Leveraging Resources for Learning Through the Power of Partnership

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I. Introduction

Public forums on Jewish education regularly decry its costs, and emphasize the great need for increased financial resources for Jewish education inside and outside classroom settings. While we do not question the assumption that high quality Jewish education is expensive (indeed, almost anything of quality is), or the need for greater funding for Jewish education, the implicit equation of educational resources with financial support oversimplifies the current challenges in Jewish education, and unintentionally diverts conversation away from an analysis of other kinds of resources that affect learning.

Our current research on text learning in pairs or havruta text learning provides one illustration of how the field of Jewish education needs a more elemental understanding of educational resources. Resources are not only external resources brought to bear, but also include, among other things, the basic pedagogic elements that teachers and learners work with—in this case, the elements that comprise the havruta text learning encounter: oneself, one’s peer partner and the sacred text. These three elements constitute what we call the “three partners of havruta” (see diagram A), which identifies these three potential educational resources—resources that are already present in the learning experience—and puts them in relationship. These most basic of resources are often underutilized and even overlooked.

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1 Thank you to Susan Fendrick and Meir Lakein for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this paper and to participants in the Mandel Center lunch seminar series for their comments on our presentation of many of these ideas.
In our work, we emphasize that these elemental resources are actually partners in learning. We use this language of partnership to underscore the idea that learners must treat their peers and the texts they study as subjects in their own right, and relate to them as such. This means that each partner, including the text, has something worthwhile to offer that can come to light when listened to closely. The idea of partnership implies that there is a mutual responsibility to try to understand the other, instead of merely treating the text and one’s peers as objects to be used in pursuit of one’s own goals.

Our work here is very much connected to the discussion of David Cohen and colleagues about the nature of educational resources. In their article “Resources, Instruction, and Research” (2003), they make the point that learning resources are not simply about infrastructure improvements or increasing staffing, but also have to do with the specific people resources (such as teacher and peers) already in the classroom, and content resources (such as materials) and how they are made manifest. Resources here also includes personal resources, such as knowledge and capacities for engagement, including the way we use words and the relationships we are able to

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2 We will use the terms “havruta partner,” “partner,” and “resource” interchangeably in the body of the paper, although we recognize that while the ideal is for these resources (the human partners and the text) to be treated as partners, this is not always the case.

3 We will explore the implications of this framing in the conclusion of this article.
form. As Cohen et al. point out, it is not enough to simply have resources; they need to be activated for learners to learn. The “effects of resources depend on both access and use: students and teachers cannot use resources they don't have, but the resources they do have are not self-acting.” (ibid., p. 122) Thus, teachers and students need to actively and intelligently make use of the resources at their disposal in order to improve learning.

The current study, conducted in a seventh-grade Jewish studies classroom, asks: What happens to students’ learning as they are inducted into a relational learning framework represented by the three partners of havruta, and learn how to recognize and access the three havruta partners, their most elemental learning resources?

II. Theoretical underpinnings

This study is based in a view of text learning that understands the reader to be an active agent in constructing meaning, in interaction with the text (e.g. Langer, 1990, 1995; Scholes, 1985; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978). In this view, readers must be given an opportunity to engage with the text and be supported in developing the skills necessary for constructing meaning in interaction with the text (see Haroutunian-Gordon, 2010, 2014 for an example of one approach that does just that). Our work is also grounded in a view of learning as socially constructed and mediated (Vygostky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990; Tharp and Gallimore, 1991). Vygostky and other scholars of sociocultural views of knowledge describe a model of the “social formation of the mind” whereby social interactions support the construction of individual mental processes (Wertsch, 1985). This view provides some of the theoretical underpinning to the scholarly work on the potential benefits of well-designed...

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4 In Teaching Problems and the Problems of Teaching (2001), a close study of a third grade math class over the course of a year, Magdalene Lampert illustrates these points.

Growing out of this sociocultural view of knowledge construction is the idea that when students discuss texts with others, they have the potential to further develop their comprehension of the text, as well as important thinking and social skills (Murphy, et all, 2009). Research by Michaels, Resnick and O’Connor (2010) helps us understand that not all classroom talk is equal in its learning benefits, and that certain kinds of “talk moves” 5(p. 179-180) --what they call “accountable talk”6-- allow for more intellectually productive work than others (p. 239). All of these literatures, taken together, underscore the idea that it is important for learners to engage both with texts and people in pursuing understanding of these texts.

The focus of the present study is to specifically explore the interactions of a peer dyad (a havruta pair) with each other and with the biblical text under study, and to examine what happens to their learning as they learn to access both the text and human resources they are afforded in havruta. To do so, we investigate a learning segment in which students use both textual and human resources productively, and examine what happens to their learning as a result.

III. Context, Design, and Method of Current Study

This research is situated in a suburban Jewish supplementary school eager to experiment with strengthening their seventh graders’ skills for closely reading Jewish texts. We created a seventh grade beit midrash’, set up as a design experiment (Cobb, Confrey, Lehrer, and Schauble 2003)8. Our

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5 Talk moves are words, phrases or sentences that one uses in the course of speaking in order to affect something or someone.
6 Two examples of “accountable talk” moves are re-voicing (“So you’re saying that it’s an odd number”) and asking students to apply their own reasoning to someone else’s reasoning (“Do you agree or disagree and why?”) (Chapin, O’Connor, Anderson, 2003). The majority of research on accountable talk has been conducted in math and science classrooms.
7 Beit midrash literally means "study house" and is a place or environment in which people study Jewish texts together.
intention was to test out and document how students can be inducted into a particular relational model of Jewish text study (havruta) involving three partners, and how this affects their learning. Our pedagogy incorporated frameworks developed through previous research: (a) a model of six paired havruta learning practices (Kent, 2008, 2010); (b) the framework of the “three partners of havruta” (Kent, 2008), also called the havruta learning triangle (Holzer with Kent, 2013; and (c) the framework of “havruta inspired pedagogy,” which includes a particular teaching and learning stance, and a set of learning practices and learning structures (Kent & Cook, 2012).

