustrated by
Ellen Kahan Zager

What inspires you to create?

In the Beginning
It is a distinctly human tendency to wonder where we come from. Creation stories help people organize their sense of the world and their own place within it. The Jewish creation story, found in the portion known as Bereshit (Genesis) at the very beginning of the Torah, is a layered tale that covers many concepts, including the origins of time, the physical world, and humanity.

Just Say the Word
As the familiar story goes, God created the world in six days—starting with light, then sky, land, vegetation, celestial bodies, wildlife, and finally, us. In the biblical account, words play a key role in creation: “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). Kabbala (Jewish mystic tradition) goes further. In mystic lore, God creates the entire universe using the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This mystic connection between the Hebrew language and the creation of the world is hinted at in the illustrations of this book.

Separate and Together
Much of the creation story involves separating elements from one another—light from dark, night from day, water from land, species from species. Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, is a separation between the workweek (God’s productive first six days) and a day of rest, a separation between holy and mundane. In fact, the first thing in the Torah to be called “holy”—kadosh in Hebrew—is not a thing or a place: it’s Shabbat, a time to refrain from creating and to reflect on the beauty of creation itself. It’s also a precious opportunity for family time—a day apart for the sake of being together.

HANDS ON!

Make Alphabet Animals
The illustrator of this book plays with Hebrew letters as design elements. Break out some paper and crayons to try the same thing with the alphabet in English (or any language).

Draw an A as an ape...
...or an M as a mouse!

...an S as a snake...

...an I as an iguana...

Now go create a story with your letter characters!

TALK IT OVER WITH YOUR KIDS

In this story, God made light first. Why?
What would you create first?

What is your favorite creature?

How do you think it would feel to be the first human?
Mankind can best be defined as “the speaking species.” Nature traditionally has been divided into four classes: the inanimate world; the flora, or plant world; the fauna, or animal world; and mankind, called “the speaker.” Man the speaker is a separate class. The scientific definition of man as Homo sapiens is not the best title for humanity; many animals — dolphins, for example — also have high levels of intelligence, perhaps not too inferior to that of humans. In addition, man’s attempts at wisdom have not always been successful. However, the fact that we are speakers is basic, so very primal that it differentiates us from the rest of creation. The right name for us should be, perhaps, Homo garrulus. This title is not facetious; it defines not only man’s distinction, but also his superiority.

It is not just that we can communicate; everything can communicate. The birds and the bees, and even plants, can transmit some signals to each other, by voice, by sight, or by scent, but ours is a very different form of communication. As far as we know, animals can only transmit emotions, or status reports. They can signal statements such as, “Here I am,” “I am about to attack you,” or “I am going to court you” — depending on the situation. Humans can create words, which are transmittable symbols. We can create symbols for everything in the world: objects, space, and time, concrete notions and abstract ones, ideas and emotions. We can talk about almost everything in the world, and give it a name.

The Book of Genesis tells us about the creation of Man. The Midrash, in Genesis Rabbah (8:4), a fourth-century homiletic exegesis on the Bible, says that God consulted the angels about the creation of Man, and the angels did not like the idea at all. To them, connecting a Divine soul with an earthly body seemed a strange and unlikely combination, bound to fail. The Midrash then goes on (17:4) to tell that after man was created, God showed the new world and all its creatures to the angels, and asked, “Can you give names to all these things around you?” The angels said they could not. Then God showed off His new creature, Man, to prove his special qualities; all the animals passed before Adam, and Adam gave names to each one (Genesis 2:19) — including himself, his wife (Genesis 2:23), and the Almighty (Midrash Tanhuma, Shemini 8). That was the beginning of Man as a distinctive creation, different indeed from all other creatures, superior to animals and even to angels — not merely because he can talk, but because of the ability to create words.

This “gift of gab” is useful: we use words to transmit pictures, frames of mind, information, emotions. However, we are not just users of words — we are their creators. Some of us begin creating words at the age of two and finish at the age of three; some of us go on creating words — by chance or by will — throughout our lives. Words come from that deep place where each of us is a creator. Man the speaker is the only creature who can use words to represent objects or ideas. Of course, man can do many other things — with his hands and with other parts of himself. However, the critical difference, the big jump, is man’s ability to transfer, to communicate an idea from one person to another by the symbols, words, that he creates. This ability to transmit knowledge, to transfer information and experience to others, and to advance through the generations is the basis of all culture.

