What Connects “Good” Teaching, Text Study and Hevruta Learning? A Conceptual Argument

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Introduction
The study of Jewish traditional texts in a Hevruta learning setting (two people studying a text together) represents past as well as contemporary modes of Jewish religious and devotional study. More recently, Hevruta learning has made its way into several contexts of professional development in Jewish education, including inservice settings like the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute (MTEI) and preservice settings like the teacher preparation program at Pardes in Jerusalem and the DeLeT fellowship program at Brandeis University. While it seems plausible for professionals to engage in this traditional form of learning, I am interested in how this cultural activity might be especially generative in the professional development of teachers.

In this paper I discuss a new rationale for the study of texts in Hevruta based in philosophical hermeneutics as it was developed in the context of the Beit Midrash for teachers in the DeLeT program. Central to this argument is the idea of “conversation” as developed by H.G. Gadamer and P. Ricoeur, which I use to illuminate a view of Jewish text study in Hevruta. Next I consider some of the dispositions needed to participate in such conversations with both the text and a Hevruta partner. I then claim that these dispositions are also integral to good teaching, at least the kind of teaching fostered in the DeLeT program where this research is taking place. This paper is part of a larger project designed to document and study the character, quality and impact of the

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1 An early version of this paper was presented at the Network for Research in Jewish Education, June, 2005. I would like to thank my colleagues and friends Sharon Feiman-Nemser and Orit Kent for their thoughtful comments on an early draft of this article as well as for their rich critical colleagueship in developing, guiding and conceptualizing the DeLeT’s Beit Midrash for Teachers, at Brandeis University.


4 For a discussion of educational aspects and implications of Hevruta learning, see Aliza Siegel, Havruta Study: History Benefits and Enhancements, Jerusalem: ATID, 2003; Gilla Ratzersdorfer Rosen, Empathy and Agression in Torah Study: Analysis of a Talmudic description of Havruta Learning, in Wisdom from All My Teachers, J. Sacks and S. Handelman (eds.), Jerusalem and New York: Urim, 2003, p.249-263. Early Talmudic sources reflect an awareness of various interpersonal characteristics that take place during Hevruta study, for example: “Rabbi Hiya bar Abba said: even a parent and a child, or a teacher and his student who are studying Torah together… at first become enemies of one another, but they do not move from there until they become devoted friends of one another”, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin, 30b.
Beit Midrash for teachers at Brandeis and to explore the potential of text study in Hevruta as a form of professional development for teachers.

**Rationales for Text Study in Professional Development**

When I speak about text study in Hevruta, I refer to a situation in which the learner is involved in a slow, meticulous open investigation and deciphering of the text, helping his study partner, weighing alternative interpretations, arguing with his study partner about possible interpretations and “arguing with” the content of the text. For centuries, this activity has served not only as a method of acquiring knowledge, but also as a devotional activity believed to have a transformative impact on its practitioners in terms of religious practice, beliefs and values learners were to take away from the content of these texts. 5 Today, however, the intensive work required by this type of text study is, in many ways, a counter-cultural and unnatural activity. The nature of Hevruta text study runs against the grain of widespread cultural patterns of learning and experiences. We operate in an age of visual learning and exposure to compact and well-presented information, not meticulous reading and intensive open-ended investigation of texts as a collaborative operation. 6 Contemporary educational orientations favor measurable and objective learning outcomes, rather than attention to the transformative potential of the learning process. 7 Hevruta text study is also time consuming and demanding for both teacher and students. It requires sophisticated intellectual and interpersonal skills and forms of knowledge. Yet, the persistence of this mode of learning over uncountable centuries and its recent “come back” leads us to explore its potential contribution to the professional development of teachers. I therefore ask: What can I hope that teachers might gain by engaging in a learning experience of this type?

In designing both the curriculum and the pedagogy of Delet’s Beit Midrash for Teachers at Brandeis, my colleagues and I were driven by several rationales, that we most likely share with

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5 The transformative effects of text study pertain to actions to be accomplished, beliefs to held, character development etc. It seems that the metaphysical quality of the subject matter was traditionally perceived as the cause of transformation. See for example The Zohar, Part II, p. 99 a and b; M. Idel, Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia, Albany: State Univ. of New York Pr., 1989; Benjamin Gross, L’ame de la vie: Hayyim de Volozhyn, Lagrasse : Verdier, Paris 1986. See also different meanings attributed to Torah Lishma study; N. Lamm, Torah lishmah: in the works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his contemporaries, New York : Yeshiva University Pr., 1989. In more recent times, with the growing awareness of the impact of processes of interpretation in literary and philosophical hermeneutics theories, the transformative dimension is also attributed to modes of text study, see Anthony C. Thiselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics. The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1992; Mario J. Valdes, Phenomenological Hermeneutics and the Study of Literature, University of Toronto Press, 1987.

6 A similar case is made in relation to certain forms of literature and of history studies of texts. Compare for example with W. Iser, a theoretician of literature: “The question arises as to why we may need this particular medium, especially in view of the fact that literature as a medium is put on a par with other media, and the ever-increasing role that these play in our civilization shows the degree to which literature has lost its significance as the epitome of culture. The more comprehensively a medium fulfills its sociocultural function, the more it is taken for granted, as literature once used to be. It did indeed fulfill several such functions, ranging from entertainment through information and documentation to pastime, but these have now been distributed among many independent institutions that not only compete fiercely with literature but also deprive it of its formerly all-encompassing function. Does literature still have anything to offer that the competing media are unable to provide?” W. Iser, The Significance of Fictionalizing, lecture for the Learned Societies Luncheon, presented at Irvine on February 24, 1997. See also David Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity; Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope, The University of Chicago Press, 1987, who discusses the challenge of historical consciousness for text based traditions.