We developed and co-taught an eight-session course, which met weekly from 6-7:30 pm. In consultation with synagogue staff, we chose to focus on the Jacob and Esau narratives in the Bible because they seemed developmentally appropriate and potentially interesting thematically to middle school students. In addition to the text content, the course focused on three important pedagogical components to support students’ partnered learning: teaching a partnership stance, teaching skills for accessing their human and text resources, and developing capacities for reflecting on learning.

Through direct instruction, students were introduced to the three partners of havruta framework, the partnership between two people and a text and the idea that it requires a stance of exploration and deep listening for the partnership to come alive. Then, through in-class discussions and exercises, students explored how their own stance towards their peers and the text could affect their partnership. One strategy for helping students learn to access their human partner as a real resource was to teach them a series of talk moves to help them better draw out each other’s ideas, elicit the similarities and differences in each other’s thinking, and better attend to and understand

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8 “Design experiments,” Cobb et al explain, “entail both ‘engineering’ particular forms of learning and systematically studying those forms of learning within the context defined by the means of supporting them.” Design experiments are explicitly used to explore the “complexity that is a hallmark of educational settings.” (Cobb et al, 9)

9 This article reports findings of one aspect of this design research and not on the entire project.

10 Talk moves are words, phrases or sentences that one uses in the course of speaking in order to affect something or someone. In this context, students were taught particular talk moves in order to have particular effects on their partnership learning.
one another. Students also learned talk moves to help them better attend to the text, such as “What’s your evidence” and “Is there another way to understand that?” These talk moves (and reminders about the partnership stance) were embedded in text study guides to further support their use. Also, students were taught that the stance and skills to access both the text and human partners were often parallel. For example, students were taught ways to both listen to a peer and a text, and became aware of the similarities (and differences) in doing each. Finally, through in-class exercises and written assignments, students were given opportunities for meta-cognitive reflection, to look at what they were each learning and how they were learning so that they could more intentionally utilize their new knowledge and skills and make mid-course corrections.\(^\text{11}\)

Because this was a design experiment, we documented all aspects of the course\(^\text{12}\), including collecting videotape of all class sessions, and made changes along the way based on what we saw happening in the class and what we identified through the data. We wanted to understand what these students could accomplish when they were intentionally and explicitly inducted into a learning partnership with each other and the text, and taught particular skills to access these resources and put them in relationship.\(^\text{13}\)

The teacher-researchers reviewed all materials, including the video documentation, in order to identify both different students’ areas of growth and themes and patterns that emerged from the data. As part of this process, we identified one student pair—Jim and Nate--whose havruta sessions

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\(^{11}\) While a complete description and analysis of this pedagogy is beyond the scope of this article, see http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/beitmidrashresearch/havruta.html for a video of and written narrative about our pedagogy.

\(^{12}\) This included videotaping the full class and two student pairs. We also collected student written work, mid-term assessments, teaching journals and other artifacts connected to each lesson. Also, students were interviewed by trained interviewers three weeks after the course ended in order to better understand what they had learned. All videotaped sessions and interviews were transcribed.

\(^{13}\) One example of a mid-course correction that was made was explicitly working with students to explore the idea of “understanding” and the connection between understanding a person and understanding a text. This was added to the curriculum after it became evident that simply teaching students the skills of close reading was not adequate for helping them put aside their early-formed beliefs about characters in the text and fully probe alternative interpretations.
we analyzed in order to explore how they utilized the resources of their three-way partnership, and how this affected their learning process and learning gains over the eight weeks.

The choice to focus on Nate and Jim’s havruta is both pragmatic and conceptual. In Hebrew school, student attendance is irregular, and Nate and Jim are the pair for which there is the highest number of recorded sessions (seven), allowing analysis of their learning trajectory from beginning to end. In addition, the richness of their case data offered an opportunity to develop a more conceptually textured case and a more grounded hypothesis about the improvements they seem to make in their havruta work.14 Their case offers both “images of the possible” (Shulman, 2004) for how students’ text learning can develop and grow deeper, and provides insight into how it becomes possible for these students to deepen their learning as they recognize the havruta learning resources of self, other, and text and make better use of them.

What follows are a few brief snapshots from Jim and Nate’s earlier peer learning sessions in order to develop a picture of their evolving learning patterns over time, followed by a close analysis from beginning to end of their seventh and final text-based peer learning session. The close analysis of session seven serves to both show how far they have come from the earlier working patterns, as well as provide a context for showing how their growing attention to the three elemental resources of the havruta triangle impacts both their learning process and their textual and person-based understanding. We draw on conversation analysis (Goodwin, 1990) for this purpose to analyze both their organization of speech and their emerging understanding through interaction.

IV. Nate and Jim’s Case

A. Beginning to try to intentionally listen to one another and the text

14 Our intent here is not to argue that Nate and Jim’s learning typifies—or for that matter exceeds—that of other pairs. Nor would we attempt to predict how their future Jewish text learning will be affected by their experience in this eight-week course.
In a questionnaire administered prior to the course, Jim and Nate state that they both know the basic facts of the Jacob and Esau narratives. Both write that they like to participate in group work. Nate explains that what helps him work better with a partner or group is when “I’m in charge and they listen to me.” Jim says that a challenge for him in group work occurs when people in the group have different ideas. Given this background, it is no surprise that at Jim and Nate’s first havruta meeting, when they discuss what will be important to their efforts to learn together, they highlight the idea that they will need to “share power”-- in the sense of giving each other space and respect to be a full participant in the work. As it turns out, learning to “share power” was one of the challenges they would face as a pair.

