



## Kulam Curriculum: Risk Taking & Courage

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[▶ curriculum.movingtraditions.org/kulam-curriculum-risk-taking-and-courage](https://curriculum.movingtraditions.org/kulam-curriculum-risk-taking-and-courage)

### Objectives

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By the end of the session, participants will be able to:

- Explore the messages that teenagers receive about risks and courage from media, society, and Judaism, including messages about gender norms and risk/courage.
- Reflect on their personal relationship with risks.
- Reflect on their personal “fallback setting” and how to check in with themselves in a new or stressful social situation in order to make thoughtful, healthy, and safe decisions.

### Enduring Questions

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- What messages do teenagers receive about risks and courage?
- What is my personal relationship with risk?
- How can I make thoughtful and healthy decisions in risky situations?

### Materials

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- Equipment for sharing videos (e.g., a computer that participants can gather around, a projector and screen):
- Easel paper or large sticky notes for the wall (two pieces)
- Markers (a few)
- Tape or fun-tak, to put paper on wall

- Materials for Risk Survey activity
  - Option 1:
    - Seven paper bags
    - Easel paper or large sticky note for the wall (one)
    - Slips of paper (seven per participant)
    - Pens (one per participant)
  - Option 2:

Online survey (see instructions below, in Facilitator Prep): A way to share the survey with participants
  - Optional, for optional risk-taking activity (Use these materials for the suggested risks, or make up your own risks and bring the materials you need)
    - pillows (several)
    - a condiment (e.g., ketchup or mayonnaise. Please note, mustard is not recommended, as it is a mild emetic and can make a person vomit.)
    - spoons (one per participant)
    - candle (one)
    - matches or lighter (one)

## Facilitator Prep

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## Select which option you'll use for the Risk Survey

### Option 1: Paper

- Select seven prompts from the list below. (The starred prompts are ones we strongly recommend.)
- Write the seven prompts on a large paper and post it on the wall.
- Label seven paper bags, each with one prompt.
  - \*give a speech
  - \*walk around in an “unfamiliar” neighborhood
  - \*ask a friend for help with a problem
  - ride a bike without a helmet
  - go skydiving
  - vandalize someone’s property
  - tell someone “I love you”
  - ride in the car without a seatbelt
  - get into a physical fight
  - shoplift
  - have unprotected sex
  - hook up with someone at a party
  - send a naked photo of yourself to someone
  - drop acid
  - use someone else’s prescription pills
  - smoke a cigarette
  - use a vaping or e-cigarette device
  - get high
  - drink a few beers
- Prepare a piece of easel paper or large sticky note with the following multiple-choice answers listed. Be sure to include the letters A-E with the answer choices. Post the paper on the wall.
  1. I have done this, and I would do it again
  2. I would do this, regardless of the circumstances
  3. I would do this, depending on the circumstances
  4. I have done this, but would not do it again
  5. I have no interest in doing this
- Option 2: Digital
  - Create a survey in Google Forms, Polleverywhere, or Mentimeter using the information from Option 1
  - Plan how you will share the survey link with participants. For example, you could email it to them or write the link on a large piece of paper.

## **PeopleHood Frame**

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*Optional additional Jewish content, to be used wherever you see fit.*

## PeopleHood Frame

- **When in Jewish History have we asked questions about Risk and Courage?**
  - **Who has asked these questions?**
  - **What were the circumstances that caused them to ask these questions?**
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SAY:

Throughout Jewish History, from leaving enslavement in Egypt to standing up for what we believe in today and tomorrow, Jewish people have faced risks. Sometimes we have to weigh and balance our choices of two competing risks. Imagine the choice of Hannah Szenes (Senesh), a Hungarian Jew from an assimilated family. She left her life in Hungary, which was then comfortable, although circumscribed by antisemitism, to make a new home on a kibbutz in Palestine in 1939. Then, when the opportunity came to fight against the Nazis, she left in order to parachute into Hungary and fight to save Jewish people from imprisonment and death.

Her risks cost her her life. She was executed by the Nazis in 1944. She wrote passionately in her diary and her poems about her choices.