7 For the philosophical underpinnings of the pragmatists and technical view of knowledge see Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, Minneapolis, 1979.
teacher educators in other contexts of teachers’ professional development where Hevruta text study is taking place. Some of these rationales attend to the content of the texts, while other rationales attend to the very activity of text study and Hevruta learning.8

Two rationales pertain to specific contents from specific texts that teachers should learn and “take” away from these texts. In this view, the texts provide a source of content knowledge, which is important for teachers to know as Jewish educators, because they are expected to teach the content to their students. Thus a Bible teacher will study biblical texts which he or she is expected to teach in the classroom. A second rationale is to view the content of Jewish texts as some type of “Jewish literacy”, something that each Bible teacher or Jewish educator ought to know, despite the fact he or she is not expected to teach these.

Two additional rationales attend to what teachers should take away from the experience of text study. The activity of text study offers teachers an opportunity to individually and actively engage in the interpretation of Jewish texts, thus providing them with a sense of ownership of these texts and confidence in their own ability to work with and teach these texts. Furthermore, the intimate setting of text study in Hevruta provides an exposure to different learning styles used by different learners, which again is important for teachers to be aware of.9

Finally, two rationales attend more specifically to the mode of Hevruta study. According to these views, teachers should engage in Hevruta text study because it represents a traditional Jewish learning mode that should be a part of teachers’ general Jewish education. Another view emphasizes the importance of teachers experiencing this mode of study in order to be able to use it as a mode of study for their students in the classroom.10

The context of DeLeT’s Beit Midrash for Teachers

The argument I present in this article is conceptual in nature but it has grown out of a concrete and specific context: DeLeT’s Beit Midrash is an integral part of the DeLeT (Day School Leadership Through Teaching) program at Brandeis, a thirteen month, post BA fellowship program designed to prepare teachers for the elementary grades in Jewish day schools. Together with my colleague Orit Kent, we have designed and lead the Beit Midrash for the last four years, for a period of one month each time. Beit Midrash sessions are 3 hours long and meet twice a week. The curriculum of the Beit Midrash for Teachers reflects three purposes: (1) to explore ideas about teaching and learning in classical Jewish texts; (2) to explore hevruta as a form of Jewish learning; and (3) to explore elements of “good” text study. The first purpose highlights the substantive ideas in the texts under study; the second and third emerge from the activity of text study in pairs.

Texts are chosen to represent different genres, including Biblical, talmudic and medieval texts, both legal and midrashic. The Beit Midrash is organized around themes related to teaching and learning and texts are selected for the themes they address. The students are encouraged to study the texts in their Hebrew/Aramaic original language but an English translation is offered as well. This Beit Midrash differs from more traditional Yeshivah Beit Midrash settings in a couple and important elements. In most cases, and especially as far as the talmudic literature is concerned, texts are studied as selected segments only. The teachers of the Beit Midrash provide short

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8 This is based on informal interviews we conducted of teacher educators who incorporate text study in Hevruta into their teacher education program. See footnote no.3.

9 This rationale is mentioned by the leaders of all three educational programs mentioned in footnote no. 3.

10 Both rationales were explicitly noted by the leaders of Pardes’ Beit Midrash and Teacher Preparation program located in Jerusalem, during an interview I conducted in March 2005. Experiencing Hevruta learning in order to implement it in other educational contexts is also one of the rationales of Hevruta learning at the Mandel Teacher Educators Institute.
historical and conceptual background to the texts, as well as a relatively short selection of commentaries which they believe to be relevant to the study. Most important, they provide the students of the Beit Midrash with a study guide for each session, which is meant to orient the text study towards specific questions but without neutralizing the more explorative nature of the text study.

These characteristics of DeLeT’s Beit Midrash are an outcome of various dilemmas and choices I have made with my colleague, during the ongoing process of designing and teaching the Beit Misrash. I will address these aspects in a future study which will discuss the enacted curriculum of DeLeT’s Beit Midrash.

A conceptual argument

In the context of my work in DeLeT’s Beit Midrash, I have come to articulate an additional and new rationale for text study in Hevruta. Its conceptual view makes the case for inducting teachers into the cultural practice of text study through Hevruta learning in a manner that holds potential for transformative effects and implications on their work as teachers in the classroom. The impact I discuss refers to the cultivation of dispositions that I consider to be central to good teaching.

Text study in Hevruta is a complex activity. It engages the learner simultaneously in two activities: studying a text and studying with a partner. Yet, not every random engagement with a text and a Hevruta may entail similar educational effects. As teacher educator, interested in engaging teachers in this complex activity, I needed to analyze what skills and dispositions are required to participate in this activity, and how I understand the nature of the activity itself. What conceptual view informs the way I talk about the study of text and Hevruta learning? How does this relate to the skills and dispositions I would like teachers to develop and learn from their engagement in this activity?