In their fourth learning session together, where they have been tasked with identifying details in the text, this interchange occurs:

Nate [reading the text]: “His father, Isaac, said to him ‘Who are you?’ And he said ‘I am your son Esau; your firstborn.’ Isaac was seized with a cry, violent, with very violent trembling. ‘Who was it then’ [reading in an angry sounding voice] he demanded ‘that brought, that hunted game and brought it to me? Moreover I ate of it before you came and I blessed him. Now he must remain blessed!’”

Jim: Nate, you, you know, you’re kind of making it assumptions by the way you’re saying it; that he was really mad.

Nate: He sort of is. He’s trembling. He’s violently trembling.

Jim: But he might be sad.

Nate: And he’s demanding. I mean, I’m not going to just go and demand that we--

Jim: But [English teacher’s name] demands things and she’s really cool about it.
Jim: So we can’t really be--

Nate: I, I mean, I know, I know nobody’s going to walk in and demand that they stop videoing us on the iPad; if I demanded something like “I demand that you turn these microphones off,” that’s angry. I’m frustrated. I want these gotten rid of.

Jim: Okay, keep going [with reading the text].

Both Jim and Nate attend to the text as a resource by reading it out-loud and tap into themselves as resources in relationship to the text by suggesting two different ideas about Isaac’s emotional state at this time: Nate suggests that Isaac was mad, and Jim suggests that Isaac could have been sad. Jim’s challenge of Nate’s early interpretation seems to suggest that Jim is trying to make the text a resource by closely listening to it and considering different interpretive possibilities (the subject of the previous lesson). However, Nate doesn’t probe Jim’s idea to help him understand it better and consider its merits. He just continues with his initial idea, which he seems to base in the fact that the English translation says “he [Isaac] demanded” and which he understands as reflecting anger. Nate is not tapping into his partner as a resource: he is not really listening in a sustained way to Jim, nor extending him the power of being a full participant with ideas worthy of engagement.

Jim also falls short, by not making it clear to Nate what he doesn’t understand or agree with in Nate’s suggestion that Isaac is angry—that is, by not making a sustained effort to serve as a resource. He tries to suggest that “demanding” doesn’t have to mean “angry” by bringing a counterexample of a teacher they both have, but then when Nate pushes back, Jim doesn’t attend to his own idea and pursue it; he just tells Nate to keep reading.

As they move forward with their reading of the text in this session, Jim calls attention to six details in the text, compared to Nate calling attention to one. This is consistent with Jim’s other peer
learning sessions: he stays close to the text, looking at single details and trying to understand their significance but not necessarily developing an understanding of the larger whole. Nate doesn’t seem to stick as closely to the text and, as demonstrated in the dialogue above, moves fairly quickly to drawing conclusions about what the text means.15

B. The challenges of holding all three partners in conversation

These dynamics come to a head in their sixth session. They are reading the part of the biblical narrative that explains that Rebekah is sending Jacob away from home, saying she doesn’t want him to marry a Canaanite. The next thing the text says is that Esau saw that his father didn’t approve of his sons marrying Canaanite women and marries one of the daughters of Ishmael, his uncle.

In the havruta, Jim tries to probe the text as they are reading it, and both asks Nate what he thinks and volunteers his own ideas. Nate does not want to stop and probe the text in the middle of reading it. Even when Jim gets Nate to stop and respond to the question he has raised, Nate is the one who decides how much time they will take exploring the question before going on. When he finally brings up an interpretation of part of the text, it isn’t based in textual evidence. Jim challenges him, using speech prompts he learned in class:16

Jim: I don’t see what you’re trying to say, Nate. Could you explain that in a different way [speech prompt]?

15 Interestingly, in their written work from this havruta session, Nate writes that Jim helped him notice that Isaac wasn’t necessarily angry, and Jim writes that Nate helped him notice that a demand is usually a form of anger. They both retain what the other one has said, but because during their havruta they didn’t treat their partners’ ideas as resources, they lost out on the opportunity to probe the ideas and see how that probing might have enriched their understanding of the text.

16 Students were taught a variety of speech prompts over the course of the eight weeks, questions and statements that they could use to help them work with both their human partner and the text. Some examples are: 1. Please tell me more about what you mean. 2. I don’t understand. Can you say that in a different way or give an example? 3. What’s your evidence? 4. What’s another way of understanding that?
Nate: Esau is trying to be a jerk to his father.

Jim: Where does it say-?

Nate: Because he didn’t get the, that’s my interpretation.

Jim: Where’s your evidence? [speech prompt]

Nate: I don’t have evidence. It’s just an interpretation.

Jim: Then, then it’s, oh well, show me where your interpretation is.

Nate has simply misread the text. He mistakenly assumes that Ishmaelites are Canaanites. And based on this assumption, he assumes that Esau’s marrying someone from Ishmael is an attempt to intentionally go against his father’s wishes. Nate is so sure of his reading of the text that he is unable to see or acknowledge his misreading. Jim continues to challenge him, using speech prompts and trying to hold him close to the text, but Nate understands these challenges to be proof that Jim simply doesn’t understand him, rather than an invitation to explore the merits of the interpretation together. A little further into their havruta, the following exchange takes place:

Jim: No, but I don’t understand what you’re trying to say because here [in the example you just gave] the dad is deliberately making it bad for the, for you.

Nate: That’s the point. That’s my point. I, Esau is deliberately making it annoying for Isaac; that’s my interpretation.

Jim: But it doesn’t-

Nate: He’s deliberately doing that on, that’s my interpretation.