ASK:

- **Were her actions courageous risk, or foolish danger? Why?**
- **What would you have done?**
- **Would it have been braver to stay in Hungary in the first place and try to make change from the inside? Why or why not?**
- **Was it braver to try to make a new world in Palestine or to leave it and try to fight the Nazis in Hungary?**
- **If Hannah were a man, how would you feel about the risks she took?**

**We can continue exploring these questions as we find out more about risk and courage.**

Facilitator's Tip: The word "risk," coming from the mouth of a parent or educator, prepares the teen mind to get ready for a lecture to stay safe. As an adult, you might recall being told to avoid unnecessary risks by parents and community members. But what if there are risks worth taking? What if risk is the only way to grow? And how can we be courageous if we don't take risks? In school, teens often hear that there's a "zero tolerance policy" approach to drinking and drug use. Yet these usually ignore what to do if they find themselves in the situation. Our goal is to create a different conversation on the topic: How does Jewish tradition view risk and courage? What are the ethics of being risky? What will help guide a teen to responsible risk-taking?

## 1. Opening Discussion About Risks (10 minutes)

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SAY:

Welcome, everyone!

Today, we're going to start by watching a video of people skateboarding in San Francisco.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/08/learning/risk-taking.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Facilitator's Tip: If you are not able to share a video, share this photo with participants and adapt the questions to be about the photo: [https://blog.slamcity.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Don\\_Brown-Interview-by-Neil-Macdonald-Slam-City-Skates-Go-Skateboarding-Day.jpg](https://blog.slamcity.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Don_Brown-Interview-by-Neil-Macdonald-Slam-City-Skates-Go-Skateboarding-Day.jpg)

ASK:

- What stood out to you in this video?
- How did you feel while watching this?
- Think of something that you like doing. Do you feel that you have an interest similar to what these skaters have? Why or why not?

SAY:

Some of you might feel exhilarated by the thought of skateboarding like the people in the video; others of you might never want to do an activity like that, and some of you might feel somewhere in between.

Because of COVID-19, many of the things that we never thought of as risks have become risks, like shaking someone's hand, giving a family member a hug, or even going to the movies. It can be difficult to gauge how serious these risks are because we've never lived through a pandemic like this before. And as the pandemic shifts to a new stage, we might have even more questions about risk!

ASK:

What comes to mind when you think of risks? (Take down their responses on butcher paper or sticky note posted on the wall)

Facilitator's Tip: Notice the type of language that participants use to talk about risks. Does it largely refer to the "unnecessary risks" that parents sometimes tell kids to avoid? Or does it also include courageous risks, like standing up for yourself, being brave? If it's the former, you might acknowledge this by saying something like: "So, it looks from this list that we are defining risks as something negative. When might risk-taking be a positive thing? For instance, in our community, I hope that you do take risks, in sharing your opinion even when you think others might disagree."

ASK:

What is a risk you've taken recently (e.g., maybe you rode a bus or plane for the first time in a while, ate inside at a restaurant, sent a message to someone you like, spoke up in class when you were not sure of what you were going to say, tried something you've never tried before)? (Add to the butcher paper/sticky note on the wall)

## **2. Risk-Taking and the Brain (15-20 minutes)**

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SAY:

To continue exploring the theme of risks, we're going to do a quick activity.

*Ask for a volunteer. Then, take something from the volunteer (e.g., a pen, hat, or phone). Allow a moment for them to respond to what you did. Thank your volunteer.*

ASK:

- What just happened? How did our volunteer respond?
- How might a 3-year-old have responded to that same thing? Does anyone who spends a lot of time around preschoolers want to role-play that?

Ask for another volunteer. Give them a piece of paper and pen and ask them to write out the alphabet. Hover over their shoulder while they are doing it. When they are halfway through say, “Come on! Why aren’t you finished yet?” then “Hurry up!” Allow a moment for their response. Thank your volunteer.

ASK:

- How did our volunteer respond?
- Who wants to act out a 3-year-old’s response to the same thing?

SAY:

Okay, now let’s think about a few other scenarios together: How would you do something versus how a preschooler would do something?

ASK:

- How would you handle being hungry? (*Pause for reaction.*)
- How would a preschooler handle being hungry? (*Pause for reaction. Possible reaction: They might cry. Preschoolers might not be able to articulate how or why they are upset.*)
- How might you handle seeing a dog? (*Example: Maybe you’d look around for the owner*)
- How might a preschooler handle it? (*Example: They might get really excited and hug the dog.*)

*You may choose to invite students up to act out any of the above scenarios.*

ASK:

- What are some common themes you saw in the differences between the high schoolers and preschoolers in the role plays or the answers we just discussed?
- In what situations would you rather interact with the preschooler? Why?
- In what situations would you rather interact with the high schooler? Why?
- Does anybody know what changes happened so that you are not reacting like preschoolers anymore?

