

**REFLECTIONS ON MY TEACHING: AN INTRODUCTION TO *HAVRUTA* STYLE LEARNING**  
**Presented by Mark David Walsh as part of the IFRS Faculty Lecture Series, August 19, 2011**

In blessed memory of Sr Shirley Sedawie, OAM NDS

The invitation to make this presentation has provided me with a valuable opportunity to look more closely at the variety of methodologies that I draw from in my day to day teaching and the way in which they support student learning. For the purposes of this presentation, I would like to focus on a method of paired study, central to Jewish learning and teaching known as *havruta*. *Havruta* is an Aramaic term that means friendship or companionship.<sup>1</sup> It is related to the Hebrew word for friend, *haver*. This dynamic process is dependent upon the social interaction of the study partners and the meaning-making that results from their interaction with a text: a third partner in the interaction.<sup>2</sup> A fourth partner who takes part in this process is the teacher who supports the leaning of the students, who in turn support one another. I am indebted to Bat Kol Institute, Jerusalem for introducing me to this method of learning and teaching and to my colleague Sr Helen Graham MM for continuing to emphasise its value as part of the learning and teaching process. I have learnt much from her tireless efforts to use *havruta* to engage her students with the biblical text and with the Jewish community of learning that has sought to understand it.

During the course of this presentation I will look briefly at the history of the *havruta* method of learning, from the echoes of its existence in the Jewish Scriptures and later Jewish interpretation to its adoption as the “predominant mode of [Jewish] learning in the last century.”<sup>3</sup> Next, I will present a brief introduction to the *havruta* method of learning. Following this I will look at Orit Kent’s theory of *havruta* learning, framed as six core practices in three dynamic pairs.<sup>4</sup> These six core practices provide a means for examining the process of *havruta*. Then I will consider the cognitive, affective and social benefits of *havruta* learning as identified by Aliza Segal.<sup>5</sup> Finally I will reflect upon the ways in which I have used *havruta* style learning in the teaching of Scripture as well as in less formal situations such as presentations to Bible Study groups or as part of religious formation. The use the term “*havruta* style learning” here is quite deliberate, as many Jewish practitioners of this method would not see its use in the style described below as typical of *havruta* learning as it is practiced in Jewish *yeshivot*.<sup>6</sup> Further, my choice of the term is influenced by an article by Barbara Blumenfeld, who explores the use of “*havruta* style learning” to engage students in the Law classroom.<sup>7</sup> This article clearly shows that the “*havruta* style of learning” does not need to be limited to its traditional applications, but can be used to enhance learning in a variety of disciplines. Similarly, it does not need to be

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<sup>1</sup> Orit Kent, "A Theory of Havruta Learning," (Mandel Centre for Jewish Education, Brandeis University, 2010) <http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/pdfs/TheoryofHavrutaLearning> (accessed August 20, 2011), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Racheal Gelfman Shultz, "Havruta Learning in Pairs," (My Jewish Learning, 2010) [http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Torah\\_Study/How\\_to\\_Study\\_Torah/Havruta\\_Learning\\_in\\_Pairs\\_.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Torah_Study/How_to_Study_Torah/Havruta_Learning_in_Pairs_.shtml) (accessed August 20, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Kent, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Aliza Segal, *Havruta Study: History, Benefits, and Enhancements* (Jerusalem: Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Plural of *yeshiva*: a Jewish school of higher learning in which students study the core texts of Judaism: *Torah (Tanach)* and *Talmud*. These were traditionally male only institutes and often had the additional role of being a seminary in which rabbis received training.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Blumenfeld, "Engaging Students with Havruta Style Learning," (Institute for Law Teaching and Learning, 2011) <http://lawteaching.org/conferences/2011/handouts/2b-EngagingStudentswithHavruta.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2011).

limited to the Jewish *yeshiva* or *beit midrash*,<sup>8</sup> but can find a home in Christian institutes of study, such as the Institute of Formation and Religious Study.