The words that we use outwardly are only a part of those we use inwardly. We not only talk to each other with words, we also think with words. It may be possible that at a certain level we think without words. The basic, primordial thought process is not made up of distinct words, but is rather a mental collage composed of different symbols. We feel emotions, we have ideas that we get in a flash, which come to some of us as complete pictures, and to others as sounds, echoes, or smells. Then we go through a process of completion, of formation, which puts the idea into words. Most of us, however, do even our internal, deep-level thinking using words.

Words are vehicles, and very powerful ones. To use an ancient metaphor, the connection between the idea and the word can be compared to the relationship between a person and a horse. The horse is far more powerful and much faster than the person, but it must be harnessed and guided. The combination man-horse is a very different thing from each of them as an individual being. For the Aztecs, for instance, the first sight of a man on a horse was a shock. This united being with four legs, two hands, two heads, and so on was formidable, frightening, almost God-like.

We ride our words, but words have a tremendous power of their own. They form a vehicle that makes the person within...
it a different being. There is a complex connection between the thinking, dreaming, daydreaming self, and the words used to express that self, from the simplest “I am hungry,” “I want,” “I love,” or “I hate,” to the most complicated ideas. For beyond being our creations, words are also our creators. The way we are, our thinking processes, the ways we react, are created by our collection of words. “The soul is full with words” (Rabbi Y. Eibeschutz, Ya’arot Devash, Part 2, Homily 12); so much so that some people believe that each person gets an allocation of words for a lifetime, and once it is used up, life ends.

The meaning of a word has a power of its own. Words give us the enormous power of transferring ideas to others, even as words help us formulate ideas in ways that we ourselves can grasp. When we understand words – not as history or as a dictionary definition, but as living entities — when we grasp both the power and the limits of words, that is the basis of a new relationship with our own ideas.

Sometimes we are at a loss for words, and not just because of the common phenomenon of forgetting a word; we just cannot find a way to express certain feelings. Much more often, however, we use words frivolously, or are hampered and confined by our words. Words can have multiple uses and meanings. Individual and cultural differences sometimes reveal themselves in differences in the words that we use. Regional differences, as well as social class stratification, are created and manifested by using different words, and by giving them different meanings. In some primitive tribes, there are different dialects for man-language and woman-language, which are almost incomprehensible to each other, but even when men and women use exactly the same language, gender differences sometimes give the same words very different meanings. When the meaning gap is big enough, then we may speak about the same things — we may even have the same dictionary definitions — and still the words may not be refined enough to clarify the differences between one person’s use of language and another’s.*

*Sometimes, it is a matter of the general and the particular. Just as some languages have names for many shades of a color, while in other languages there are only a few, some languages have words for shades of meaning that other languages can only express in a generalized or clumsy way.

Sometimes, cultural or personal misunderstandings occur when people use the same word but with slightly different meanings. Misunderstanding can also be a matter of context. Hearing a child say, “I hate you,” is not quite the same as hearing the same words from the other end of a gun. Sometimes, the misuse of words is done intentionally. Talleyrand used to say, “Speech was given to Man in order to lie.” Lying can be done effectively just by an intentional misuse of words, but many times people lie unconsciously, or semi-consciously.

There are weak words, strong words, ambiguous words. There are also words frequently overused and abused — the most prominent example being, perhaps, the word “love.” “Love” means many different, sometimes contradictory things, which are all put in one shell; yet it is this shell that we deal with, that we think with, and sometimes we get confused by. Some words are very intimate, because we use them not only with others, but also with ourselves. By trying to find all the connotations we are not only learning more about the meaning of a word: we are also grappling with our ideas.