*Wait to see if anyone answers the last question. Fill in the gaps by explaining the prefrontal cortex in the brain that gives us more inhibitions (more details in the next paragraph). In some ways, it allows us to be more mature, but on the other hand it, prevents us from being real and taking risks.*

SAY:

A popular theory among scientists studying the development of teenagers' brains is that teens make impulsive risks because their prefrontal cortex (the front of their brains) isn't developed yet. In adults, the prefrontal cortex inhibits risk-taking by reflecting on consequences. More recently, researchers have found that teen risk-taking is largely motivated by their desire to learn more about the world. They point out that the majority of teens don't have serious impulse-control issues, whereas a smaller subset of teens—those who exhibit impulsive behavior and have weak cognitive control—are most at risk for unhealthy outcomes.

*(For more information, see this study: <https://bit.ly/2uUeHZM>).*

SAY:

For example, a friend is provoking you from across the room in class. The simple part of your brain tells you to give them the finger and tell them to shut up loudly. The prefrontal cortex is the part that gets you to stop. As you get older, around 25, the prefrontal cortex gets better at telling you not to take those risks.

ASK:

In what way does this brain theory help you understand your relationship to risk?

*Optional:*

*Invite (but do not require) participants to take the following four risks (or make up your own safe risk challenges):*

- Risk 1: Using a pillow, do a headstand, either in the middle of the room or against a wall.
- Risk 2: Eat a spoonful of a condiment.
- Risk 3: Smear a condiment on your face, take a photo, and send the photo to a close friend or family member without any context.
- Risk 4: Run your finger quickly through an open candle flame.

ASK:

- What did you notice about who took which risks?
- Which of these four risks was most risky for you?
- Who do you feel is prone to taking more risks?

SAY:

While there is research that men tend to take more physical risks than women, studies have shown that men are less likely to take social risks than women. There has not yet been this kind of research on nonbinary people. Regardless of the college campus, men are less likely to study abroad than women. In surveys, they have usually said that they are reluctant to try and make new friends in another place and would rather stay where they are.

ASK:

- What do you think about this data? Does it fit with your personal experience? Why or why not?
- How, if at all, does this fit with what you know about your friends?
- Think about a friend or two who is a particular risk-taker in your opinion. What is their gender?
- How about a friend who is not at all a risk-taker? What is their gender? (Draw their attention to any gender patterns in the responses.)

### 3. Ranking Risks (20 minutes)

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Show participants the video from *The Lonely Island*. This video satirizes the idea of YOLO (i.e., *You only live once*).

YOLO – The Lonely Island (3:13) <https://youtu.be/z5OtlA5157c>

ASK:

- Can someone break down the message of the video?
- Did you have a favorite piece of advice in the video?
- How does it compare to other messages about risk that you've seen?
- How does this compare to how conversations about risk normally go at home and at school?

For this next activity, choose either option 1 or 2. Option 1 invites participants to share anonymously the risks that they have taken. Option 2 generates a less personal conversation about risks.

#### **Risk Survey**

- *For Option 1: Set up seven paper bags around a table, each labeled with a prompt. Have the prompts also written on a piece of paper at the front of a room. Also post the answer choices on a large paper on the wall. Distribute seven slips of paper and a pen to each participant.*
- *For Option 2: Using the same content, create a quiz on Google Forms, Polleverywhere, or Mentimeter, for participants to respond to on their phones. Give the survey link to participants, by emailing it to them or posting the link on the wall.*

SAY:



The next activity will give you the opportunity to reflect on the activities you might or might not want to do. We'll be looking at the responses together, but they'll all be anonymous. Be as honest as you want.

I'm going to ask you to read through all of the prompts on the paper at the front of the room. Each prompt has a corresponding bag. I want you to respond to each of the prompts by writing a letter from A to E on a slip of paper and putting it into the corresponding bag.

- A) I have done this, and I would do it again
- B) I would do this, regardless of the circumstances
- C) I would do this, depending on the circumstances
- D) I have done this, but would not do it again
- E) I have no interest in doing this

*After everyone has responded to each prompt by putting a letter in the corresponding bag, divide participants up into seven groups, and have each group tally up the responses in each bag (they can write their tally on the bag itself). Then ask each group to report back what they found in their bag.*

ASK:

- What trends do you see in the responses? What is surprising?
- Think of the risks where you selected "I have no interest in doing this.". How did you make the decision about that risk?
- Think of the risks that you marked "I would do this, depending on the circumstances." In what circumstances would you choose to do these things?
- Which of the prompts in the quiz do you think are courageous? Why?

Facilitator's Tip: This activity itself may have felt like a risk for participants. Acknowledge that by saying: "For many of you, this activity was a risk!" Use a quick "fist of five" to see how everyone is feeling (1=totally calm; 5=panicked!).