My approach uses philosophical hermeneutics, especially as articulated in the writings of Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, to develop a new rationale for text study and Hevruta learning and its implication for the education of teachers. I am drawn to these philosophers because they view understanding as an interpretive and dialogical process. Their writings not only provide a generative theory of interpretation and meaning making, they also take the study of texts as a


\[12\] There are of course significant differences between the views of these philosophers. In this article, we refer to “philosophical hermeneutics” essentially in reference to Gadamer and Ricoeur, and we adopt a relatively eclectic and selective approach to their philosophies. Significant differences of opinion on specific issues are explicitly noted. Earlier articles have discussed philosophical hermeneutics in the context of Jewish education: D. Kerderman, Some Thoughts about Hermeneutics and Jewish Religious Education, Religious Education 93 (1), 1998, :29-43; Jon A. Levisohn, Openness and Commitment: Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Teaching of Jewish Texts, Journal of Jewish Education, Vol. 67 (1/2, Spring/Summer 2001, p. 20-35. On hermeneutics and Jewish education see J. Cohen, Hermeneutic Options for the Teaching of Canonical Texts: Freud, Fromm, Strauss, and Buber read the Bible. Courtyard 1:35-65; M. Gillis, Michael, Hermeneutics and Jewish Education: The Case of Rabbinic Literature, Monash University, 1999, Melbourne, Australia; Barry W. Holtz, Textual knowledge: teaching the bible in theory and in practice, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2003.
paradigm for understanding in general. This is particularly important in the context of teacher education in Jewish education because it addresses the question of how people understand (which is a central issue for teachers to address), through what happens in text interpretation. Implicitly, this approach assumes text study to be an activity in which one may experience and learn something more fundamental about the nature of understanding.

Following Gadamer and Ricoeur, I use the concept of “conversation” to characterize the relationship between interpreter and text. In fact, I frame both the learning of texts and the learning in Hevruta as a conversation which is interpretive in nature. The analysis of what one does when engaged in conversation will lead me to articulate and emphasize some of the dispositions that one has to cultivate in order to genuinely participate in this kind of conversation. My thesis is that the dispositions needed to participate in conversations with texts in the setting of Hevruta learning are similar to dispositions needed by teachers, in order for good teaching to take place, at least as teaching is conceptualized at DeLeT. Not surprisingly, these dispositions shape the ends and means in other components of the DeLeT program as well.

I now briefly outline elements of conversation in the relationship between interpreter and text in order to address the nature of the activity of text study and Hevruta learning that are aimed for in the Beit Midrash for Teachers at DeLeT. This type of conversation builds on both a view of the activating nature of texts upon the interpreter as well as on the latter’s activity towards the text.

**The Activating Nature of Texts**

People tend to overlook the fact that texts are not natural artifacts, but rather modes of expression and communication created by human beings. What, then, is the nature of this communicative medium? What is the nature of texts? How does the way one thinks about texts influence the way one engages with texts?

What a speaker speaks about is the referent of his discourse. Every discourse has therefore a referential function, which means that the “subject of discourse says something about something.” According to Ricoeur, in living speech situations, people draw on their common context, direct interactions, facial expressions etc. in order to clarify the referent of discourse, pointing (as it were) to what it is they speak about. In such cases, the reference is ostensive, that is, clearly pointing to what it intends to say.

This is no longer the case when discourse has been fixed in writing and when text takes the place of speech. In the encounter between the reader and the text, such cues are absent and the natural “movement of reference” of a live dialogue is interrupted: The reader meets the text rather than its author, and the reference is no longer ostensive. The text is now removed from its authorial intention, from its initial context and from its original audience, and has attained therefore some form of autonomy. This is one of the reasons why the text is open to a range of interpretations.

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16. This is also due to the polysemic nature of language, See P. Ricoeur, *The rule of metaphor: Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977; Paul Ricoeur,
In Ricoeur’s view, texts are about - and refer to a world, which is the world of the work. These references are evoked but not immediately present or given to the reader. The text points to some meaning, although the meaning is not merely grounded in each and every word, or even in the sum of the words. The reader does therefore not capture the meaning of the text by “scanning” the words, as it were. The task of the reader (and thus of interpretation) is precisely to orient himself or herself to something that the text is pointing to. The text invites the reader for what Ricoeur calls, the “work” of semantic innovation, that is, a process of interpretation starting from the text and exploring what the world it refers to is about. This, in a nutshell, is what creates the space for - and the movement of - the process of interpretation. In other words, given their referential quality texts require an activity of interpretation. Meaning is not directly given to the interpreter. By their very nature, texts engage the interpreter in what Ricoeur calls the “work of semantic innovation,” or the process of interpretation. Rather then descriptive, texts are generative. I therefore say that texts have an activating nature.

**The interpreter’s activity**

According to Gadamer, no human being is a passive recipient of texts. Broadly speaking, human being belong to the world before they actually attend to analyze it. Every understanding always

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Interpretation theory: discourse and the surplus of meaning, Fort Worth : Texas Christian Univ. Pr., 1976. Interpretation is the reenactment of “the initial event of discourse in a new event of discourse that will claim to be both faithful and creative”, P. Ricoeur, Philosophy and Religious Language. p. 38; Compare to Gadamer’s definition of hermeneutics as a retrieval of living speech: “The best definition of hermeneutics is to let what is alienated by the character of the written word or by the character of being distantiated by cultural or historical distances speak again: to let what seems to be far and alienated speak again”, H.G. Gadamer, “Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences”, Research in Phenomenology, 9, (1979), p. 83.

17 The process of interpretation includes also historical, linguistic and structural analysis. These all belong to the work of “explanation” which is a means to “understanding”. On the fundamental concepts of explanation and understanding see W. Dilthey in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, The Hermeneutics Reader: texts of the German tradition from the Enlightenment to the present, 1989, p. 149-164; Paul Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology”, From Text to Action, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, p. 270-307. The concept and the role of “distanciation” (between the interpreter and the author) is another important aspect of philosophical hermeneutics, on which Gadamer and Ricoeur have different views. See Gadamer, Truth and Method and Ricoeur, Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences.