One of the problems facing us today is the invasion of daily speech by professional, semi-scientific jargon. It is not the number of jargon words in the dictionary that matters, but the way people use them in communicating with each other, and therefore – on a different level – also in the way they deal with themselves. Jargon, in the sense of professional language, is a kind of shorthand; it takes various notions, some of which may be rather complex, and puts them in one word or in a short phrase. As such, jargon may be very helpful, but it is best used where it is meant to be used, namely, within the realm of the profession, where those who use these terms ostensibly know what they are saying. When used more widely, in a different and possibly inaccurate or misleading context, they are often misunderstood.

People often speak about “order of magnitude,” when they should simply say “big” or “small”; or they speak about “relativity,” when they want to say “not exactly.” In America, and possibly also in Europe, there is an increasing use of...
psychological jargon, which is replacing other words. People no longer love each other: they have a relationship. They do not hate: they have a negative set of reactions. They do not have problems: they have complexes. These complexes even have names, some of them quite fancy, but actually, they are all feelings and emotions, and their real existence may be likewise painful.*

*I myself coined at least one name for a very common complex: the Jewish Mother Syndrome. I call it the Jocasta Complex, the counterpart of the Oedipus Complex.

Mark Twain lists eighteen rules that a certain writer violated, one of them being, “use the right word, not its second cousin.” When it comes to jargon, this kind of violation is very common. We use first and second cousins because we do not know the real meaning of the word. People who get caught by the jargon find themselves saying things that are quite different from what they really mean, or even worse, they cease to know what they mean altogether.

The problem with jargon goes beyond that. In his famous book *1984*, George Orwell writes about the subject of forming people's thinking by creating a special language. A language in which certain words do not exist, and other words have only a stipulated, jargon meaning, creates people who can talk, but are unable to think — at least not about certain things. When there is no word for something, either one has to invent a word, or — more commonly — one is stuck, because of the inability to think about an idea. People are even more stuck when they are given substitute words, especially ones that catch on easily. For then, instead of saying what they really want to say, people settle for something that is close enough, but not quite the same.

Once people begin to internalize this shorthand, to use it on themselves, they gradually lose their simple, basic ways of relation; they take complex jargon formulas as substitutes for simple words. It is not just a matter of replacing certain words with more beautiful ones. Many words have synonyms with almost the same meaning, the only difference being a subtle linguistic distinction. Jargon, however, not only changes the words, it changes their inner meaning; it biases our thinking. People end up using artificial constructs instead of natural ones, complex words instead of simple words, and become unable to say what they really want to say.

Take some examples from other spheres of life: we could, if we wished, avoid the trouble of eating by being fed intravenously. It is quite easy, very mechanical, not even painful, and it is effective, in the sense that one gets all the liquid and nourishment one needs; but one also loses the joy and taste of eating. Another example would be mechanical procreation. It could be much faster and more efficient, would save lots of effort and prevent the birth of unwanted children, but this would not be just a change of means; it is an essential change. A purely mechanical, prestructured world such as this is a totally different world. Luckily, we have not yet been completely taken over by mechanical jargon forms, yet we do use them, and, in a sense, are used by them.

Jargon language might, perhaps, be smoother, but it can turn our words into something like mechanically grown vegetables: bigger, with all the right colors, but with a taste that is not the same. To use a different metaphor: the difference between the sound of a violin, with its many overtones and undertones, and an artificially-created pure tone.

Just as there is a deep problem of becoming confused, mistaken, mechanical, and untrue by using jargon, there are also problems in using simple words. The richness and awesome complexity that exist in many natural, simple, well-known things are also found in basic, simple words — which are also those words that we usually learn earliest. These are, in fact, not simple at all. They have the same seeming simplicity as the smallest flower growing in the field, which is far more complex than the most advanced mechanism. Like the smell of fresh-baked bread, which has many nuances, and is far more complex than an artificial scent made in a factory according to a formula, simple words have many components and connotations, and they have an enormous emotional impact. Like other natural things, they grow. We learn them when we are babies, and we keep modifying them throughout our lives.
Words for basic notions, feelings, and reactions are the words that are most important to us: Love, Hate, Friendship, Family, God, Man, Justice. We think with them at a primitive, very powerful level. A girl counting flower petals, “he loves me, he loves me not,” is actually asking, “What is love? What kind of love? What does each of us mean when we speak of love?” When we say, “I love you,” “I hate you,” “I want to marry you,” “I want to be your friend,” “I curse God,” “I bless God,” “I praise,” “I blaspheme” — we are using words that, in many cases, we do not really understand. Because we know these words for such a long time, because we seem to know their meaning so well, we never have the chance to really understand what they mean. When we grapple with the meaning of the words, we discover what they are. Through this process of trying to understand, the words may become very different; sometimes we also gain a new understanding of ourselves and what we have been doing all our lives. This understanding is itself a revelation.

