Including learners with communication disabilities in the Jewish conversation

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Please ask questions!

- Ask questions in the chat box at any time!
- I will watch the chat box and answer questions.
- I will also be available for questions after the webinar.
- You can also reach me at rabbi@matankids.org.
The communication golden rule: Everyone does their job.
Everybody has two communication jobs:

**Listening**: Working to understand what you’re being told.

**Telling**: Working to be understandable to the person you’re communicating with.

Questions? Please ask us in the chat box.
Listening: Working to understand

• What is someone trying to tell you?
• How do you know?
• How can you check?
• What else can you do if you’re not sure?
Telling: Working to be understandable

- What do I want them to understand?
- Do they understand what I’m telling them?
- How do I know?
- How can I make it more understandable?
Sometimes we do this with spoken words.

Questions? Please ask us in the chat box.
Communication can look different for some people, eg:

- Not speaking, or speaking with difficulty.
- Using body language more than words.
- Repetitive or scripted speech.
- Communication devices.
- Intermittent speech.
- Having difficulty understanding language.
Ex. 4:10 ¶ But Moses said to YHVH, “Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”
Communication reciprocity is for everyone

• Not everyone uses words.

• Not everyone communicates in typical ways.

• Everyone can work to be understandable.

• Everyone can work to understand others.

• Everyone can do their job.
Doing our job when someone doesn’t understand what we are saying

• It’s our job to **find ways to be more understandable**.

• What do they think I meant?

• How do I know?

• What else can I try?
Doing our job when we don’t understand what someone is saying

• It’s our job to **find ways to listen more effectively**.
• What are they trying to tell me?
• How are they trying to tell me?
• How do I know?
• What else can I try?
Communication works when everyone does their job!
Including people with disabilities in the golden rule of communication:

Presume competence.

Do your listening job.

Honor their telling work.
Presume competence

• Everyone has thoughts that matter and important things to say.
• People don’t always know how to express themselves.
• We don’t always know how to listen.
• We should always care.
Do your listening job for everyone

- When we’re not understanding, we need to keep doing our listening job.
- Don’t wait for people to become typical communicators before you listen.
- It’s our job to keep looking for ways to listen that will work.
We don’t always know what someone is thinking

• Some people don’t have a clear form of communication.
• They do have thoughts, feelings, and opinions.
• We can’t read their mind.
• Their mind still matters.
• We can keep trying.
Don’t ignore their telling work

• People with communication disabilities spend a lot of time being misunderstood.

• Attempts to communicate are sometimes dismissed as meaningless.

• Or treated as disruptive behavior problems.

• Respect them as communication even if you don’t understand what they mean.

Questions? Please ask us in the chat box.
Honoring their telling work

• Look for communication attempts.

• Remember that it’s still meaningful to them when you don’t understand it.

• Show that you care.

• Show that you are listening.

• Say thank you.

• Keep trying.
Often worth saying:

- “I don’t understand what you’re saying yet, but I do care.”
- “Your opinion is important to me.”
- “I want to listen to you.”
“Silence is not absence”

• When someone isn’t responding in a way you understand, you don’t know what they’re thinking.

• Or what their cognitive abilities are.

• Be careful about assumptions.

• Err on the side of assuming that people are capable of understanding you.

• (And have opinions on what you’re saying).
Guessing

- Communicating with people with communication impairments can involve a lot of guesswork.
- Be clear about what you know — and what you don’t.
- Try to make good guesses, and to keep improving them.
Try different kinds of language

- Some people find simpler language easier to understand.
- *But* some people find it confusing.
- Some people find precise technical language easier to understand.
- If someone doesn’t seem to understand simple language, try using technical language (and vice versa).
Address people directly

- Even if they’ve never responded in a way you understand.
- Even if they may not understand.
- People understand respect, whether or not they understand words.
- When people know you are listening, they are more likely to keep trying to communicate with you.
The 7 Second Rule and Beyond

• When you ask a question, wait at least 7 seconds before saying anything else.

• When you know what the question is, seven seconds feels very long — but the people you’ve asked are still thinking about it. Count.

• Wait time can make it possible for people to understand and communicate.

• Many people with disabilities need more time. If 7 seconds doesn’t work consistently, try 14 or more.
Give people the time they need to do their telling job

- Using a communication device is slower than speaking.
- Some people speak slowly.
- Some people need to be more verbose.
- Equal participation may involve more speaking time.
Try speeding up and slowing down

- Some people have trouble understanding when things are happening too quickly.