### **A brief review of the historical roots of *havruta* to its contemporary predominance**

How deeply rooted in Jewish history is the practice of *havruta*? How widely was it practiced? Aliza Segal observes: “Torah study with a partner seems to carry with it the weight of history and tradition.” Thus, students today form a link in a chain reaching back into history.<sup>9</sup> Just how far this chain reaches back into history, however, is another question, with scholarly debate indicating that its roots may not reach as deeply as some would suggest.<sup>10</sup> Having said this, one can look to the biblical text itself to see what might be considered to be two ancient echoes of *havruta*. First we read in Ecclesiastes:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. (4:9-10)

This adage might also be applied to the process of *talmud Torah*<sup>11</sup> with a partner rather than on one’s own. This does not preclude the practice of an individual studying the text on his or her own; an activity for which there are precedents in Jewish learning. In addition to this we read in Proverbs:

“Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another.” (27:17)

Just as one piece of iron sharpens another, so too will two people studying Torah together sharpen each other’s minds through their study of the sacred text. Although it might be argued that these passages might refer to any number of endeavours embarked upon by two people, later interpretation has linked both passages with the process of *havruta* as we shall soon see.<sup>12</sup>

A famous quote from a collection of *halakhic*<sup>13</sup> *midrashim* on the book of Deuteronomy that dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century of the Common Era states that a person should find a *haber* for all things: reading Scripture, studying Mishnah, eating, drinking and disclosing all of one’s secrets.<sup>14</sup> A later quote, this time coming from the *Talmud*<sup>15</sup> suggests that “Torah is only acquired in a group, *haburah*” [also *havurah*] (*Babylonian Talmud* [BT], Berakhot63b). And yet another: “Two scholars sharpen one another” (*BT Ta’anit7a*)<sup>16</sup>, which seems to be a clear reference to Proverbs 27:17 (above). This appears to indicate that the process of studying with a *havruta* (used here to indicate a study partner) was encouraged in ancient times and that the *havruta*

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<sup>8</sup> Literally, “House of study.”

<sup>9</sup> Segal, 4.

<sup>10</sup> See Segal and Shultz for further discussion.

<sup>11</sup> Literally, “Study of Torah.”

<sup>12</sup> See the commentary on these passages in *The Jewish Study Bible*.

<sup>13</sup> *Halakhah* is most commonly referred to as Jewish Law. *Halakhic midrashim* cover the many *mitzvot* (commandments) that shape the way that a Jew lives. Rooted in the written Torah, *Halakhah* provides a guide for what one can and cannot do. As the Torah did not address in detail all aspects of life facing the Jewish people the Jewish Sages and Rabbis engaged in often robust dialogue over how these laws were to be interpreted. The results of this discourse were eventually compiled and committed to writing in the *Mishnah* (2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E.).

<sup>14</sup> (*Sifre Deuteronomy* #305) in Rabbi Dov Gartenberg, “An Introduction to Havruta Study,” <http://rabbidovblog.blogspot.com/2005/11/introduction-to-havruta-study.html> (accessed August 15, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> From the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Jewish sages and rabbis began to interpret the Mishnah alongside the Torah. The various commentaries they produced were compiled and edited in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The result, called the *Gemara*, was combined with the *Mishnah* to become the *Talmud*.

<sup>16</sup> Schultz.

method of learning might be equally ancient. Another statement dating back to the *Talmud* that has been used to emphasise the importance and historicity of *havruta* is “Give me *havruta* or give me death” (*BT Ta'anit*23a). Schultz argues that to read this text as applying only to the study of Torah is in fact to take it out of context. She argues that the text might better be understood as signifying the interdependence of the individual and the society in which she or he lives.<sup>17</sup> Having said this, the very fact that each of these passages from the *Tanach* and the *Talmud* has been interpreted as referring to the practice of *havruta* must indicate its place within the Jewish chain of tradition.

The extent to which this chain extends has been questioned by recent study, which seems to indicate that while the practice of *havruta* learning does have ancient roots, or was at least practiced in *Talmudic* times, it was only one of a number of modes of learning employed in Jewish *yeshivot* and *beit midrash* until gaining prominence in the last century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century *yeshivot* of Eastern Europe, where the method seems to have been used widely, it was only one of a number of approaches to learning that were employed. In fact, the *havruta* method was more widely used remedially to support the learning of weaker students who could not keep up with the rest of the class.<sup>18</sup> Some would even go so far as to suggest that *havruta* was an innovation belonging to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> Learning in the *yeshivot* of Eastern Europe was geared towards an elite group of scholars who had no need for the *havruta* method of learning in the first place. Further, it is suggested that the method actually became prominent only after the First World War when *yeshiva* study was opened up to all men rather than the elite, thus necessitating the use of *havruta* in order to support the learning of students faced with difficult texts.<sup>20</sup> Since this period, access to higher Jewish learning as typified by the *yeshivot* has opened up to include women as well as men. Today there are *yeshivot* for women and men as well as *yeshivot* that combine religious and secular curricula. Whilst *havruta* might not have been widely practiced in the ancient past, it has certainly become for many the preferred method of study and highlights the value placed upon studying with a partner in Jewish tradition.