Jim: It doesn’t, but, but, no. It doesn’t say anywhere in the text that Ishmael, any of Ishmael’s ladies or cousins or whatever are Canaanites.
Nate: See, that’s also my interpretation.

Jim: Wait. So, so you’re just, you’re just thinking that Esau married her just to annoy him but it doesn’t say anywhere that he did?

Nate: I’m trying to make an interpretation.

Jim: Yeah, but you, but you don’t have any, you’re, you’re, no. You’re predicting. You can’t, you can’t-

Nate: I don’t think you’re understanding me. Let me not explain because you still wouldn’t understand it.17

At this point in their learning experience, we see evidence that Jim is trying to hold the text in relationship. He is respecting the text as a full partner and a necessary resource by sticking close to it and trying to explore its multiple meanings. He is using speech prompts18 he learned in class to try to get his partner to elaborate his interpretation and point to evidence in the text to back up his ideas. He challenges his partner’s idea twelve times in this havruta alone. Jim is still spending a great deal of time reacting to Nate instead of proposing his own ideas, and focusing on discrete details in the text instead of looking at it as a whole. Nate too is trying to work with the text as a resource but his tendency to draw large conclusions before fully exploring the text, and then to not listen to his havruta’s ideas and challenges (ignoring the important resources his partner brings to their learning) gets in his way. Nate gets frustrated because he thinks Jim is not trying hard enough to understand him, but it is at least as significant that Nate is not trying hard enough to understand the text.

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17 Nate’s comment is a subversion of one of the speech prompts he was taught.
18 This is an example of how the speech prompts operate to allow Jim to try to both attend to the text as a resource and tap into his partner as a resource.
C. Utilizing Resources and Bringing the Partnership of Three to Life

Their seventh havruta session is markedly different from their earlier sessions. From the start of this havruta, they articulate to each other the way they are going to intentionally try to shift their pattern from one in which Nate develops theories about the text and often ignores Jim’s questions (and even the text), sticking to his original idea at all cost, and in which Jim reacts to Nate’s ideas (generally by raising textual challenges to Nate’s ideas) rather than either developing his own ideas or building off of Nate’s (at very least for exploratory purposes). This pattern has left Jim feeling like Nate is doing all of the real talking and none of the listening, and has left Nate feeling like Jim doesn’t understand what he says. To be sure, each has certainly learned something through the course of their previous sessions, and through the course of their interchanges noticed many details in the text. Some might even view their previous sessions as strong models of partner learning, since they are talking to each other and drawing on the text to varying degrees in their discussions. If one were to watch their havruta videos with the sound turned off, one would see what appears to be a lot of talk and activity directed at the central players of the peer learning session, the text and the two individuals.

However, talk and activity alone are not enough. They need to enable learners to utilize the resources at their disposal. Nate and Jim’s learning patterns have meant that they have not been utilizing the potential of their learning resources--themselves, the other person and the text --and working in partnership to explore what everyone is bringing to the table. They are sitting next to each other, talking to each other and trying to interpret the text, but their words and actions are not productively intersecting or building anything more substantial than the initial ideas each poses. Jim has practiced noticing details in the text, but has not built them into a larger whole and often reacts to Nate’s ideas rather than posing his own. Nate has developed some of his own big ideas, but often
does not adequately ground them in the text, explore other textual interpretive possibilities, or consistently consider his partner’s questions and suggestions.

Through in-class exercises, they have become aware of some of these dynamics and are working to change them. To highlight their attempt to shift the dynamics, they both are clear with the other at the start of their havruta that they are going to try on different roles in this particular havruta session. Nate says to Jim, “I won’t be the one talking,” meaning that he recognizes that he tends to talk a lot and that he will try harder to make room for Jim’s ideas and not just his own. In return, Jim says to Nate, “This time I will [talk]” meaning that while Jim has talked in past havrutot, in this one, he will try harder to share his own ideas about the text, while also responding to Nate’s.

a. Drawing on human resources

While they each say almost an equal number of words in this session, this fact alone could not tell us if they were engaging with each other, using each other to explore ideas and build them together. However, a close look at the transcript from their session shows that they are also completely responsive to each other in this havruta. Each of their utterances follows up on a previous utterance. They answer each other’s questions, never simply ignoring a question that is raised, and checking for understanding along the way. In the following transcript we see an example following their reading the verses that Rebekah was told by God that she has two nations in her womb and that the older will serve the younger, years before she helps her younger son get the blessing meant for the older.

Jim: Okay. Okay, so where it says where God gives Rebekah the prophecy sort of thing?

Nate: Yeah.

Jim: How did this come to happen? Because Rebekah knew this was going to happen, right? Because God told her.
Nate: [Looking at the text and then at Jim] Are you asking what, which parts of this came true in the story?

Jim: No. How did it happen that Rebekah, did God, because God doesn’t control people’s minds. So how did it come that (2) Esau, that, that Jacob would get the birthright when Rebekah already knew? Had Rebekah been like waiting? [rate of speech slows down]

Jim starts to ask a question and Nate encourages him to finish asking his question. Jim’s question—“How did this come to happen…” isn’t completely clear to Nate. While in past sessions, Nate might have moved on, ignoring Jim’s question altogether, in this session, he stops and checks to see if he understands what Jim is asking. Nate then pauses to let Jim tell him if his understanding is correct. Nate gives Jim an opportunity to confirm or negate Nate’s own understanding of Jim’s words. This is an example of a talk move, a word or phrase— in this case— “Are you asking….?”—that has an impact on the peer interaction. This particular talk move helps keep the partners in-sync and makes sure they are understanding each other. Nate’s invitation to Jim to confirm or negate Nate’s own understanding of Jim’s words gives Jim an opportunity to clearly tell Nate that he has it wrong, and to then try to reformulate his question more clearly. He makes three different attempts to do so, giving us more hints to what he is trying to sort through. It is only because Nate has given Jim the space to talk through his idea—in the language of the class, Nate used the practice of “attentive silence”—that Jim is able to elaborate upon his earlier question. While in past sessions, Jim might have let his idea go, in this session, where he is more attuned to utilizing himself as a resource, he takes advantage of the space created by Nate and tries to pursue his idea.