- Some people have trouble understanding when things are happening too slowly.

- If one speed isn’t working, try another.

Questions? Please ask us in the chat box.
Sometimes things need to be made more basic

- Sometimes people don’t respond because what you are asking is too advanced.
- Sometimes people need simpler or more introductory material in order to engage.
- But be careful about this assumption.
Sometimes things need to be made more advanced

- Sometimes people don’t respond because what you are asking is too basic to hold their attention.

- Eg: A kid who knows the alphabet but is being taught it in special education for the 6th straight year may well not engage with the lesson.

- If making things simpler isn’t working, try making them harder.
Ask about communication preferences and needs

• Some people prefer to communicate in writing.

• Or by speaking.

• Or by typing.

• Or by pointing.

• Or with a third party assisting.

• Some people can tell you if you ask — and not if you don’t.

Questions? Please ask us in the chat box.
Yes-or-no questions

- You can often get a lot of mileage out of yes-or-no questions.

- If someone can only say yes or no, they depend on you to ask the right questions.

- Spend some time thinking about what people in this situation are likely to have opinions about.

- Including yes-or-no questions during lesson planning can help.
Making yes/no answers possible

- Some people can answer “yes” or “no” directly.
- Others can’t or don’t know how yet.
- Sometimes pointing or making a gesture works better.
- Sometimes people have unique ways to say yes/no.
- Try asking “Can you show me yes?” “Can you show me no?”
Multiple-choice questions

- Two-choice questions and multiple choice questions can also be very useful.
- For asking about preferences.
- For offering choices of activities.
- For asking about opinions.
Open-ended two-choice questions

• Two-choice questions can also be more open-ended, eg:
  • “Do you want x, or something else?”
  • “Are you saying x, or something else?”

• This can be very effective with a range of people who have trouble finding words.

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The “or something else?” method of figuring out what someone means

- Make a guess about what someone might be trying to say.

- Say “Are you saying [your guess], or something else?”

- (Sometimes two options works better, but don’t use too many at once.)

- Keep narrowing it down until you get it.

- Repeat as needed.
An example in Torah class

- Morah Sarah: Why did Joseph’s brothers get mad at him?
- Shira: Got milk?!
- Morah Sarah: Shira, are you talking about milk, the parsha, or something else?
- Shira: Parsha! Got milk?!
- Morah Sarah: Do you think his brothers were angry about milk, or do you mean something else?
- Shira: Else!
- Morah Sarah: Are you talking about something Joseph had, or something else?
- Shira: Had coat! Got milk?!
- Morah Sarah: I think you mean that they were angry because he had the coat of many colors and they didn’t. Is that right, or did you mean something else?
- Shira: No! Joseph didn’t share!
- Morah Sarah: Do you mean that they were mad that he didn’t share his special coat, or something else?
- Shira: Because he didn’t share!
- Morah Sarah: Thank you Shira. What does everyone else think about Shira’s idea? Were Joseph’s brothers mad because he didn’t share?
How this could have gone

• Morah Sarah: Why did Joseph’s brothers get mad at him?
• Shira: Got milk?!
• Morah Sarah: Shira, stop being silly.
• Shira: Got milk?!
• Morah Sarah: Shira, it’s not time for snack. We will have milk later.
• Shira: No snack! GOT MILK?!
• Morah Sarah: Shira, we need to use our inside voices.
• Shira: Got milk?!
• Morah Sarah: Look at the schedule. We drink milk at snack time in this classroom. It’s not time for milk.
• Shira: Got milk?!!
• Morah Sarah: Shira, I think you need a time out. Come back when you can sit nicely and use your inside voice.
Teachers also have another communication job

- Facilitating and supporting communication.
- **Teaching** communication skills for telling.
- **Teaching** communication skills for listening.
- **Providing** multiple ways to communicate.
Teaching all learners to do their communication jobs

- Everyone does their listening job and their telling job.
- Kids with and without disabilities learn to understand each other.
- Kids with and without disabilities learn to be understood by each other.
A lot of this is trial and error
When we all keep trying, a lot of communication becomes possible.
About our webinars

- Matan offers monthly free webinars with Rabbi Ruti Regan on topics in inclusive Jewish education.

- You can view our archive at: https://matankids.org/resources/webinars-2/

- To register for upcoming webinars, visit: https://matankids.org/webinarschedule/