### **A brief introduction to the *havruta* method of learning**

*Havruta* is primarily about dialogue between the *havrutot*, or study partners, and the text that they are engaging with. The text at the heart of this study has traditionally been the *Talmud*, although *havruta* is also used in the study of the *Tanach*.<sup>21</sup> In addition to these three partners, the dialogue is also supported by a fourth party, the Rabbi or teacher. Harvey Fields notes that one should always study with a friend and a teacher – as emphasised in the *Talmud* (*Avot* 1.6). This, he argues, has two advantages: “It provides us with a check on our assumptions and a means of challenging our conclusions. It also has the advantage of sharpening our understandings against other points of view.”<sup>22</sup> Orit Kent emphasises the interdependent nature of *havruta* study and the fact that each partner is not only responsible for her or his own learning, but also for the learning of his or her partner.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Schultz.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Segal, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Schultz.

<sup>21</sup> *Tanach* (also *TaNaKh*) is an acronym for the three sections of the Jewish Bible. *T* signifies Torah, which in this case is the 5 books of Moses (Pentateuch); *N* stands for *Nevi'im* (“prophets”); and *Ch* (*Kh*) represents *Kethuvim* “writings”, which includes books such as Psalms and Proverbs.

<sup>22</sup> Harvey J. Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*. Vol. 1. (New York: UAH Press, 1998) 5.

<sup>23</sup> Kent, 7.

Jewish learning is both communal and dialogical. To this one must add a further characteristic, with which those not brought up in the Jewish community of interpretation sometimes have great difficulty coming to terms with. Jewish biblical interpretation is polysemous: “subject to multiple interpretations and therefore cannot be reduced to one single “correct” meaning.”<sup>24</sup> Jewish learning, argues Jeffrey Spitzer promotes discussion rather than one prevailing “correct” interpretation, as indicated in this observation of the Mishnah: “When we examine and discuss the logic of the Mishnah, we make sure that diverse opinions, divergent opinions, and even clearly false opinions are given voice.”<sup>25</sup> Barbara Blumenfeld points out that this has further implications for the learning and teaching process:

[The] *Havruta* method, in contrast to typical Western classrooms, removes dependence on a teacher to provide a final or “correct” answer. Instead, the teacher, serving as both a guide and participant in the quest for understanding, becomes another seeker of the “truth.”<sup>26</sup>

Blumenfeld further highlights other important aspects of the *havruta* method. She emphasises the importance of the process rather than the product. This process aims to expand the participants’ understanding of the text, rather than finding a final or definitive interpretation. As such it helps to develop the students’ critical thinking skills as well as their ability to ask questions.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Blumenfeld notes that the *havruta* method is democratic and disagreement does not need to result in one person being right and another wrong: “while a particular situation may be resolved,’ she contends, “the debate and discovery will not end once a “correct” answer is recognized. Rather, the learning continues indefinitely.”<sup>28</sup> As such, engagement in *havruta* forms another link in the chain of tradition of Jewish biblical interpretation discussed earlier.

Traditionally, the *havruta* process occurs in *yeshivot* and *beit midrash* preceding a formal class, or *shi’ur*. This period of preparatory study, conducted in *havruta* is called a *sefer*. The Rabbi or teacher directs the examination and analysis that takes place in the *sefer* by choosing the text to be studied and the questions to be answered. They are also present during this session to answer questions, provide clarification and where necessary, ask more questions to facilitate learning. Whilst the content of the *sefer* was generally designed to be elucidated upon in the *shi’ur* that followed, the teacher would not simply rehash this content in the *shi’ur*. Instead they would use it as a basis for further learning. This is extremely useful where complicated subject matter is to be covered as it gives students an opportunity to grapple with the content of the class before the *shi’ur*. Gartenberg notes that *shi’ur* also provides an opportunity for the students to test their reading of the text against that of the teacher. In this session, one is also encouraged to “challenge the teacher’s reading and to ask further questions on the text”<sup>29</sup> and presumably the teacher.

