

Tevet

Hebrew Language Day: The Power of Language

This lesson will address the importance of language. We'll learn that language is very powerful and that, therefore, it is important to use it carefully and with good intentions. Good use of words can help others, while negative use of words can cause harm.

Goals

- > The students will study Jewish sources to learn about the importance of optimal communication, to express themselves and to understand others, and will be introduced to the concept of *lashon hara*.
- > The students will develop sensitivity and awareness of the importance of good, healthy discourse and the importance of avoiding and rejecting negative, hurtful discourse.

Sources

- > The verse "Death and life are in the power of the tongue [מִתְּחִיּוֹת וּמִתְּמוֹת בְּיַד־לְשׁוֹן]."
- > The verse "Keep your tongue from evil [אַצְרֵ לְשׁוֹנֶךָ מְרַע]."
- > The midrash "Good Language and Bad Language"

Ages



Grades 4–6



Can be adapted for Grades 1–3



Can be adapted for Grades 7 and up

Background for the Teacher

Hebrew Language Day was established by the government of Israel as a day dedicated to promoting the status of the Hebrew language. This day is marked on the 21st of Tevet, the birthday of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who revived the Hebrew language in the modern era. Speech and language are the basis for human societies and all cultural development. According to Jewish tradition, the world was created through statements (in the first chapter of Genesis, each time it's written "G-d said"). Words are the basis for everything that was created and has developed in the world. They have great power, which we can see in our own lives.

In this lesson, we will focus on the power of words, particularly their power to increase the good in the world. It is easy to mistakenly think that words don't have any significant effect on reality, since they are not really actions, only sounds that we make with our mouths. But, the truth is that words do influence our lives and can even change reality. A historical speech is one example of the power of words to change reality. Another, is the blessings made

during a Jewish wedding ceremony, which actually turn the two individuals into a married couple. In everyday life, a hurtful word can cause someone to lose their self-confidence and a helpful word can encourage someone and be a seed that sprouts and can nurture and strengthen them.

One example of how words can cause harm is *lashon hara*, speaking negatively about others, or saying things that may be perceived negatively by the listener.

 **Activities**

Opening Hook

Play charades. Each turn, choose a representative and whisper to the representative a word or phrase for them to act out. When it is their turn, each representative will try to communicate the word or phrase without using any sounds or language and the rest of the students will try to guess the word or phrase. You can have two groups compete against each other.

List of words/phrases to act out: camera, fish, tree, ice cream, clock, bee, rain, car, moustache, drums, balloon, umbrella, airplane, banana, sunglasses, brushing teeth, being late for the bus, eating something spicy, make everyone in the class raise their right hand, make everyone in the class clap, make everyone in the class laugh. You can have the students try to say the word/phrase in Hebrew, too.

Discuss with the students: How did the representatives feel? How did the people who were guessing feel? What was difficult? What would help you to guess the right answer more quickly?



Main Activity

Explain to the students that, in honor of Hebrew Language Day, which falls during the month of Tevet on the birthday of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who revived the Hebrew language, you will be studying Jewish sources about the importance of language and speech. When we played charades, we saw how much we need words. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda understood that Hebrew was lacking words and so he renewed and added words to the language, so that Hebrew would be a language in which people could completely express themselves. Examples of words that were missing in Hebrew and that Ben Yehuda invented: newspaper, bicycle, ice cream, airplane. In this lesson, we'll learn about the power of language and how it can be used for good or to cause harm.

Part 1:

Unlike animals, humans have the power of speech. Ask the students how speech is a power. In what ways does it distinguish humans from all the other animals? Explain that unlike animals, which use more basic forms of communication, language enables humans to express a wide range of feelings and thoughts, and enables us to build relationships with others. Language also enables us to listen to and understand the thoughts and feelings of others.

On the board, write the verse, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue [מִות וְחִיּוֹת בַּיְד לְשׁוֹן]" (Proverbs 18:21).


 Ask the students:

- What is the simple meaning of this verse?
- Do you think this verse is an example of hyperbole (intentional exaggeration) or does the tongue really have the power of life and death? (There are good arguments to support both possible answers.)