*Ask students to consider three of the prompts from the activity. We recommend using "walk around in an unsafe neighborhood," "give a speech," or "ask a friend for help with a problem." Go one prompt at a time and ask participants to respond to the following question using their fists of five (or whatever method you used earlier).*

ASK:

Do you think your gender affects how risky you feel this activity to be? How so? Why do you think that is?

*Ask a few students to elaborate on their response, making sure to call on at least one student who answered with 1, and one student who answered with 5.*

#### **4. Fallback Setting Introduction (5 minutes)**

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SAY:

We've been talking throughout today's session about the balance of risk and courage. If we are overly cautious, we miss out on much in life. Yet, if we are reckless, we risk destroying our body and our life. Our prefrontal cortex's development, as we talked about earlier, is part of how we respond to every situation, like an app that is constantly running in the background of your phone.

A tool to help us strike this balance is called a "fallback mode." Think for a few moments of how you usually react, or how you think you'd react if:

- You need to ask your parents for a later curfew.
- You need to ask how much you will make at a job.
- You are crossing a street and a car is speeding toward you.
- You need to tell your friend that something they did is not okay with you.
- You want to try out for a team or a play.

*Pause for a few moments to allow the participants to think in response to the prompt.*

SAY:

What you just thought of—your usual response in a tough situation—that is your personal fallback mode. Some of us might instinctively clam up and let others take the lead in these situations. Others might get really angry and go into fight mode. And yet, others might have a totally different response. Your fallback mode is your mind and body's way of protecting you. But in some situations, it might not actually serve you. And when you're under the influence of drugs and alcohol, your fallback mode will be even more exaggerated, meaning it is harder to get in touch with how you feel and how you think about a situation.

*Optional:*

If there is time, break participants into *hevruta* partners to share about the fallback mode they thought of. After the *hevruta* partners have shared for about five minutes, bring everyone back together and ask the following questions.

ASK:

What commonalities or differences did you notice between you and your partner's fallback mode?

- When you think about your fallback mode, in what ways, if at all, do you think your fallback mode might be connected to how you were raised?
- What fallback modes do you think people of different genders are rewarded for having?

## **5. Crossing the Red Sea (5 minutes)**

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SAY:

Share the following story from the Babylonian Talmud by telling it out loud to the group.

During Passover, we read that Moses lifted his staff, and God split the sea, allowing the Israelites to cross to freedom. But the rabbis didn't like this version of the story. It was an awesome miracle, sure, but the Israelites didn't do anything to gain their freedom or become free. So, in their boldness, the rabbis told a new story.

In their version, the Israelites gathered at the water's edge. Moses lifted his hands as God commanded. And nothing happened. The sea remained still.

Can you imagine the panic of the people at that moment? Moses had never failed to produce a miracle before. Murmuring raced through the crowd—many considered turning back and allowing themselves to be enslaved once more. Then, out of the crowd, walked a solitary figure.

Nachshon, the son of Aminadav, stepped into the water. His family and friends looked on with horror and amazement. They cried, "What are you doing? Where are you going?"

Nachshon walked forward like a man possessed—up to his knees, his waist, his chest. When the water came up just over his nostrils, the moment when he is fully submerged, at that time and not a second before, the sea split.

And the people were able to walk behind Nachshon to liberation, to a place of singing and joy.

– Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 36b–37a, Mekhilta Beshallah 6

ASK:

- What stands out to you in this story?
- What message or lesson do you think it is trying to convey?

SAY:

Risks can lead to great things, like the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, and they can also be very dangerous, such as if the sea had not split. In order to learn and grow, we must take some risks. We must be courageous. We also need to be thoughtful about it. Because we don't always know what the result of our decisions will be, it is important to spend time reflecting on our environment, our brain's development, and our fallback modes.

## 6. Closing Ritual and Evaluation (5 minutes)

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ASK:

What is something specific you are taking away from today? You can include a risk that you feel less or more likely to take after this session.

*Invite each person to respond.*

I am going to ask each of you to please complete a survey about our time together today. Your feedback is very important to us and to our partner, Moving Traditions, and it's super easy! Please take out your phone and text the word PEOPLE to 267-399-5900. A survey link will instantly be sent to you. This session was called "Risk Taking & Courage" so when asked, that's the answer. Answer the questions before hitting submit and you are done!

**OR say the same paragraph above but print and use this QR code to have your teens access the survey!**

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**Note to Educator:**

When you are done using this session, please take the teacher survey to give us feedback about it! Use this link:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/MTKUEDU22>

