THREE PARTNERS IN STUDY: TWO PEOPLE AND A TEXT

General
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We often hear about the desire to create communities in which Jews gather to actively engage in Torah study. But connecting learners to past and future Torah conversations takes a lot of work. It may also require a reframing of how we think about the task of Torah learning. The most efficient way to reach large numbers with a low barrier of entry is by offering classes or lectures with insightful and inspiring teachers. While valuable, this format does not require learners to be actively involved in their own learning, to take responsibility for it, or to develop deeper relationships with either the texts or the people sitting in the audience.

Another approach to Torah learning is relational, and calls upon all those involved in Torah study to work hard to understand the text; a relational approach asks us to take responsibility for our fellow Torah learners. This approach calls upon participants to be both active learners and active teachers, no matter where they are in their Torah learning journey. It requires a serious engagement with the text, even when (or maybe, especially when) it flies in the face of their own ideas and sensibilities. It is through this approach that we believe Torah learners can develop deep and enduring relationships with Torah as well as with a larger community of Torah learners.

One way that both cultivates and gives shape to this approach is “chevruta”: two people studying with one another and a text. Chevruta learning has become increasingly popular in the United States in the last decades. Today, it has migrated from traditional Jewish learning venues to a host of Jewish learning arenas that cross age, gender, and denominational boundaries. Sometimes, chevruta is considered the “authentic”
structure for Jewish learning, as if to imply that other forms of study are inauthentic. The timeline of the widespread use of chevruta in traditional Eastern European yeshivot is debated among scholars. While documents suggest that chevruta as a form of study has its roots in the 16th century, the professed merits of studying with other people seem to have more ancient precedent in the Babylonian Talmud. Today, widespread use of this method has caught on across the spectrum of Jewish learning. And while learning through chevruta may be a link in the chain of Jewish tradition, this is far from its only benefit.

The benefits of working in chevruta lie in its power to cultivate certain attitudes and skills. These attitudes include a willingness to take responsibility for our own and another’s learning as well as a willingness to believe that both the text and one’s chevruta partner have something to teach. In this sense, we must act as if there are three chevruta partners, not just two: the two people and the text. And, in order to benefit from the shared learning experience and to develop rich understandings of our texts, we must be willing to give space and time to all three partners. This mode of Torah learning requires what we call a “stance” in which one sees oneself as being in relationship to a text and to other people, and one works to cultivate this relationship as part of the study process.

In addition to these attitudes, there are certain skills, what we in the Beit Midrash Research Project call “chevruta practices,” that enable chevruta learners to activate the three partners and make the most of the learning experience. These paired practices are listening and articulating, wondering and focusing, and supporting and challenging. Listening and articulating are at the heart of chevruta learning: The interplay of partners both articulating ideas and listening enables them to build a pool of ideas and to forge collaborative relationships. Wondering and focusing enable the dynamic between curiously looking in multiple directions and identifying something interesting and delving into it. This dynamic helps us to find a middle ground between endless inquiry and premature closure. With supporting and challenging, we explore the text more deeply to strengthen the ideas at hand and to generate and consider different ideas and interpretations. We strive to support and challenge ourselves, our partner, and the text, as we eschew the simplistic goal of advocating our position and instead help all three partners “speak” to develop the strongest ideas.

We have found that people can learn the art and skill of chevruta. And, even when one doesn’t use the structure of two people studying, one can still engage in “chevruta-inspired pedagogy,” a pedagogy that is informed by ideals of the relational model of chevruta learning. This pedagogy favors immersive learning experiences that are concerned with the whole person and, in particular, favors the close study of texts with other people.
Engaging in chevruta or in “chevruta-inspired pedagogy” draws on a relational pedagogy that we already have — although we rarely use it to its potential. It is a tool that helps people become comfortable picking up a Jewish text and trying to understand it; a tool for those more experienced to deepen their understandings, conversations, and relationships; a tool to create enduring relationships between people and our rich tradition. Ultimately, this is a tool to engage learners as full human beings along intellectual, social, ethical, and spiritual dimensions.