Ask the students to mention an example of a positive experience with speech (for example, smiling and saying "Good morning", giving a compliment, supporting a friend who is going through a hard time). Then, ask them to give an example of a negative experience with speech (for example, rude language, online bullying, gossip).

Explain to the students that the verse from Proverbs teaches us about the great power of speech. Positive words spoken to someone can really help them. On the other hand, hurtful words can really hurt someone, sometimes even more than physical pain.

Have the students work on the worksheet (Supplement 1) in pairs. Before reading the story, explain to the students that in Hebrew, the word tongue (*lashon*) means both "language" and "speech."


 Bring the class back together and ask the students:

- What did Tavi mean when he told Rabban Gamliel that "When it's good, there's nothing better and when it's bad, there's nothing worse"?
- Do you think that typed reactions and chats on social media are like speech? Why do you think that people sometimes write hurtful things on social media that they wouldn't say to someone if they were speaking face to face? Do you think an online attack hurts more, less, or the same as a face-to-face attack? Why?

Point out that one of the ways in which speech can be considered "bad" is *lashon hara*, saying negative things about others, or things that may be perceived negatively by the listener. Ask the students to give an example of each case.



You can take a deeper dive into the subject of communication on social media and ask how that type of communication can strengthen bonds and create a sense of closeness among people. What can be done to make online conversations something positive that provides support, strengthens people, and makes them happy?

Part 2:

Project the following verse onto the board or distribute it to the students on paper:

מִי־הָאִישׁ הַחֲפִץ־חַיִם אֲהַב־יְמִים לְרֹאֹת טֹב, נָצַר לְשׂוֹנָה מְרֻעָה וְשִׁפְתָּחָה מִדְבָּר מְרֻמָּה

"Who desires life, longs to see many good years? Keep your tongue from evil, your lips from speaking deceit."

Psalms 34:13-14

Explain that according to the verse, a person who really wants to live a good life and to experience good, happy things will be careful about how they use language and how they speak. They won't speak badly about others and they won't use untrue or bad language. Listen to the song "[Mi Ha-lsh](#)" while you give each student a piece of paper with the name of another student in the class. On the paper, have them write a nice message to that classmate. (Give examples and emphasize that they should only write something nice that will make the person who reads the note happy, for example, "It's nice to play with you"; "You always help when you're asked"; "You're funny and make me happy.")



Distribute papers with a drawing of a heart (Supplement 2) to the students and ask them to write or draw nice words for one another. You can then glue all the hearts to a poster with the verse.

After they've finished writing, ask the students to get up and deliver the messages they wrote to their classmates. Then, discuss the experience:

- How did you feel when you received a nice message?
- How did you feel when you were writing the message and when you gave it to your classmate?



Conclusion

Words are a basic and important way that we communicate with each other. The verse from Proverbs, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue," refers to the great power of speech, which can be used for good or for bad. In our daily lives, we can always find an opportunity to add a good word. Sometimes, a few positive words can make a big difference.



An Interactive Game

Good Words – A memory game



A memory game that uses pictures and symbols to teach the students positive things to say in Hebrew

Instructions for the game:

Divide the class into two teams. Each turn, have the students try to find two matching cards. Find Card A, which shows a word in Hebrew and a picture, and then find the matching Card B, which shows the English translation of that word. The team that finds the greatest number of matching pairs wins.

The game has two levels: **Level 1** - easy; **Level 2** - difficult.

Supplement 1

Good Language and Bad Language

Read the midrash and answer the questions.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said to Tavi, his slave, “Go and buy me a good food from the market.”

He went and bought him tongue.

He said to him, “Go and buy me a bad food from the market.”

He went and bought him tongue.

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said to him, “When I told you to buy me a good food, you bought me tongue and when I told you to buy me a bad food, you bought me tongue. Why?”

Tavi replied, “Good comes from it and bad comes from it. When it’s good, there’s nothing better and when it’s bad, there’s nothing worse.”

