SPEAKING VOLUMES

Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum

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A Project of the Aleph Society
Based on a lesson by Rabbi Alex Israel

Facilitator's Note: This unit is presented as a 75-minute session. For a 60-minute session, omit Part One.

Introduction (2 minutes)

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 (תנו), translated here as both “to exploit” and “to wrong”. Tonu comes from ona’a (אונה), 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”?
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] 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).


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], 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 given matter 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 Yoḥanan 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”? 
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 Yoḥanan, 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.
The Gemara relates: One day, Rabbi Yoḥanan⁴ was bathing in the Jordan River. Reish Lakish⁵ 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, the spear, a hand sickle, and a harvest sickle, from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity?⁶ 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,⁷ 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 Yohanan and Reish Lakish, the intent behind Rabbi Yohanan’s insult of “a bandit knows his banditry” is unclear. We can’t truly know what Rabbi Yohanan 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.

**Text #6: Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 84a.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

As a result of the quarrel, Rabbi Yohanan was offended, which in turn affected Reish Lakish, who fell ill. Rabbi Yohanan’s sister, who was Reish Lakish’s wife, came crying to Rabbi Yohanan, 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 Yohanan 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 Yohanan was sorely pained over losing him. The Rabbis said: Who will go to calm Rabbi Yohanan’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 Yohanan speaks to his sister? Do his words to his sister change the way you perceive Rabbi Yohanan? Why or why not?

2. The text says that Rabbi Yohanan was “sorely pained” to lose Reish Lakish. Does his reaction change how you perceive Rabbi Yohanan and the way he spoke? Why or why not?

Let’s read from the Shulḥan 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: 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.
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.
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Part Two: Introducing “Verbal Mistreatment”

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