Jim’s question seems to get Nate thinking about his theory of what is going on. However, unlike previous sessions where Nate alone has elaborated theories, this theory comes out of his interaction with Jim and his interaction with the text; he is drawing on both as resources, and connecting them to his own thinking.
According to Nate, Rebekah doesn’t think the prophecy will happen without her making it happen. Therefore, she is the cause of all that occurs thereafter. (In articulating his theory, Nate responds to Jim’s questions: “Has Rebekah been waiting?” and “God doesn’t control people’s minds.”19) Jim tries to unpack Nate’s idea, and they continue to work hard to understand each other as they try to develop the big ideas they are weaving.

b. Drawing on textual resources

It would have been so easy for them at this point to simply move into the land of abstract discussion and share ideas back and forth, never looking back at the text and possibly leaving it far behind. But to do so would have been a missed opportunity to engage with the text resource at their disposal, and go deeper into it. Jim returns them to the text to see how Nate’s theory reads within the text itself, and through this move uncovers an important point: If Rebekah is really the cause of events, how do we explain the scene when Esav comes in starving from hunting and sells his birthright to Jacob for food? In Jim’s words: “Rebekah didn’t make Esav starving.” The question that Jim frames becomes: Why is Esav hungry on that particular day of all days, since his hunger seems to set a whole chain of events in motion? In making this move, Jim has intentionally attended to the text, drawing on it to ask a question that both responds to the conversation that preceded it and moves their conversation forward.

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19 In human speech, not all questions are phrased as questions. Jim often makes comments about ideas that he is questioning and wondering about. This is one such example.
This is but one of the many examples of the ways in which the text is a presence in their conversation. Jim and Nate closely examine this incident in the text, and Jim’s conclusion is “I feel like there’s something that the text is leaving out… because what is the cause of him selling his birthright and being really hungry?” They spin out the details in the text, imagining Esav as a hunter, working hard and coming home hungry on other occasions too, which only strengthens the question: Why on this day of all days did Esav come home hungry? As Nate says, “It wasn’t just coincidental.” By attending to the text in this case, they allow the text to challenge their own idea that Rebekah is the cause of all that has unfolded and in that way, the text is also a “partner” in their study. [maybe show triangle][maybe insert quote from Jim about what this partnership means]. They use the text’s details, its resources, to deepen their exploration.

c. Making the learning partnership (of three) come alive

As they shift their study to a focus on Jacob (their assignment was to consider the text through Jacob’s eyes and to consider Jacob’s character), their study becomes a full-fledged theological discussion. They are no longer focused on one or two details in the passage, but are considering all of the text they have studied up to this point to further explore their big question: What or who is the cause of how this narrative unfolds? This question has emerged through Nate’s and Jim’s both bringing themselves in relation to the text and to each other. They are exploring what is truly important to them, what Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon (2010) calls “a genuine question.” Neither is wedded to a single answer to this big question, but both are working together to explore it based on what they have learned in the text and from their own and each other’s knowledge and beliefs. Nate suggests that the birth story of Jacob and Esau is the cause of all that unfolds, since their birth order affects everything to come: “The effect of those two being born the way they are is
the cause of the prophecy.” This suggestion shifts their conversation to an explicit theological discussion about the nature of God’s role in humanity.

Jim: But God said that he does, He doesn’t control people. He created them since they’ll have their own minds just like any living thing because the whole world is what he wanted. Now He wants people who can have their own decisions.

Nate: Yeah, but at the same time God knows what’s going to happen.

Jim: He does but He can’t change it so.

Nate: Yeah, He may not be able to change it but He can know what’s going to happen.

Jim: But I feel like that God isn’t being honest here. He knows that something’s gonna happen so he tells Rebekah so that she can sort of-

Nate: Intervene and make it happen.

Jim: Is, is, is God, does God favor Jacob?

Nate: In, in a way. I think that God is the cause of this entire dispute. If that prophecy hadn’t happened, my theory is if that prophecy had never been given to Rebekah then she wouldn’t have helped Jacob…

Jim suggests that while God might know everything that happens, He can’t make it happen. As he gets to the crux of his argument—that God isn’t being honest in this narrative since He tells Rebekah the prophecy, knowing full well what that will set in motion-- he and Nate are in sync, with Nate re-voicing Jim’s idea with a slight shift of emphasis (“Yeah, He may not be able to change it but He can know what’s going to happen.”) and finishing Jim’s sentence (“intervene and make it happen”).
Each concludes this part of their study with a new idea:

Nate: In, in a way. I think that God is the cause of this entire dispute. If that prophecy hadn’t happened, my theory is if that prophecy had never been given to Rebekah then she wouldn’t have helped Jacob [points to text repeatedly] steal the birthright

Jim: Yeah, because, because Ja--

Nate: because she wouldn’t have known that one of, that the older will serve the younger.=

Jim: And--

Nate: So she wouldn’t have tried to get Jacob the spiritual power.=

Jim: And, you don’t hear, in this text [points to text] you don’t hear, see Jacob telling Rebekah. Rebekah just gets involved all of the sudden.

Nate: She just says “Oh he’s gonna get the birthright. Go get some skin. Go get some hairy stuff on and we’ll get that birthright for you.” [Jim looks at text]

Jim: Yeah, and I feel like God favors Jacob here.