Vayikra Rabbah, Chapter 33, Section 1



Questions

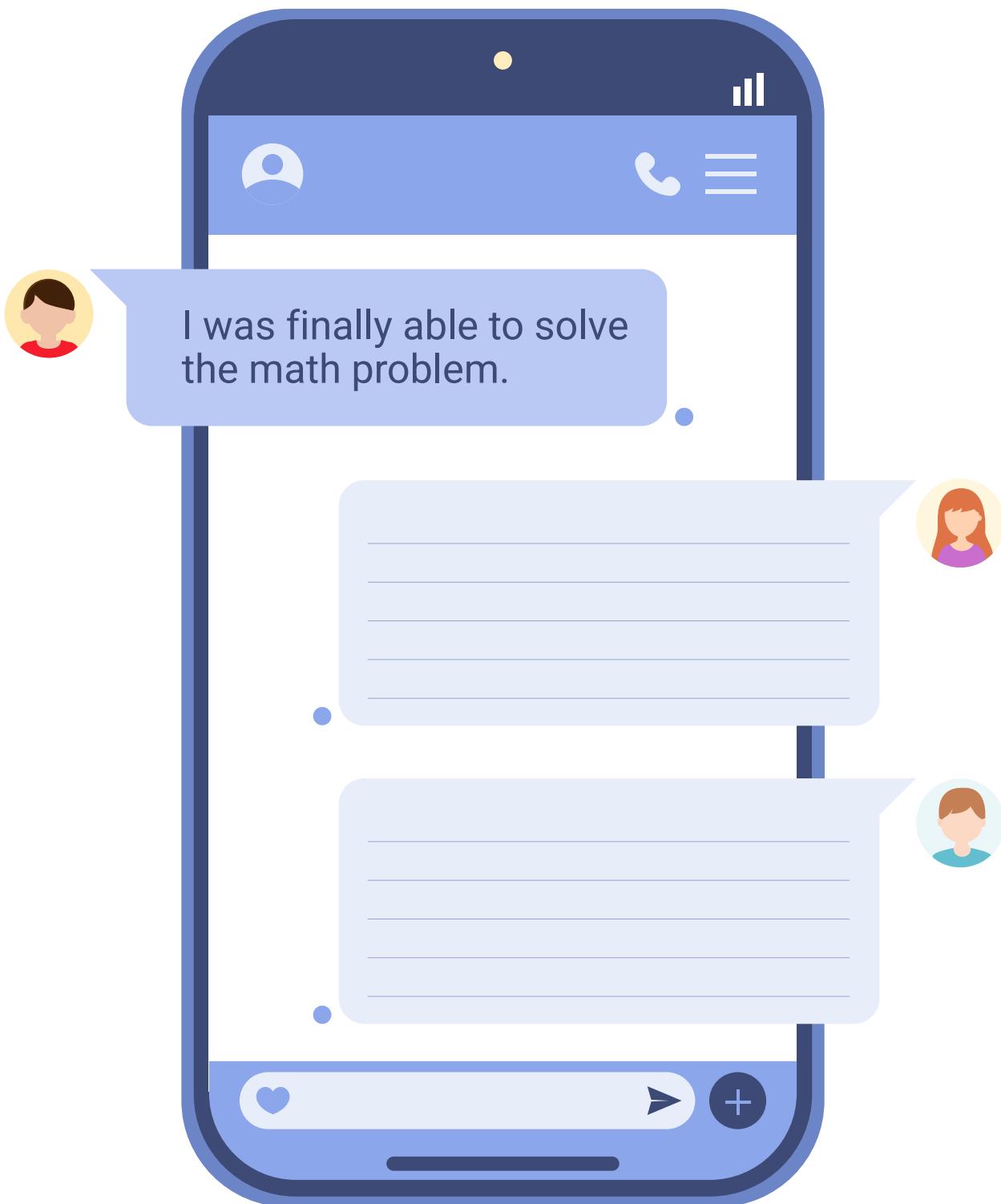
1. What did Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel expect when he asked for a good food from the market?

2. What did Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel expect when he asked for a bad food from the market?

3. Highlight the sentences in the midrash that present the main message about the tongue. What can we learn from this?

 **Assignment**

Fill in the blanks in the chat between the characters. In the first blank space, write a positive, encouraging reaction to the first message. In the second blank space, write a negative reaction to the first message.



Supplement 2