18 The difference between what the text meant in the view of the author and what the text means or may mean is what provides interpretation with its dynamic. In Gadamer’s words: “Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well.”, Truth and Method, p. 296-297 (my emphasis). For Gadamer, the meaning of a text “is always co-determined by the historical situation of the interpreter”, Truth and Method, p. 296. This idea is central for the understanding of the possibility of multiple interpretations of texts both over time and in the present, on one hand without having to adopt a full relativistic stance renouncing concepts of better and less good interpretations, not to say the need for criteria that are necessary for good text interpretation. See for example: “The role of falsification is played here by the conflict between competing interpretations. An interpretation must not only be probable, but more probable than another. There are criteria of relative superiority which may easily be derived from the logic of subjective probability”, Paul Ricoeur, The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text, From Text to Action, Northwestern Un. Press, Evanston, 1991, p. 213. Ricoeur refers here to evaluating an interpretation in terms of its language, its genre, its context, its time and place.

19 In a future paper discussing the design of text study in Hevruta learning, we will expand on the activating character of texts in general and narrative texts in particular. See for example, W. Iser, The Act of Reading : A Theory of Aesthetic Response, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr., 1978.

20 In this view, Gadamer follows Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, Albany: State University of New York Pr., 1996; Our efforts to understand are always taking place in particular linguistic traditions which carry with them particular ways of viewing the world, certain “forms of life” in which we find ourselves always.
begins with implicit conceptual frameworks and assumptions about the “thing” we attend to, including a primary decision about how to conceive it. Gadamer further describes how this pre-understanding (which he calls “preconceptions” or “prejudices”) is always constituted by the language we have inherited, and the opinions, assumptions and beliefs that guide our life and our understanding. These “historical traditions” are, however, not static but open-ended, evolving and changing over time, through people’s interpretations and unfolding cultures.

Gadamer stresses that these preconceptions are not an obstacle to understanding but the very condition of understanding. \(^{21}\) We are never able to totally step outside our finite human condition and contemplate things from an objective distance. Rather, we can only enlighten our situation from within that situation: “The illumination of this situation - reflection on effective history - can never be completely achieved; Yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are. To be historically conditioned means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.”\(^{22}\) Thus, these preconceptions, this foreknowledge we carry, can never be entirely explicit to us; it is always present and active when we engage in the interpretation of a text. For example, in the context of DeLeT’s Beit Midrash for teachers, the learners carry their personal pre-knowledge, preconceptions and beliefs about teaching and learning, as they each confront Jewish texts which address themes related to teaching and learning.

Gadamer uses the concept of horizon to capture this existential situation. Our horizon indicates that, although we are always situated in historical and cultural contexts, in and through our preunderstandings, we are capable of moving ourselves in this situation and thus changing or even expanding our horizon. Text interpretation thus calls for or ascribes an active role to the interpreter: In each and every activity of text interpretation, the interpreter is not only active in trying to decipher what the text is saying, but also in engaging his or her horizon in the process of understanding.

At the same time, the interpreter attends to the horizon presented by the text (defined as the “world of the text” by Ricoeur). The process of interpretation emerges from the interaction between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. What is the nature of this interaction? What does it entail? According to Gadamer, this interaction can be understood as analogous to a conversation so that reflection about what takes place in conversation may shed light on several important aspects of interpretation. \(^{23}\)

**Interpretation as Conversation**

One needs to distinguish a genuine conversation from other interactive forms of communication such as debates or confrontations. In this view, conversation holds a special characteristic, namely the centrality of the subject matter: In a conversation the subject matter is focal and both interlocutors participate in its discussion and exploration thus allowing for the primacy of the subject matter as a fundamental condition for conversation.\(^{24}\) Conversation is characterized by an

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\(^{21}\) See Gadamer’s long critic of the Enlightenments’ “prejudice against prejudice” and his argument to revise the assumed dichotomy between autonomous reason and traditions, *Truth and Method*, p. 265-285.

\(^{22}\) *Truth and Method*, p. 302.


\(^{24}\) H.G. Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, New Haven: Yale Univ. press, 1980; H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. It is important to stress that the subject matter is what is commonly expressed through the form in the text. It is not a synonym for the text. In Ricoeur’s term used earlier, the subject matter is “the world of the text.” It is this the subject matter that provokes the questions for the pre-understanding of the interpreter.
openness that allows the conversational partners to be carried along by the subject matter: “A genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it.”

According to Gadamer, a genuine hermeneutical engagement with a text, has the characteristics of a conversation between two partners. The interpreter encounters the text as a partner, to which he needs to attend: “When we try to understand a text, we do not try to transpose ourselves into the author’s mind, but (...) we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which he has formed his views.” In this view, interpretation is not only something that one does but rather an experience in which one participates, in which one encounters a text as an other involving his as well as the text’s horizons in a dialectical process. Understanding emerges in an unsettling process of discovery, by participating in a dialogue with the text.

At a closer look, the conversation between the interpreter and the text appears to be a progressive process of meaning making which takes place between two horizons meeting each other. The interpreter projects on the text from his horizon and the text offers the interpreter something that is not directly given to him. The text’s meaning may differ from what the author intended to say and/or what the interpreter initially thought about the issue at stake. A circular movement is therefore taking place between the anticipatory movement of the interpreter’s horizon on one hand and the horizon he or she encounters in the text. Gadamer emphasizes that this movement is neither subjective nor objective. He describes understanding “as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter.” This movement continues until some consensus is achieved in the mind of the interpreter and understanding is attained. In this context, consensus is not construed as a synonym of the interpreter’s agreement with the claim of the text. Consensus is not about a synthesis or a compromise between the world of the interpreter and the world of the text. Understanding is a form of consensus between what the interpreter believes the text to say and what is reasonable to claim that the text is saying, given its content, its argument and the meaning of the words. (Therefore, not each and every understanding or interpretation is viable). It follows that the process of interpretation, like in conversation, is first and foremost, about trying to understand what is said and why it is said, thus the interpreter needs to be mindful of the text’s horizon and focus on its subject matter. Yet, such understanding is not attainable unless the interpreter involves his horizon in this circular movement.