Nate: In a sense-

Jim: Do you see that because

Nate: In a sense, I mean, in a sense, yes.

Jim: You know, God knows but that doesn’t make sense now because God could have just had Jacob come out first not Esau. Was, was God trying to make it hard for Esau?

Nate: Well, we’ll never know.
Nate gets more definitive as he speaks, suggesting that God is really the cause of all that unfolds in the narrative (and not Rebekah or the prophecy, as he earlier suggested). Jim provides textual support to Nate’s idea (“And, you don’t hear, in this text, you don’t hear, see Jacob telling Rebekah. Rebekah just gets involved all of the sudden.”), as Nate continues to revisit his idea and develop it further. Jim frames his own new idea initially as a question: Does God favor Jacob? While he could easily have stopped with this question, in a sense an obvious point that arises from the text, he continues to develop his question/idea based on their discussion of the text and frames the following question: “Was God trying to make it hard for Esav?” since if it was just a matter of favoring Jacob, God could have had Jacob be born first.

As we consider this havruta session overall, Nate has used it as an opportunity to really listen and respond to his partner’s ideas in a way that he has not previously. And while Jim has raised many questions, they do not come out as attacks on Nate’s idea, but rather as explorations of the text overall. Jim has moved away from focusing solely on this or that textual detail to being able to explore the text as a whole and put forward his own ideas about it (often in the form of a question), even at times supporting Nate’s ideas in the process. The tone of their havruta has the quality of focused exploration. They are focused on a big question: What is the cause of this narrative? What is the power behind it? And they pursue a number of points to try and respond to that question, maintaining an open quality in their consideration of new ideas and new evidence as they move along in their discussion. Even Nate’s theory comes across as less heavy-handed than in previous instances, as he is more ready to explore the underpinnings of his theory, consider Jim’s response to it, and revise it based on what he hears from the text and from Jim.

One might say that they have succeeded in meeting the overall learning goal of activating all sides of the three partners of havruta triangle, the core relational triangle, and in a sense, made their
partnership of three come alive. They have done this by keeping themselves, the text, and their human partner ongoing parts of the conversation—really listening to each, giving space to each to articulate or share ideas, supporting the building of each other’s ideas, and challenging ideas for the purpose of sharpening their understanding. They have also done this by moving the conversation beyond analysis of a single detail in the text, taking all the textual knowledge that they have built to explore the text’s larger meaning.

There is a sense of “focused wondering”\(^20\) in their discussion, a focus on a big idea (what is the cause of the particular chain of events in the story of Jacob and Esau?), a focus on the details in the text and how the text supports or challenges their interpretations, and a focus on each other. This focus is balanced by their wondering stance, their willingness to explore different ideas and interpretations and not simply settle on the first idea that comes their way. And their work is undergirded by what appears to be a deep respect for each other and the text, as reflected in how they treat each partner.

During this session, Jim and Nate have been jointly constructing knowledge. While each raises and pursues his own ideas, the development of these ideas is distributed across them (similar to Resnick’s 1993 findings) so that their ideas become shared and integrated within each other’s developing trajectory of thought. Each starts the session with a particular idea or question that is developed and changed through their interactions with each other and the text, and they move from trying to fill gaps in the text through close textual analysis (already a more advanced way of working with the text than merely reading the plot) to having a theological discussion grounded in the details of text. Their increased use of the resources at their disposal heightens their ability to dig more deeply into the text. In interviews conducted three weeks after the course ends, both Jim and Nate

\(^20\) See Kent, 2010 for a further discussion of “focused wondering” and its role in partner learning.
comment on some specific ideas and skills that they have learned about the practice of partnership itself, and ways in which they have already used some of those skills in other contexts.

Jim starts off his interview explaining that this class gave him an opportunity to go “close into the text” and notice “new interpretations…that I would never have thought of.” He eloquently talks about learning to understand the idea of the text as a partner, and learning to use the prompt “what is your evidence” to make the text a partner and “not judge” it, which to him means reading it quickly and going with his first understanding of it. He explains, “I think that the text is telling you something, so that makes it a partner, but you have to listen to what it's telling you…and just like you…can’t judge a person by their looks, you can’t do that with the text either just by scanning it.”

He provides a specific example of how he made the text a partner in one of his study sessions with Nate. “I was really looking in [to the text] to see where he [Nate] was coming from, and I thought he might be right, but then I realized that I had just scanned over it. [I] went back and I looked really closely at it, and I found a couple of things that I had skipped over - it was actually a whole line that I skipped over that had important information in it.”

He also gives a nuanced description of what a good human partner/havruta looks like: “somebody who really cares about what the other person thinks, and...how they feel about what they're looking at; even if the other person completely disagrees, they should both look at each other's evidence, and somebody who, I guess, really...is thoughtful about the other person's idea, even if it's not what they believe.” While he says that the practice of “attentive silence” was the hardest thing for him to practice in terms of working with his human partner, Nate, his nuanced

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21 He does not specifically list those new interpretations and due to time constraints for conducting these interviews, the interviewer protocol privileged trying to elicit information about students’ learning new skills and ideas about the work of partnership, rather than fully assessing what new content ideas they gained. (However, an examination of his student work indicates some of the new details in the text that he notices and some of the interpretations he develops.)

22 It is noteworthy that Jim also points to examples outside of class where he has begun to work harder to listen to the text. Specifically, he talks about learning parshat hashavua with his family and using the speech prompt, “where is your evidence?” and more generally, re-reading what he reads in books and not merely skimming.
discussion of how he used this practice in his havruta work points to his understanding of this concept and his ability to use it intentionally at important points during his partnership work. For example, “I listened to him and I got his point and then I let him keep going but once he went too far and I said, ‘wait… I don’t think that’s right.’” Overall, his comments reflect an understanding of the importance of considering both the other person and the text in order to make the most of the Torah learning experience, and he is able to provide details of his experience to illustrate his understanding.

