

How Leaders Can Support Students Who Stutter

What is Stuttering?

Stuttering is a speech difference which may interrupt the flow of speech with silent blocks, repetitions, or sound prolongations. It is understood as a combination of motor, linguistic, and psychosocial factors as it develops. It is *not* related to intellect or personality, although if one is anxious about their stutter, they may be less likely to speak up and *demonstrate* their full personality and all of their ideas.

Attempts to control or hide stuttering can lead to more stuttering and more tension. It's important to communicate to children that it's ok to stutter.

What Does the *Tanach* say?

"The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord." (Proverbs 16:1)

The Interpretation:

"Stuttering is not shameful or a failure of fluency; it is from the Lord."
-Julie Zucker

The Implications: How to Support

- Keep eye contact during the moment of stuttering
- Don't rush the student to get their words out or finish their sentences for them, even if you can tell where they're going with it. Wait 2 seconds after they seem to have finished to make sure they are done before you start speaking. This will also help reduce a sense of time pressure.
- Don't give advice like "slow down" "take a deep breath" "relax" "think about what you want to say" - it can frustrate the student by making them feel like they should be better at controlling their fluency (it's not something they can or should try to control)
- Don't praise fluent speech- it's a coincidence, not an accomplishment. We don't want to create the idea that stuttered speech is less valuable than fluent speech.
- Try to create a classroom environment where students are not speaking over each other, interrupting each other, or finishing each other's sentences during class discussions.
- If other students ask you about his speech, you can point out "Yes, he has some bumps in his speech because he talks differently than you which is pretty cool. Not everyone stutters, so we're lucky we have him in our class because it's rare."

What Does the *Tanach* Say?

And Moses said: ‘Please Lord, no man of words am I, not at any time in the past nor since You have spoken to your servant, for I am heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued.’ And the Lord said to him: “Who gave man a mouth, or who makes him mute or deaf or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” And Moses said: “Please, my Lord, send, pray, by the hand of him You would send.”

And the wrath of the Lord flared up against Moses, and He said, “Is there not Aaron the Levite, your brother? I know that he can indeed speak... and you shall speak to him and put words in his mouth, and I myself will be with your mouth and with his mouth and I will instruct you both on what you should do” (Ex. 4:10-17)

The Interpretation:

- When Moses is called to deliver his prophecy to the people of Israel and Pharaoh, he initially tries to avoid it. Moses insinuates that his speech renders him unfit for the task, but G-d is firm that Moses’s speech does not render him unfit for his task with Pharaoh
- G-d helps Moses by giving him Aaron as a backup plan. G-d understands that his speech can present a genuine challenge and allows one’s community to help if need be.
- In later dialogues we do see Moses speaking with Pharaoh despite the offer of Aaron’s assistance. Evidently Moses gained comfort and confidence and did not feel the need to resort to Aaron all the time.
- This dialogue shows a brilliant balance - Moses is assured that he is not to be treated as less due to his speech and that he is fit for positions of supreme responsibility. On the other hand, G-d acknowledges the real-world difficulties of encumbered speech and provides Aaron as a helper. However, as Moses gains experience and confidence with his task the need for Aaron’s voice is lessened. The person who stutters is called to be an active participant in life

The Implications: How to Support?

Note: The ideas below are not about avoiding fears. They’re about giving students a sense of agency so they can choose when to take risks rather than feeling trapped. Not everyone will want or need these accommodations, so check with them and their family first.

- To the extent that it is possible, do not force the student to speak *at length* during class if he is not comfortable with it. Give occasional opportunities, but do not pressure him. Consider providing other ways for him to demonstrate his knowledge.
 - Let them raise their hand first rather than calling on them randomly
 - Sometimes shorter phrases are easier to get out than a long answer
- During Seders or other opportunities to read out loud, encourage everyone to volunteer to jump in for a passage rather than going around in a circle. That way students who stutter can choose if and when they want to participate verbally.
- Allow students to say prayers in unison with a partner or a group
- Consider accommodations for B’nai mitzvah or other public speaking if a student is interested in them. For example, letting the student do the reading with close family in a closed ceremony ahead of time and then inviting the rest of the crowd for other parts of the service and the celebration afterwards.
- Praise students for the content of what they said (their ideas and contributions), not *how* they said it.