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 Yohanan 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 Yohanan’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 Yoḥanan 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 Yoḥanan 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 Yoḥanan bar Nappaha was one of the greatest scholars in the Talmud. He lived in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, in Tiberias. Throughout his life, Rabbi Yoḥanan was famous for being extremely handsome, with many stories in the Talmud recounting his physical beauty. Rabbi Yoḥanan studied under the leading teachers of the yeshiva in Tiberias, where he eventually became the head of the school. For a long time Rabbi Yoḥanan 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 Yoḥanan, and later taught with him as a colleague. Reish Lakish was well known for his strict piety. He married Rabbi Yoḥanan’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 Yoḥanan’s was bathing in the Jordan River. Reish Lakish’s 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.

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

Reish Lakish was known for his physical strength. Rabbi Yoḥanan tells him that if he applied the same energy in physical training into Torah study, then Reish Lakish could be a great scholar. Rabbi Yoḥanan 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.
3. **Adapt the story into a short scene** of a play that shows how Rabbi Yoḥanan 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 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 [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 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.

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

### Discuss as a group or chavurah:

1. Briefly summarize this story. What is the chain of events?
2. How would you describe what Rabbi Yoḥanan 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 Yoḥanan 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.

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'פי שהוא רגיל באותו 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

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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.
The Names We Call Each Other (Middle School)

Part Two: Watching Our Words


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 [terefot], 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 __________________________