For Nate, his most clear partnership learning gain is that he is able to recognize himself as someone who has trouble listening to his human partner and then turn this around to become a better listener. “I definitely got better at attentive silence because I was always the talker and by the end, I was letting my partner talk.” He specifically talks about how this turn-around came about through the course of a reflective exercise in class, and we see evidence of this in his last havruta session. “I was, most of the time, in the not good at all area and it just came to me like I need to turn this around and get on the other side. And so I said ‘All right,’ I sat down with my partner Jim and I said ‘All right, I’ve done the talking. What do you want to say?’ And I let him talk and I responded.

“ He highlights the quality of being a good listener in his description of what makes for a good havruta: “I think it [a good havruta] is someone who isn’t just a talker but they also listen, and when they’re listening, they use attentive silence, they ask questions, and when they’re talking they let the other person respond.”

He also says that he is doing a better job of listening in his relationships outside of class as well. “I have always been the talkative person…and I’ve been talking a lot in places that I should

23 Interestingly, during most of their havruta sessions, Jim and Nate uttered an almost equal number of words. This highlights the fact that being a good listener and practicing attentive silence isn’t just about the number of words one utters but about one’s stance towards one partner and whether one really makes space for his/her ideas to flourish.
have kept quiet. I [am now] attentively listening, using attentive silence and paying attention, learning what I need to and when I don’t understand, then I ask a question and I ask them to explain. And if I don’t get how they’re explaining it, I ask them to explain it in a different way.”

In the interview, Nate shows his understanding of the three partners of havruta triangle by explaining that it emphasizes the importance of not just working together with another person, but also working with the text too (not just reading it). “There’s the person and the person and they work together, which makes the bottom of the triangle. And then you’re working, in a sense, with the text, and it’s not that you and your partner are reading the text. You and your partner are working with the text so you have your partner, the two people connected and they’re both connected to the text…” He seems to feel that for him it is easier to work with the text :“it’s just there for you.” There is certainly evidence in the last havruta session that Nate does more listening to both the text and his havruta. It is interesting to note that he doesn’t yet seem to consciously connect the fact that, by pressing him for evidence, his havruta partner helped him treat the text as a partner and to listen to it. (This would be the next step to pursue with him if the class had continued.)

V. Conclusion

This case dug deeply into one havruta session to illuminate what the learning process looks like as students activate the most elemental resources of their havruta learning experience--themselves, their human partner and the text --and the subsequent gains that they make as a result. As Jim and Nate learn to recognize these elemental resources, attend to them, use them productively, and put them in relationship, their learning can be described as “going deeper.” The

24 Another study might focus the lens more broadly to look at all the student work that this class generated and/or all of the student interviews; we hope to conduct such an analysis in the future, in particular to help highlight all of the students’ learning gains. This fine-grained analysis of one pair’s learning process and learning gains has had the advantage of illustrating with some specificity what students need to do within their text-based discussions to affect those learning gains and identifying some of the factors that make them possible.
analysis of Jim and Nate’s havruta helps show that it is not enough to activate each of the three partners separately; “parallel play” among the partners does not on its own generate the most productive learning. That is, mere “turn taking” or speaking the same amount of words does not produce deep learning or productive talk among peers, and does not on its own create a partnership. Rather, it is when Jim and Nate are able to both access these partners and bring them into productive relationship that their partnership of three comes alive, and their discussion reaches new levels of insight.

The theme of “going deeper” emerged from analysis of student interviews as a whole. There, students talked about the class experience as having been different from their usual experience studying texts, and how they learned a new way to learn that required them to slow down, re-read, consider alternative ideas, get up close to the text and go deeper. While students use language like “going deep” or similar phrases to describe their learning experience generally, we use it to also refer specifically to what they did with the text and its content. For us, as teacher-researchers, going deeper in this context means that students moved beyond merely learning the plot of the story, that they developed and explored multiple interpretations grounded in the evidence and gaps in the text, and that they learned and utilized skills and tools for studying together and developed a stance toward one another and the text that supported this learning process.

Nate and Jim’s seventh session is an instance of deeper learning, in which the students started the session understanding the text in a particular way, and by the end had probed it in order to understand it in far more nuanced ways. The session is also an instance of deep learning in the sense that it indicates change over time in how these students work together and with the text. Nate and Jim’s final interviews (quoted in the preceding pages) provide support for the idea that, through the time they spent in the seventh grade beit midrash, they developed new understandings of
themselves as havruta partners, and new ideas and skills to access their havruta resources and attend to the full partnership.

In our classroom observations and recordings of data,\textsuperscript{25} we observed the other students to varying degrees drawing on these resources, and by doing so raising questions and developing ideas about the text. In interviews, students also reported learning skills to draw upon the resources, and gave examples of how they used those skills. For example, Jodi talks about having gotten better at attentive silence and using her body to indicate to her partner that she’s really listening. She also explains that she got better at considering if there was another way to understand the text, by re-reading it and trying to see it from a different perspective and also considering her partner’s different perspectives. Becky also explains that she got better at attentive silence, which to her means not interrupting the other person’s thinking but just saying ‘tell me more about what you mean’ so they can explain more. She explains that in her havruta, “at first we wouldn’t understand each other, but then once we explained it, we both got it and came up with some really good ideas together.” Ed says, that among other things, he got better at challenging his partner to support his ideas with evidence. He explains that his partner did it to him a lot and “that reminded me I could do it.” He said he used to just go with whatever idea his partner suggested, and then “[get] excited that it was my turn to talk.” Now, if he “saw something that seemed a little off, [he’d] say, ‘where did you see that?’