**Dispositions of participants in interpretation**

A closer attention to Gadamer and Ricoeur’s views of interpretation as conversation reveals that it encompasses also special dispositions on behalf of the participants in a genuine conversation with a partner or with a text:

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27 It goes without saying that this view of what understanding a text is about, greatly differs from a view who would conceptualize text understanding mainly as an outcome of the reader’s meticulous application of reading methods.
28 Truth and Method, p. 293. See also: “The interpreter dealing with a traditional text seeks to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the text is given for him as something universal, that he understands it as such and only afterwards uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal thing, the text; i.e., to understand what this piece of tradition says, what constitutes the meaning and importance of the text. In order to understand that, he must not seek to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation, if he wants to understand at all,” Truth and Method, p. 289
1. Openness towards another perspective- In conversations, we also are aware of the interlocutor’s or the text’s horizon, and one of the features of a conversation is our attempt to understand his or her point of view by placing ourselves in that person’s or text’s horizon. Conversation requires therefore an openness of one conversation partner towards the other (partner or text), and his or her attempt to view the subject at stake from the other’s perspective. Thus, conversation rests on a mutual commitment to attend to the claims of the text, and to be engaged by them, although we may ultimately reject or accept what has been said. In Gadamer’s words, to encounter a text is ideally to encounter an other who breaks into my ego-centeredness and gives me something to understand”. Openness and good will, are therefore required, at least in a first stage of a genuine conversation. It is demonstrated not when one attempts to “prove that one is always right” but when “one seeks instead as far as possible to strengthen the other’s viewpoint so that what the other person has to say becomes illuminating”.

2. Self awareness of one’s limited perspective- According to Gadamer, the awareness of the role of history in our understanding, the awareness that we always operate from within a horizon, downplays our certainty and cultivates our readiness and openness to further and new experiences. The text and the horizon it offers to the interpreter, open up a world onto which the interpreter is able to project himself and consider the matter at stake from a different and new perspective.

3. Being aware of and revising preconceptions- Texts, and especially texts with evocative characteristics, have the potential to provoke our preconceptions, to challenge them and to invite us to expand ourselves. The interpreter willingly allows himself or herself to be challenged or provoked by the subject matter. In this view, the interpreter does not stand over and against the text as an object or does not attempt to remove herself from the encounter with the text, by neutralizing his or her preconceptions. Rather, it is by bringing them into play with the text’s horizon; in allowing the text to provoke them; even as Gadamer says, in the willingness to put oneself “at risk” in front of the text, that genuine learning and understanding might occur. This experience with a text brings our preunderstandings to the foreground and provides us with an opportunity to uncover some of the unarticulated habits by which we understand the issue at

29 In Gadamer’s words, texts posses a claim to validity “in such a way that it has something to say to me,” Truth and Method, p.361.
32 Gadamer characterizes the readiness for experience as a stance of questioning that one adopts in relation to things that he or she encounters. The question open things up; it avoids us taking things for granted. Questioning is a type of openness that needs to be cultivated, see H.G. Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 362.
34 “One intends to understand the text itself. But this means that the interpreter’s own thoughts too have gone into re-awakening the text’s meaning. In this the interpreter’s own horizon is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that he maintains or enforces, but more as an opinion and a possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk, and that helps one truly to make one’s own what the text says”. Gadamer, Truth and Method, p. 388. Thus conversation in which one does not put oneself at risk is not a genuine conversation, see Truth and Method, p. 303. On the power of text interpretation to provoke self understanding, see also W. Iser: “If a literary text does something to its readers, it also simultaneously reveals something about them. Thus literature turns into a divining rod, locating our dispositions, desires, inclinations, and eventually our overall makeup. The question arises as to why we need this particular medium. Questions of this kind point to a literary anthropology that is both an underpinning and an offshoot of reader-response criticism.” (Iser, introduction to Prospecting: from reader response to literary anthropology, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Pr., 1989).
stake. We can become more aware of our projections and thus engage in revising them as they might function as a narrowing obstacle, thus the potential for text interpretation to become transformative.

4. Listening- The close reading of a text and engagement in multiple readings can help us reduce our tendency to subconsciously project meanings onto the text. It forces us to cultivate the art of listening to what is said in and by a text, and to what we do when we listen to the text. In Gadamer’s words: “Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another”.

5. Revising or expanding self understanding- Moreover, the reader’s horizon is expanded by the exposure to the world of the text. Although the reader may reject the claim of a text, the reader’s horizon has already been expanded when he or she understands the text sufficiently to reject it. The reader may accept the claims of the text, which then will result in the refuguration of his or her horizon. The reader may also appropriate the horizon of the text in a creative way. In each of these cases, a fusion of horizons and a transformation in the reader’s own self-understanding have occurred. According to Gadamer and Ricoeur, this is the ultimate objective of text interpretation: the disclosure of the world of the text for the reader is ultimately meant for the reader’s self understanding. In Ricoeur’s own words: “the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself.”