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<sup>24</sup> Adele Reinhartz and Miriam-Sima Walfish, “Conflict and Coexistence in Jewish Interpretation,” in Phyllis Tribble & Letty M. Russell (eds.), *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 105.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Spitzer, “Valuing Debate and Conversation,” (My Jewish Learning, 2011)

[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Torah\\_Study/Themes\\_and\\_Theology/Conversation\\_and\\_Debate/Valuing\\_Debate.shtml?PRRI](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Torah_Study/Themes_and_Theology/Conversation_and_Debate/Valuing_Debate.shtml?PRRI) (accessed February 4, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Blumenfeld, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Blumenfeld, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Blumenfeld, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Gartenberg

### Orit Kent's "Core *havruta* practices"

Orit Kent defines *havruta* as "two people working together for some period of time to together make sense of a text."<sup>30</sup> Through careful observation of numerous *havruta* sessions Kent observed that the process of *havruta* learning engages the participants in three dynamic sets of core behaviours:

1. listening and articulating;
2. wondering and focusing; and
3. supporting and challenging.<sup>31</sup>

Effective *havruta* learning occurs when each partner assists the other to engage in these practices. First, there must be a balance between articulating and listening if effective learning is to take place, which also includes giving space for the text to speak as part of the process. Second, *havrutot* must feel free enough to explore the wealth of possibilities presented by the text, whilst also remembering that their study of the text cannot possibly address all of these. Instead they must focus their discussion on a particular aspect of the text. The need to focus might be in response to a question asked of them by the teacher, or by the text itself. Finally, *havrutot* must play the role of a critical partner in the process of study. This involves the dynamic processes of supporting and challenging one another as each partner seeks to understand the text with greater depth and breadth. It is important to note that each of these core behaviours does not always occur in isolation or a defined sequence. It is their interaction that is characteristic of the *havruta* process. Let us now explore each of these six core practices in more detail.

Kent sees listening and articulating as the "engine" that not only starts the *havruta* process, but also keeps it going.<sup>32</sup> Each of the *havrutot* is responsible for contributing to the process by expressing one's own ideas and actively listening to the contribution of the other. In addition to this, both partners should be actively engaged in listening to the text that they are studying. Actively listening involves allowing space within *havruta* to hear the voice of the other, rather than simply waiting for the next opportunity to speak. As such, listening does not simply involve silence on the part of one partner while the other speaks; it also involves asking clarifying questions and checking to see if one has understood the other partner correctly. This process involves quite a bit of discipline on the part of each of the *havrutot*:

To understand the other, one needs to practice both outer and inner silence – creating an outer space for the other to articulate and also silencing the many internal voices that arise in one's own heads so that s/he can truly pay attention to what the other is trying to say.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, the process of articulating one's ideas is also not so straight forward. When it comes to verbalizing what each partner is thinking it is important that *havrutot* do not block further possibilities for discussion by making definitive statements too early in the process. Articulating, instead, should take the form of thinking out loud and "inviting one's partner into one's thinking."<sup>34</sup> Effective articulating and listening involves taking turns, building a respectful relationship and most importantly building ideas.<sup>35</sup> Listening and articulating alone, however, does not constitute the *havruta* process in its entirety, for a greater engagement with the text and between the *havrutot* is necessary to bring out the richness of this process.

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<sup>30</sup> Kent, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 20.

The second pair of behaviours that Kent identifies is wondering and focusing. Each partner must feel free to explore the “multiple possibilities” presented by the text, whilst at the same time remaining conscious of the fact that they are being called to come to a deeper understanding of the text and to draw some conclusions about its meaning.<sup>36</sup> This is where the partners move beyond the initial process of meaning-making into the world of imagination and possibility. In approaching the text and looking for meaning the partners might choose to focus on a particular interpretation and follow this through in detail or they may wish to approach the text a number of times from a variety of angles in order to answer the questions they are generating.<sup>37</sup> The tension involved in this pair of practices is that the partners will end up *wandering* in so many different directions that they will be unable to move forward in any meaningful way with any particular idea.<sup>38</sup> Alternately, if the *havrutot* focus too narrowly on only one part of the text, they run the risk of leaving other parts of the text and new interpretations underdeveloped or unexplored. Finally, in focussing on any one idea or on the idea of only one partner at a time, *havrutot* must still leave space open to return to other possibilities and interpretations during the course of the *havruta* session, or in future sessions.<sup>39</sup>