In Molière’s play The Bourgeois Gentleman, the hero says, “Fancy that! I have been speaking prose all my life, and I never knew it.” It is very true. With many of the words we use daily, we talk poetry, or philosophy, or theology, and we know it not; we say lots of nonsense without knowing it, and also lots of wisdom — with the same kind of ignorance.

We do not have to go to the other side of the world and hear strange new words in order to realize that there are things within ourselves that we do not know anything about. The real quest is to understand the words that we use constantly, for these are the foundation of our existence. What are they? What are they made of? These words, as powerful as they are, are also very foggy. They have a meaning for each of us, but what precisely is that meaning? Clarifying our understanding of simple words will not just change our way of speaking; it will also change our way of thinking and change our basic feelings. When we know certain things about those words, we become different people; we are re-created.

The exploration of simple words undertaken in this book is, in a certain way, a discussion about the creation of Man — which brings us back to the beginning of this chapter. The Midrashic account says that Man and Woman were first created as one body; later God cut that being in half, thereby making a separate Man and a separate Woman (Leviticus Rabbah, 17:1. See also Plato’s Symposium).

What was Adam and Eve’s greatest discovery when they were cut apart? It was, possibly, like looking in a mirror: “Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23) — yet something different. It was also the first time that Adam and Eve could begin to have a conversation. When I speak with another being who is similar to me, yet different, I begin not only to understand the other, but also to understand what I myself am speaking about.

I do not know what language Adam spoke with Eve, with the animals, or with the angels but I am sure it was simple words.

The Gemara relates: One day, Rabbi Yoĥanan1 was bathing in the Jordan River. Reish Lakish2 saw him and jumped into the Jordan, pursuing him. At that time, Reish Lakish was the leader of a band of marauders. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to Reish Lakish: Your strength is fit for Torah study. Reish Lakish said to him: Your beauty is fit for women. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to him: If you return to the pursuit of Torah, I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beauti- ful than I am. Reish Lakish accepted upon himself to study Torah. Subsequently, Reish Lakish wanted to jump back out of the river to bring back his clothes, but he was unable to return, as he had lost his physical strength as soon as he accepted the responsibility to study Torah upon himself.

Rabbi Yoĥanan taught Reish Lakish Bible, and taught him Mishna, and turned him into a great man. Eventually, Reish Lakish became one of the outstanding Torah scholars of his generation. One day the Sages of the study hall were engaging in a dispute concerning the following baraita: With regard to the sword, the knife, the dag- ger (ve‘ehapgyon);3 the spear, a hand sickle, and a harvest sickle, from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity?4 The baraita answers: It is from the time of the completion of their manufacture, which is the halakha with regard to metal vessels in general.

As a result of the quarrel, Rabbi Yoĥanan was offended, which in turn affected Reish Lakish, who fell ill. Rabbi Yoĥanan’s sister, who was Reish Lakish’s wife, came crying to Rabbi Yoĥanan, begging that he pray for Reish Lakish’s recovery. She said to him: Do this for the sake of my children, so that they should have a father. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to her the verse: “Leave your fatherless children, I will rear them” (Jeremiah 49:11), i.e., I will take care of them. She said to him: Do so for the sake of my widowhood. He said to her the rest of the verse: “And let your widows trust in Me.”

Ultimately, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, Reish Lakish, died. Rabbi Yoĥanan was sorely pained over losing him. The Rabbis said: Who will go to calm Rabbi Yoĥanan’s mind and comfort him over his loss? They said: Let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, as his statements are sharp, i.e., he is clever and will be able to serve as a substitute for Reish Lakish.

