Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum
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.
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.

Read Text #2 aloud.


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?
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.

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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.


וַיֹּ֨אמֶר ה' אֵלָ֗יו מִ֣י שָׂ֣ם פֶּה֮ לָֽאָדָם֒ א֚וֹ מִֽי־יָשׂ֣וּם 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’ במה שהשיבו בכאן מי שם פה לאדם ר”ל כי האלמות והעברת הדבור בו לא היה собойו מפועל הטבע אבל

This 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.


מִי שָׂם פֶּה לָֽאָדָם. כִּלֶּים, אֶפְּרָה, וּמֵר צִיוָּה, יֵשָׁהָו פָּרֶץ אֲבֵל. אֲזַנְתֵּי הָאֲשֶׁר, הֲמַה שָּׂאָה? רַבּוּךָ שֵׁיְרָה, מִי שָׂאָהָו פָּרֶץ אֲבֵל. מִי שָׂאָהָו פָּרֶץ אֲבֵל.

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 (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? 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?


3 The people quarreled with Moses, and they said, saying: 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. 13 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?
5. The word used here, to “strike” (יָחַךְ — יַ֧ךְ), 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.
Introduction: Moses, Man of Action


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, 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.

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? 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.

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


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 Hitites and the Emorites and the Perizites and the Hivites and the Yevusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.
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. 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. 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 cumbersome of speech and cumbersome 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 cumbersome of speech and cumbersome 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...

לוא אני, או מי שמע להב אמי יכול או מתן לא יכול או פקח או עיו לכדי ואני.

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 #5b: Abarbanel.** Commentary on Exodus 4:10.

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.

**Text #5c: Behkor Shor.** Commentary on Exodus 4:11.

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**


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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.

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: If only we had perished in the perishing of our brethren before the Lord. 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. 13 These are the waters of dispute, where the children of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and He was sanctified through them.