These dispositions are all required from those who participate in a hermeneutical conversation with a text. They show that engaging in the activity of text interpretation requires an overall stance, a certain attitude on behalf of the interpreter. This stance is neither natural nor a necessary attitude that will characterize interpreters of texts who are following particular literary methods of analysis and interpretations of texts. These dispositions will therefore need to be nurtured over time by the interpreter, and they highlight the potentially transformative effect that the participation in text participation can have on the learner.

I now discuss similar features of the interpretive process as well as similar dispositions required for Hevruta study.

**Hevruta Learning as a Hermeneutical Conversation**

I believe that the approach of philosophical hermeneutics to interpretation and meaning making offers interesting insights on the potential nature and features of the learning process in a Hevruta

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35 Truth and Method, p. 361.
36 Paul Ricoeur, “Appropriation”, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, p. 182. See also: “to understand is not to project oneself into the text; it is to receive an enlarged self from the apprehension of proposed worlds which are the genuine object of interpretation,” p. 182-3. Gadamer emphasizes a different aspect of self understanding, that is that our pre-knowledge causes us to always anticipate meaning. This expectancy takes the form of a projection based on our past experience of the world. In this sense, hermeneutic understanding is a way of being that indicates our fundamental temporality and historicity; we may discover some of our preunderstandings, which then may be revised, see Truth and Method, p. 265. In a way, we may revise ourselves, which is a transformative dimension of hermeneutical conversation.

37 In this context we cannot discuss the implications of this approach for concepts such as identity and self–identity, despite their importance in the context of Jewish education. We also note that, unlike the modern Cartesian belief in human self understanding by introspective self reflection (thus for example, without the need for textual traditions), Gadamer and Ricoeur hold a view that self understanding is only possible through the ongoing hermeneutical encounter with human expressions of life and being, which are embedded in texts and works of arts. See for example, Elie Holzer, *Educational aspects of hermeneutical activity in text study*, (forthcoming); See also George Steiner, *Real Presences*, University of Chicago Press, USA, 1991.
Gadamer saw in genuine conversation a paradigm for all hermeneutical understanding. What is Hevruta learning if not a conversation between two individuals, focusing on an effort to understand a text and ultimately taking a stance towards what it says? In other words, the process of conversation that I have discussed in relation to the encounter between the learner and the text, also apply to the interactive learning process of two partners in a Hevruta setting. It is characterized by an encounter of two horizons, attempting to reach some fusion, at least in relation to what the participants both believe the text is saying or in relation to their personal views on the issue that they believe the text is addressing.

But let me first ask: What would an observer of a Hevruta study setting see? In most educational institutions he would probably notice several of the following characteristics. Sometimes, a more advanced learner (advanced in either content knowledge and/or learning skills) partners with a less advanced learner. In other instances, both learners have a more or less equivalent knowledge and skill background. The learners in the Hevruta either study texts in preparation for a lesson, or as a review of what was taught in class. In other instances, they study their own topics or books. Usually, one of the learners reads a passage of the text out loud and both learners attempt to explain what the passage means. They question each other about what the passage says, or how it relates to its larger context. Usually, there is a lively exchange of ideas, each partner argues for his or her interpretation, as both focus on the written text. Hevruta learning can be conceptualized as a setting in which people attempt to learn through and with someone else: Both Hevruta partners work together to interpret the text; they draw on their mutual knowledge, they articulate their unfolding understanding, they attempt to convince one another of their interpretation, and they use one another’s knowledge and different understanding to develop their own.

Referring to the view of interpretation and understanding based on philosophical hermeneutics, I conceptualize the study of text in a Hevruta setting as an instance where three horizons participate and interact in a complicated intersubjective and dialogical experience: the horizons of both learners and the horizon of the text. In other words, each Hevruta partner is simultaneously engaged in a process of meaning making which encompasses two intertwined but different axes: between herself and her Hevruta partner and between herself and the text. I characterize this encounter with the concept of horizons in order to emphasize that the Hevruta partners are always engaging in the learning from within and with a certain (cultural, conceptual, biographical) context and with prior knowledge, opinions and beliefs about the matter at stake. Moreover, looking at text study in a Hevruta setting as an interaction of three horizons refers us back to understanding as an outcome of a fusion of horizons. This view makes us attend to what is going on in this learning setting in terms of processes of meaning making, in which the learning partners and the text’s horizons interact until some fusion of horizons (consensus among both partners about what it is that the text is saying) is reached.

The learner is called to articulate his or her own interpretation of the text and, in the presence of the partner’s possible different interpretation, to attend to a different view but also to argue for a better interpretation. Leaving aside the need for analytical, methodological and critical skills, the Hevruta learner engages in a circular movement of listening and attending seriously to what the partner and the text are actually saying. He or she must attend in an open way to the claims of

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38 Following Ricoeur, we note that there are differences between the interaction of two learning partners and the interaction between an interpreter and a text. For example, in a live conversation, there are more opportunities for a speaker to clarify his or her intentions. The discourse between the learners is not “fixed” by writing. It therefore reflects not only to “a world” (to use Ricoeur’s term) but also to the speaker’s intention who is present.
both the text and the *Hevruta* partner, attempting to view things from the perspective of the others (the text and the partner’s view about the text). Similarly to the concept of consensus reached between an interpreter and what the text is saying, the process of interpretation that takes place in *Hevruta* can also be characterized as a consensus-seeking dialogue, in the sense of agreement about what each side is actually saying and what each partner understands the text to say.