Many students in their interviews also shared insights that they gleaned about the content of the text itself through using their havruta skills\textsuperscript{26}. For example, Ira links the speech prompt, “is there another way of thinking about that?” to helping him think about Rebekah’s perspective, when she

\textsuperscript{25} The date includes videotape of another student pair (whose members changed frequently), videotape of all full class exercises and discussions, observational notes from each class and all written student work.

\textsuperscript{26} This question was not asked to all students.
tells Jacob the plan for his going in to Isaac to get the blessing. “We tried to put ourselves in her perspective and see what she would’ve thought…” Shelly talks about the experience of looking at the text through “different eyes,” having studied it before, but now considering different perspectives on whether or not Jacob was justified in taking Esau’s birthright for a bowl of soup.

The interviews also highlighted another important piece of learning, in that students internalized the framework of partnership and consequently report that the course affected their attitude towards the text and their ideas of what havruta is about. Many students talk about a havruta partner using descriptive phrases that indicate an ethical aspect to the work: someone who “cares,” “pays attention,” and “takes time to understand;” someone with whom you have a sense of trust” and who “helps you grow.” Human havruta partners help one another and deeply attend to one another. Similarly, and significantly, they talked about the text as “there for you,” “as telling you something [if] you listen to what it’s telling you,” as “back up…even if I was saying something wrong, the text would prove me wrong,” as “a partner that contributes ideas,” and as something that one needs to take the time to “understand.” In these phrases, we hear the text presented as an active partner in the learning, and learners as having a responsibility to treat it as such. As one student said, “[H]ow I thought about it [the text] was different, because they really challenged us to think about the text differently than I might have before” (Sally). As another student said, “Not only do you have your partner, as in your havruta partner, who sits next to you and talks to you…the text sort of talks to you as well” (Ira). For these students, there is a sense that the havruta partners treat each other as subjects with integrity, to be attended to and drawn upon, not merely resources to be used or used up. To access this integrity, partners must approach one another with openness and respect and be responsible for “hearing” what the other has to offer.
Notably, this suggests that the partnership framing goes beyond a resource framing in important ways. The partnership framing calls upon the partners to be accountable to and for one another and indicates that everyone has a responsibility to attend to those resources, not just for their own gain but for the greater good of the whole. The partnership framing also privileges relationship, which in this context, possibly provided the students with extra motivation to stick with it, even when they were tired and the work was hard. Because of Nate’s relationship with Jim, it was worth it to him to try and turn around how he was working with Jim (and in turn with the text). This suggests that it is important for teachers to work on fostering these relationships, so that students take their peers and the texts they study seriously, both as an end in themselves and also as a means to helping students develop a stake in the learning process and their learning relationships.

Finally, we learn through both Jim and Nate’s case, as well as through the interviews, that the skills for engaging with a person and with a text are deeply connected. For example, as Nate learned to better attend to his human partner, he also better attended to the text. And as Marcie eloquently states in her interview, “It’s just as misleading to judge the text as it is to judge a person and [you need] to use what you know about thinking about people…and think about that when you look at the text so you can learn the most you can from it.” How we attend to both kinds of partners is integrally connected.

These observations—that it is essential to text learning to activate the most elemental resources, that these resources need to be put into relationship for the “deepest” learning, that these resources can be framed as “partners” with implications for accountability, and that the skills for connecting to the two different types of resources, people and the text, are integrally connected -- have important implications for how we teach and support students when they are studying texts
with others. While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore in detail the implications for teaching, a few general principles are in order:

1. It is important that educators help students recognize at a basic level that the text and their peers can serve as important resources in their learning, and teach students how to use them as resources. Educators can do this through cultivating students’ learning stance or attitude toward the text and their peers, teaching them specific havruta practices and skills, such as some of the talk moves discussed above, and supporting their learning with the right structures, such as well developed study guides.\(^{27}\)

2. Part of helping students to access these resources includes helping them understand the parallels between the skills they need to see another person as a resource and to see the text as one, such as what it means to listen to another person and to listen to a text.

3. It is not enough just to identify these as resources and teach students how to attend to them individually. Students need to be supported to put these resources into relationship through, for example, explicit talk moves and study guide instructions.

4. Undergirding the strength of the partnership work is students’ understanding of themselves as part of a partnership relationship with the text and with others. Educators can help students understand what this means and how this relationship is one of responsibility and accountability, helping students reflect on and take responsibility for their role in the partnership.

5. Finally, teachers can continually assess students’ growth and learning needs in these terms: How are students able to recognize and draw upon each other and the text as resources?

\(^{27}\) See Kent and Cook (2013 and 2014) for a more detailed definition of terms and discussion of examples of what we mean by stance, practices and structures.
There is much to be learned about the frameworks that are needed for helping students to
grow into and attain a deeper engagement with the texts that constitute “Torah”—that is, Jewish
learning in the broad sense. But we can begin with the recognition that learners have three of the
most elemental resources for that engagement close at hand—themselves, their learning partners,
and the texts themselves—and that some basic skills and frames can help them access those
elements as resources. As we think about questions of “resource allocation” in Jewish education, we
might consider how to help learners (and how to help teachers help learners) better draw upon and
leverage the most basic of resources already available to them, and bring them into relationship to
facilitate and deepen learning.

Transcript Notations
.
falling intonation

?
rising intonation

,
continuing intonation

[ ]
brackets around word or phrases indicate that these have been inserted to assist the reader's
understanding, either to insert implied words or to insert descriptions of what the individuals
are doing.

-  speech is cut off (generally by other person)

=  no noticeable interruption between utterances

… some content has been cut out

(2) silence 2 seconds, timed to the nearest second
BIBLIOGRAPHY


