



The Importance of Communication by Matan Har

Subject Area: Torah/Talmud, Tools/Games
Single Class Lesson
Target Age Group: 6 years old to 16 years old

Lesson Objective: To examine the importance of communication in relation to the story of the Tower of Babel (and playing with marshmallows). This lesson will ensure that students will be familiar with the story of the Tower of Babel as well as experience what it is like to not be able to communicate.

This is one of my favorite lessons every year. Start the lesson by reading a children's version of the story of the Tower of Babel. After reading, ask the class a few comprehension questions such as: Why did the people in the story decide to build the tower? Why was G-d upset with the people? (They attempted to build a tower high enough that they could wage war with G-d.) How did G-d punish the people and what do you think about the punishment? (G-d made them speak different languages.) Was it fair? Was it too strict or too lenient?

After finishing the discussion inform the class that they will be undergoing a number of activities that will test their ability to communicate. Tell the class that for the next few minutes they will be unable to communicate verbally or in writing because by some magical act no two people now know the same language (*a la* the Tower of Babel). Allow them to have fun speaking gibberish to each other for a little while to test their new languages.

Now tell the class that they have sixty seconds to line up against a wall in order from shortest to tallest using only hand gestures and facial expressions. After sixty seconds tell them to stop and assess how they did. This exercise should be pretty easy and they should be successful for the most part.

Now tell them they have two minutes to line up in order from youngest to tallest, again, only using hand signals to communicate. This second activity should be more difficult and they probably won't get it perfect and they may even get a little frustrated. Ask the students why the second activity was harder than the first? Why were they able to do the first one easily but not the second? What, if anything, does this tell us about communication?



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Now comes the really fun part. Split the class up into small groups, probably three or four per group depending on the class size. Now take out a couple bags of marshmallows and a few boxes of toothpicks and tell them that the class will be having a competition (I like to make it competitive, I think it makes it more fun, but it by no means has to be competitive).

The class will have an allotted amount of time to build a "Tower of Babel" using the marshmallows and toothpicks. The tower will be judged on three categories: height, appearance, and strength (although these are certainly flexible).

The kicker is that every time the teacher says the word *L'bal'bel*, which means "to confuse" in Hebrew and shares a root with said tower, the class is unable to communicate via language and must go silent. Allow the groups five minutes with a piece of paper and a pencil to plan out how they think they want to build their towers before you give them the materials. Give each group an equal amount of marshmallows and once they start building give them the *l'bal'bel* command off and on every few minutes.

When it looks like a good time to stop tell them they have one more minute to finish up. Judge the towers based on your own criterion, I measure the height with a ruler, strength by lifting it and dropping it and hanging a weight from its highest point, and appearance based on which tower looks the most organized and geometric. Sometimes, if it works out, I like to have it end in a three way tie and then create some sort of tie breaker for them. Have fun with it! I know I do. I usually give the winning group some sort of prize.

After the judging, ask the class how not being able to talk to each other affected the creating process. Was it much harder when you couldn't speak? Did anyone find the silence easier? What do you think now of G-d's punishment of the people attempting to build the Tower of Babel? What does the Hebrew word *l'bal'bel* have to do with the name of the tower? Can you think of an English word similar to the name that makes sense in the same context?

This lesson should take upwards of 1½ to 2 hours.

No references were used in the making of this lesson plan.