We saw that specific dispositions are required on behalf of the interpreter of a text in order to enable for a genuine interpretive process to take place. Conceptually, the need for these characteristics is based on the fact that the text is considered as encompassing a “world”, another view on the matter that is potentially expressed by the text. It goes without saying that similarly each Hevruta is exposed to the “world” of his or her Hevruta partner. Thus, the same dispositions are called upon for each of the Hevruta partner to be attending to in relation to his or her Hevruta partner: Openness towards perspectives offered, self awareness of one’s limited perspective, listening, revising or expanding self understanding and finally being aware of and being willing to revise your preconceptions. In relation to the later, studying a text with another, and the vocalization of one’s thoughts for the *Hevruta* partner can make a genuine difference in how one hears and becomes aware of one’s own preconceptions. Consequently, these preconceptions may be scrutinized and revised in the process of the *Hevruta* learning.

**Dispositions for Text Study in Hevruta and for Teaching**

I have conceptualized text study and Hevruta learning as a hermeneutical conversation. This view reflects the type of text study and Hevruta learning which infuses the curriculum and which is explicitly nurtured in Delet’s Beit Midrash for teachers. In addition, I have come to articulate some parallels between the dispositions required of the learner of text study in Hevruta and the dispositions required of teachers following the view of good teaching that is promoted in DeLeT.

The Beit Midrash’s curriculum offers opportunities to explore and practice these dispositions in text interpretation and in the work with a *Hevruta* learner. By identifying these dispositions of text interpretation and *Hevruta* learning, and by inviting fellows to practice them and reflect on them, the Beit Midrash provides not only an opportunity to develop an awareness of these dispositions but also a first hand experience of the challenge it takes for each teacher to foster them over time. It helps shape a kind of teacher engagement with these dispositions through practice based reflective talk that is valued and promoted across the program and it provides an additional learning context for practicing, learning and developing these dispositions that I believe to be a condition for both the study of text and for good teaching in general. Hence I posit that the very engagement in the process of text study and *Hevruta* learning has the potential to become a “site” for the cultivation of these dispositions by the prospective teachers who study in DeLeT. This view provides an interesting rationale for engaging prospective teachers in this type of intensive text study in Hevruta.
The following dispositions stand out as especially important in both contexts:

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<th>Interpreter’s Dispositions for Text Study in Hevruta</th>
<th>Teacher’s Dispositions for Good Teaching</th>
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<td>Openness towards another perspective</td>
<td>Open mindedness towards students’ perspectives on the subject matter</td>
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<td>Being aware of - and readiness to revisit one’s preconceptions</td>
<td>Teacher’s awareness of preconceptions and readiness to revise them</td>
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<td>Attentive listening to what the text and Hevruta partner say</td>
<td>Attentive listening to what students say</td>
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<td>Self awareness of one’s limited perspective; attending to the issue from a different perspective</td>
<td>Wholeheartedness towards students’ perspectives</td>
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Open mindedness
The disposition of open mindedness refers to a genuine desire to listen and give full attention to a variety of views, to alternative and new possibilities. This is a central element of teaching when it is conceptualized as including the construction of meaning by the learners. In this view, learning will often generate a variety of new and possibly alternative views. This is not to exclude better/ lesser or even right or wrong views. But open mindedness assumes that these views ought first to be attended to. In open mindedness, a person recognizes the possibility of error even in beliefs that are important to him. For example, teachers who are open minded take pain to examine the rationales behind what they sometimes take for granted about the matter at hand or about students’ learning. Earlier I have discussed how the same open mindedness is a central disposition for genuine conversation with text and Hevruta partner to occur.

Self Awareness of ones’ preconceptions
In the view of teaching I posit in this discussion, teachers relate to teaching as a practice which entails elements of uncertainty from which one is called to learn. Teachers need therefore to learn to be open to articulate and revise some of their unexamined preconceptions about the subject matter at hand, about students and about teaching. In this perspective, becoming self aware to one’s preconceptions and the readiness to revise them is a quality of good teaching, when a teacher is confronted with alternative views. Earlier I discussed how following philosophical hermeneutics, a similar disposition characterizes genuine conversation with text and with a learning partner.

Attentive listening
Genuine listening to students’ learning and to their “world,” is an essential characteristic of the type of teaching that lies at hear of DeLeT. Listening to a text and to a Hevruta partner implies attending to and listening to what the text or the partner says in relation to the issue at stake, so as to be engaged by it. Listening to students in the context of teaching and learning is, first and foremost, listening to what it is they say in relation to the subject matter that is studied, which is


the issue at stake. Cultivating a stance of listening means that the teacher’s stance is to assume that the student has something to say. Together with a self-awareness of one’s preconceptions, comes therefore the need for teachers to develop over time the capacity to reduce his or her tendency to subconsciously project meanings onto what students say. It is a cultivation of the art of listening to what is said by a student, and to what one does as a teacher when she or he listens to the student.

Wholeheartedness
Teachers who are wholehearted give their full attention to the matter at hand. They make deliberate efforts to see situations from different perspectives. One expression of wholeheartedness is discussed by Neil Noddings who has made us more aware of the various aspects of caring in education, which refers to some type of attentive receptivity. The wholehearted, caring person orients his or her energy toward what is specifically expressed by the other person. He or she attempts to look at the matter at stake from the perspective of the alternative point of view. Compared to attentive listening, caring emphasizes more the attitude of receiving what is expressed by someone else and taking responsibility for it – taking it seriously before attempting to diagnose it or to criticize it. Giving full attention and taking what students say seriously is central to this view of teaching as it is in Hevruta learning where one is taking responsibility for his or her partner’s learning. A similar element of caring is central when one engages in conversation with a text, as one wants not only to listen to what the text has to say, but also take it seriously.

In addition to these four dispositions which are explicit in the view of hermeneutical conversation, I am adding the disposition of tolerance and patience for ambiguity which I believe to be implicit in this view.