The sword…from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity – הַרּוֹצֵק הַכֹּסֵח הַכָּפָר הַכָּרָן. Metal vessels are susceptible to ritual impurity only when their manufacture is completed. What is considered complete in this regard? A sword is suscep-
tible to ritual impurity only when it is secured in water, and a knife once it is sharpened. This halakha is in accordance with the mishna in Kelim (14:4), and not the Gemara here (Rambam Sefer Tahara, Hilkhot Kelim 8:2).

HALAKHA

A bandit knows about his banditry – בִּין אֵין שָׁפִּי הַגָּרוֹנָה. Many commentators ask how Rabbi Yoĥanan could say this to Reish Lakish, as the Torah explicitly prohibits verbal imputa-
tion of others (see Leviticus 25:17). Some explain that a principal teacher is allowed to berate his pupil for a constructive purpose (Ein Yehezkel [Mahanash]). According to this interpretation, Reish Lakish replied that he had studied Torah prior to encountering Rabbi Yoĥanan. Consequently, Rabbi Yoĥanan could not be considered his principal teacher and therefore he had no right to berate him. Others suggest that Rabbi Yoĥanan spoke in a jocular fashion as a way of piquing the attention of the other Sages. He wanted them to listen to the opinion of Reish Lakish, who was an expert in the matter at hand. Reish Lakish mis-

NOTES

1. Yoĥanan
2. Lakish
3. ve‘ehapgyon
4. suscep-tible to ritual impurity only when it is secured in water, and a knife once it is sharpened. This halakha is in accordance with the mishna in Kelim (14:4), and not the Gemara here (Rambam Sefer Tahara, Hilkhot Kelim 8:2).
Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat went and sat before Rabbi Yoĥanan. With regard to every matter that Rabbi Yoĥanan would say, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would say to him: There is a ruling which is taught in a baraita that supports your opinion. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to him: Are you comparable to the son of Lakish? In my discussions with the son of Lakish, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the halakha by itself would become broadened and clarified. And yet you say to me: There is a ruling which is taught in a baraita that supports your opinion. Do I not know that what I say is good? Being rebutted by Reish Lakish served a purpose; your bringing proof to my statements does not.


Rabbi Yoĥanan and Reish Lakish were a unique pair in the realm of Torah study.

Reish Lakish was usually the one to raise objections and challenges and probe the issues at hand. He would pile up questions, textual or theoretical, on almost everything Rabbi Yoĥanan said. In fact, a significant portion of the sugyot in both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds is based on the controversies of Rabbi Yoĥanan and Reish Lakish.

Reish Lakish did not intend to dispute the very basis of Rabbi Yoĥanan’s statements, but to more thoroughly investigate and clarify matters, and that was how Rabbi Yoĥanan himself perceived it, too.

Indeed, after Reish Lakish’s death, Rabbi Yoĥanan was deeply grieved by his absence. To comfort him, the sages sent one of their most astute colleagues, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat, to fill Reish Lakish’s place.

Rabbi Elazar would sit before Rabbi Yoĥanan, and as Rabbi Yoĥanan spoke, he would say “There is a baraita which supports you.”

Said Rabbi Yoĥanan, “Are you like the son of Lakish? When I stated a law, the song of Lakish would raise twenty-four objections and I would give twenty-four answers, which would then lead to a fuller understanding of the law. But you say, ‘A baraita has been taught which supports you.’ Don’t I already know that my dicta are right?”

twenty-four difficulties...twenty-four answers – twenty-four is a generic number in rabbinic literature, which represents a large quantity; it should not be taken literally. Other such numbers are sixty and three hundred (Tosafot). Some commentators suggest that this number alludes to the idea that a Sage must be expert in all twenty-four books of the Bible (Eim Yisrael). Others note that the twenty-four difficulties, twenty-four answers, and the final halakha mentioned here equal forty-nine, which symbolizes the traditional forty-nine facets of Torah, as alluded to in Proverbs 2:4 (Mahantsha).