The final pair of behaviours is possibly the most difficult to master and takes time to develop. Each partner must be conscious of the necessity to support and challenge the other in the learning process. Here, Kent outlines three supporting moves. The first is using “supporting language,” indicating that one partner is listening to what the other is saying. The second is described as “implicit support” and might occur where one partner builds on the other’s ideas, signalling that they are worthy of consideration. The third supporting move involves one partner asking questions that give the other the opportunity to stop and think and to clarify their thoughts.<sup>40</sup> Kent also describes two types of challenging. The first is the “direct challenge,” where one partner asks a specific question of the other; challenging a particular idea, pointing out inconsistencies in the other’s argument or drawing the other’s attention to “alternative evidence or ideas.” The second occurs where one partner simply offers another idea or interpretation, implicitly challenging the idea already on the table.<sup>41</sup> Kent further elaborates on the purpose of challenging one’s partner, by looking at *havruta*, where the action is supportive, in contradistinction to debating, in which one partner defeats the other.

The goal of constructive challenging within *havruta* is to work with one's partner to notice the limitations of the ideas on the table and refine them. When effective, challenging can help a *havruta* come up with a better articulated interpretation, a more all-encompassing idea or a new idea altogether.<sup>42</sup>

This requires trust and takes time to develop, which is why it is essential that the *havrutot* remain together as long as possible, rather than switching regularly as often happens in classrooms.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 34-35.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

<sup>43</sup> There should, however, be some flexibility in the application of this rule, especially if it is apparent that the partners in a particular *havruta* are experiencing difficulty working together. One might also consider the changing of partners after a while in order to give students the opportunity to interact with others.

### Segal's 'cognitive, affective and social benefits'

Whilst Orit Kent's six core *havruta* practices provide a means for examining the process of *havruta*, Aliza Segal offers us insights into the benefits of the *havruta* method for learning. These benefits, she suggests, fall into three categories: cognitive, affective and social. We will explore these briefly before moving on to the ways in which *havruta* style learning might be used in the non-Jewish classroom.

Segal notes three cognitive benefits of *havruta* study. The first of these is that an individual's learning is sharpened by interaction with another. Once more we are drawn to the image, "iron sharpens iron," from the book of Proverbs (27:17). One example of this is what Segal terms the 'promotion of controversy'. She states: "being confronted with the ideas of others, and needing to present and explain one's own ideas to peers, can help to refine and clarify his or her thoughts and convictions."<sup>44</sup> The second benefit is that reading aloud, a common Jewish practice and component of *havruta* study, aids memory.<sup>45</sup> *Havruta* also provides an opportunity for "oral rehearsal" in which the learner may "more effectively refine and express their thoughts when they talk about what they are thinking."<sup>46</sup> The final cognitive benefit provided by *havruta* study is that it teaches practices and skills which can be applied to the study of scripture beyond the time the student spends in the *beit midrash*.<sup>47</sup> A number of these skills could also be applied to the study of other disciplines or material.

Segal also presents three affective benefits of *havruta* study. The first of these is the atmosphere created by *havruta* in the *beit midrash*. The Sacred texts and the collections of other texts interpreting them, the sight of and the sound other students actively engaged in *talmud Torah* has a profound impact on moulding and inspiring a "religious personality."<sup>48</sup> Second, students are part of a creative process, encouraged to develop novel approaches to the text, "as part of an ongoing and developing chain" in continuity with the historical community of learners that came before them.<sup>49</sup> Third, Segal speaks of the experiential nature of *havruta* study, where the student responds to the "magic and power of the text and tradition" and where the teacher leads them into a process of "reading aloud, accompanied by contemplation, analysing, formulating and discussing [which] can only serve to enhance the experience of Torah study."<sup>50</sup>

Finally the social benefits that Segal attributes to the use of the *havruta* method are twofold. First, the interdependent nature of *havruta* encourages students to persevere with their studies, knowing that they play an important part in the learning of another. Second, students often move from the academic approach of discussing the text at hand to the more incidental approach of "discussing its life-changing implications." Though this might seem an obvious thing to do, there is some tension as to its place in the *havruta* process. Some see it as an unnecessary by-product of the *havruta* process, calling it "*batalah*" or time-wasting, whilst others, seeing it in a more holistic sense referring to it using the oxymoron "productive *batalah*."<sup>51</sup> For *havruta* to be life-changing rather than simply meaning-making, one must leave room for "*batalah*."

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<sup>44</sup> Segal, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 7-8.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid 8.

