

Communication: Its Art and Soul

RATIONALE

Language is the marvel of the human species. With carefully chosen words, “we can shape events in each other’s brains with exquisite precision.”⁵ We can sow the seed of an idea; inspire fear, hope, or trust; collaborate; converse; argue; reason; or love. Communication is the constant of our existence: done well, it can alter the landscape of our lives.

Effective communication improves the way we do business; the way we conduct our domestic lives and our relations with friends and acquaintances; and the way we share our deepest emotions, thoughts, and inspirations. From the time of the Greek Sophists, who taught their students to use skilled rhetoric to gain power, through Dale Carnegie’s still-popular *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, people have always wanted to know how to improve their communication.

Despite the many volumes of self-help literature and the profusion of courses on this topic, there is more to be said. *Communication: Its Art and Soul*, a new six-session course by the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute (JLI), distills ancient Jewish wisdom and couples it with the latest developments in

5 Pinker, S. *The Language Instinct*. (New York, NY: William Morrow, 1994).

psychological research in the quest to find the secrets behind healthy and effective communication.

Communication: Its Art and Soul predicates its examination of mundane conversation and dialogue on the back of a hallowed principle: the injunction to love your fellow as yourself. Communication requires us to inhabit the reality of another, to enter their mind and identify with their perspective, no matter how foreign it may seem. Thus, loving our fellow as ourselves, that great principle of the Torah, is the bedrock upon which good communication is built.

This course aims to construct a coherent vision of what is worth saying and then to provide practical knowledge of how to go about saying it—as timely a pursuit today as always.

Lesson One

THE COMMUNICATING BEING

King Solomon writes in Proverbs: “Death and life are in the hand of the tongue”: a dramatic expression of the basic insight that, because we humans are social creatures, good communication skills are critical to practically every area of life.

Speech is a window into the mind. The opening session of *Communication: Its Art and Soul* sees communication not only as a technique to be mastered (a topic discussed deeply in later lessons), but also as a portal into our minds that unintentionally reveals how we perceive ourselves and others. This lesson turns to Jewish teachings and the notion of inherent human dignity, to uncover a novel yet fundamental paradigm that informs every aspect of communication. Adopting this lens transforms the way we see others and directly translates into improved communication and relationships.

This lesson also studies how communication enables us to be a force for change. We discover that the value of powerful communication is an essential life skill not only for professional therapists, but for ordinary people in all walks of life as well.

Lesson Two

THE ART OF LISTENING

Before we can learn how to speak, we have to learn how to listen. Listening entails setting aside all of one's own thoughts in order to hear the unadulterated message of the speaker, and only then carefully processing what was heard. This lesson draws upon Talmudic wisdom to explain the importance of active listening and processing, and then offers practical techniques for how to do so.

One of the most important ingredients of listening is humility. Humility in communication flows from the understanding that we can and must learn from every person. As taught in *Ethics of Our Fathers*: "Who is wise? One who learns from every person."

This lesson also confronts the challenge that electronic society poses to good listening. Social media, email, and text messages exclude the kind of nuanced signals given by facial cues, gesticulation, and tone of voice. This lesson considers how to overcome these limitations and listen effectively even on these challenging platforms. Other important elements of listening explored in this lesson are empathy and being nonjudgmental.

Lesson Three

WHEN TO TALK

We may have learned how to listen, but we are not yet ready to talk until we have learned when to speak and when to refrain. “A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is reticent” (PROVERBS 17:28).

This lesson explores what ought to remain personal and private, and what is suitable for sharing and broadcast. How do Jewish concepts—such as the “evil eye” and the imperative to be modest—affect our decisions about the personal information we share? When should we broach an opinion, and when is it proper to keep quiet? This lesson also discusses the Jewish approach to repeating gossip (whether benign or damaging): when it is forbidden, when it is allowed, and when it is mandated. Finally, this lesson discusses the special case of communicating with someone in pain. In this instance, it is imperative to know when it is appropriate to talk and when to be silent.

Lesson Four

HOW TO TALK

Having prepared students for active communication, this lesson explores the following questions: When is elaboration necessary, and when is brevity the preferred virtue? When should we opt for diplomatic language, and when should we “say it as it is”? How does the use of exaggeration, excessive superlatives, and aggressive rhetoric hurt our ability to communicate? How does tone of voice impact our communication? How scrupulously should we adhere to the truth? Are white lies ever justified? This lesson also discusses the value of intrapersonal communication—or internal dialogue—and how it serves to improve communication with others.

Lesson Five

HOW TO COMMUNICATE AND INFLUENCE

At times, we are called upon to use our communication skills to influence, guide, teach, and correct others. If communication skills are crucial in general, they are urgently needed when the message we bear may be difficult to hear. Our choice of words, tone, countenance, and gestures in such settings can be the difference between helping people and alienating them. This lesson explores the skills that help us communicate well even when our message is a corrective one.

In addition to exploring the art of criticism, this lesson also investigates the importance of our motivations in doing so. Is our objective to help the other, or are we merely venting; trying to “get it off our chest”? Are we being righteous or sanctimonious? Do we really care about the other’s improvement, or is our quiet, unspoken concern actually that their behavior may reflect badly on ourselves?

Once we have determined our motivation and are ready to act, proper execution becomes salient. This lesson considers the suitable time and setting for such communication, and in particular, techniques helpful to the challenges unique to influencing those closest to us—parents, spouses, and children.

Lesson Six

HOW TO TALK TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

Jews are no strangers to conflict. From biblical times to the politics in today's synagogues and community organizations, Jews are renowned for the passionate diversity of their views: "Two Jews, three opinions."

Though differences have led to conflict, they have also led us to a more profound unity. The debates of the Talmud became the backbone of an incredible body of scholarship, and enshrined within our culture a drive to find the deepest level of unity—something that cannot be achieved if we are deterred by our differences. In this lesson, we apply this rich tradition of debate and exploration to the task of communication. We examine how to address conflict and diversity of opinions and temperaments, so that they are not merely tolerated, but can also produce richer and more meaningful relationships.

Among this lesson's topics: When to withdraw and when to engage, how to deal with grudges, how the "in it to win it" mindset is so destructive, the toxic impact of speaking out of anger, when and how to ask forgiveness, and the important difference between love and respect.