Teaching that takes students’ construction of ideas seriously, is often characterized by moments of ambiguity. Because of the somewhat more open orientation of this type of teaching, ideas are not constructed and presented in a linear way. Often, ideas evolve in a back and forth, circular movement between teacher, learners and subject matter. Full articulation of ideas is often an outcome of such a process and takes time to be achieved. This view of teaching requires therefore that both teachers and learners learn to tolerate and cope with moments of ambiguity. This requires a fair amount of patience as understanding is not immediately achieved but an outcome of a constructive process. It goes without saying that tolerance for ambiguity and the need to postpone immediate achievement of understanding characterize the type of hermeneutical conversation I have discussed for both text interpretation and Hevruta learning.

Finally, I mention what appears to be an important skill which is related to these dispositions and that is important in both text study in Hevruta setting and in teaching: the ability to look out for evidences. Following philosophical hermeneutics meaning is not simply provided by a text but requires the work of interpretation which ends in a fusion of horizons. During this process, the interpreter is required to attend to various types of evidences in the text in order to build and

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42 Attending to what is said, is different from concentrating on the possible psychological motivations of the speaker, behind and beyond what or she says.
44 Quine calls this attitude the principle of charity, see W.V.O. Quine, Word and Object, Cambridge Mass., 1960.
sustain his or her interpretation. My view of teaching requires a similar disposition on behalf of the teacher. For example, it is important that teachers will learn to look for evidence of learning by students. But, learning is not something that is necessarily captured by the untrained eye. Teachers will have to learn to look out for evidences of learning for example by articulating what they understand to be concrete evidences of learning.

Broadly speaking, the similarities of the dispositions for text study in Hevruta and for teaching are based on a view of teaching and text study in Hevruta as being both interpretive practices. Meaning making is not only central to text interpretation in Hevruta but is also a central aspect of teaching. In other words, teachers are not only engaged in the interpretation (as a process of meaning making) of the subject matter. They are also engaged in interpreting what students say and do, as well as what is taking place in the classroom and in the lesson. Teachers make decisions based on these interpretations. For example, they are trying to help students to make meaning when they engage with the subject matter, from the perspective of their own horizons. This is the reason why teaching is an interpretive practice at its core.

Studying, engaging with and assessing the various interpretations that are created over time in a Hevruta setting, can provide teachers with an experiential microcosm, an intensive and open-ended process where they learn something about how people (themselves and their Hevruta partner) interpret, make meaning and find relevance over time, which is central to the work of teaching.

In this perspective, text study and teaching are not only interpretive by nature but they are also practices. This means that despite the fact that they both entail and require specific methods and skills, they cannot be reduced to the applications of skills, methods or techniques. They are more holistic types of practices, involving the full personality of the teacher. They require dispositions by those who engage in these practices, for these experiences to be successful. This view echoes Dewey, who says that dispositions for good teaching do not consist of a series of steps or procedures to be used by teachers but are closer to a holistic way of meeting and responding to problems and challenges; it is a way of being as a teacher.

Conclusion
I began this article by articulating various rationales for engaging prospective teachers in the study of texts in Hevruta settings as a focal activity of Jewish teacher education. Having adopted the views of philosophical hermeneutics, I proposed an additional rationale: engagement in text study and Hevruta learning according to the characteristics of hermeneutical conversation may facilitate teachers' development of several dispositions which are important for good teaching. Together with the other rationales for developing opportunities for text study and hevruta in the context of teachers' professional development, this rationale has specific curricular implications in the design

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46 We hereby adopt a view of teacher education as including not only what teachers need to know and be able to do but also as referring to the kind of human being they need to be, thus referring to some kind of character formation. See for example, G. D. Fenselmaier and J.F. Soltis, Approaches to Teaching, Teachers Colleges Press, New York: 1998, p. 40-43. Parker J. Palmer, To Known as We are Known, Harper and Row: San Fransisco, 1983; For a recent discussion on this topic see for example Lee Shulman, The Signature Pedagogies of the Professions of Law, Medicine, Engineering and the Clergy: Potential Lessons for the Education of Teachers, http://hub.mspnet.org/media/data/Shulman_Signature_Pedagogies.pdf?media_000000001297.pdf

of DeLeT’s Beit Midrash, as I will discuss in a future study of the enacted curriculum of DeLeT’s Beit Midrash.

As practical and interpretive arts, teaching and Hevruta text study happen in and by doing, and they are learned in and by doing. Learning these practices requires engaging in cycles of doing and of inquiry. This view has practical implications for the design of text study for teachers, who require opportunities to inquire into the process of text interpretation they have experienced. In other words, the Beit Midrash for teachers should provide opportunities for a cognitive apprenticeship in the processes of interpretation and meaning making, as well as for the cultivation of the dispositions.

This, of course, is not to say that these dispositions of text study and Hevruta learning will necessarily transfer to the teaching practice of the teachers in the classroom. Hence, this rationale for text study in Hevruta learning provides us with a direction for curriculum and pedagogy for teachers’ learning in the context of a Beit Midrash for teachers. In a future article I will discuss and exemplify how this rationale does in fact infuse and guide the curriculum of the Beit Midrash for Teachers in the context of DeLeT at Brandeis.

According to this view, text study in Hevruta in the context of teachers’ professional development should be perceived not only as activities that inform, but also as activities that can shape and transform those involved with it, by cultivating and nurturing core dispositions for teaching. The type of conversation which is called for with a text and with a Hevruta partner is a fundamental human and humanizing activity. This, in my view, is why text study and Hevruta learning are so fundamental for Jewish education in general, and teacher education in particular.
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