<sup>50</sup> Segal, 9-10.

<sup>51</sup> Segal, 11.

### ***Havruta* style learning in a non-Jewish classroom: reflections on my use of *havruta***

Whilst the *havruta* method of learning is traditionally applied to the study of *the Talmud* and *Tanach*, it can also be applied to the study of other texts as demonstrated by Blumenfeld's use of the method in the Law classroom, where she had students examine an Act of Parliament in *havruta* using a series of questions to guide them.<sup>52</sup> As such, *havruta* can be used in a variety of ways to prepare, facilitate and support learning in any number of subjects or disciplines. Key texts to be covered in a class might be set for students to be read in *havruta* as a means of preparation or laying a foundation for further learning. This could occur prior to the class itself or it might be incorporated into the class, prior to a lecture or presentation. Given that all of our students are working in a language other than their first, this method of preparation can assist them in coming to grips with material that is essential to the content of a particular topic. It is then possible for the teacher to build on this material during the remainder of the lecture or class. Whilst it is not possible to read all preparatory material in this manner, important or particularly complex texts could be approached in this fashion. This process also has the benefit of allowing students to raise questions of the text, which they might be able to answer in *havruta* or which might be able to be brought to the teacher for clarification.

In so far as the study of Scripture is concerned, a more traditional approach could be followed. Students can be given the opportunity to engage with a particular text in *havruta* before it is examined by the teacher. This allows the voice of the text to be heard before any interpretations are placed upon it and for students to consider it in detail without being influenced by particular interpretations. Of course, students who are just beginning their study of Scripture might need some instruction as to ways in which they can approach a text before they begin reading it in *havruta*. This might involve highlighting particular textual cues such as paying attention to repetition, questions in the text, numbers, references to time and space and so on. As students gain confidence in approaching a text without the aid of a commentary, the teacher will not need to provide this means of scaffolding their learning. After their interaction with the text on its own, one might then direct them to read a variety of commentaries illuminating it. This can be approached in a number of ways: through providing general unguided access to these texts or highlighting specific commentaries and giving guiding questions. Again, this approach will vary depending upon the experience of the group and the extent to which the teacher wishes to direct the learning of the students.

Whilst the more traditional approach to *havruta* outlined above has great benefits, I have also found that the customary sequence of *havruta* learning in the *seder* followed by the *shi'ur*, or teaching, need not always be followed. Instead of using *havruta* to introduce material prior to a lecture or tutorial, the teacher might also use it as a way of consolidating learning and applying knowledge or skills previously taught. In this way, an hour long *havruta* session can follow two hours of teaching in a typical three hour block. This can help the students to develop a deeper understanding of what has been presented to them through teacher input or through assigned reading, as well as giving them an opportunity to test what they have already learned against one another and against the teacher. A further variation on this approach is to use *havruta* for shorter periods during the course of a longer class. During a typical class, I try to intersperse my own presentation or teaching with regular opportunities for the students to engage with their *haver* in order to discuss what they have just heard – I might use specific questions to facilitate this or simply ask my students what questions the instruction has raised for them. This is generally enough to start the process. I follow this by giving the students an opportunity to ask questions or note something that made an impact upon them as

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<sup>52</sup> Blumenfeld, 6-8.



part of a whole class follow up to the havruta session. The emphasis on using the *havruta* method helps to sharpen their discussion.

### In conclusion

I have found *havruta* style learning an invaluable tool in both my teaching and formation work. This cooperative methodology not only allows me to support the learning of my students, it also enables my students to support each other in the learning and teaching process. It encourages interdependence and responsibility and allows students to approach texts at their own level: depending on background, prior learning and ability. *Havruta* encourages creativity and imagination, rather than repetition and reproduction of other people's ideas. *Havruta* encourages students to express their own understandings; listen attentively to the insights of others; give free reign to the many possible interpretations of material, whilst also helping one another to focus on the particular task at hand; and to both support and challenge one another to come to a deeper understanding and clearer articulation of the content of the courses they have chosen to study. In adopting and adapting the *havruta* method of learning one is made conscious of the Jewish community of interpretation that values the study of Scripture with a *haver*.

"Hence, say the sages, a person should acquire a 'Haver' for everything: for reading Scripture, studying Mishnah, eating, drinking, and disclosing all one's secrets to. (*Sifre Deuteronomy* #305, adapted for inclusive language by the author)<sup>53</sup>

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