

# **Text Study, Collaborative Learning and Meaning Making: An Interim Report on Phase I of A School-Based Action Research Project**

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## **Foundational Framework**

The Beit Midrash Research Project<sup>1</sup> at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education is engaged in an action research project at Keshet Cambridge, an innovative supplementary school in Cambridge, MA. In Phase One, we created a Beit Midrash for Keshet Teachers and held six beit midrash sessions for the entire staff, beginning with a longer session during Keshet's teacher orientation week followed by five other monthly sessions which took place during Keshet's regularly scheduled staff meeting times.

In these sessions, with the participation and input of Keshet director, Rafi Esterson, we brought the Keshet teachers together as a staff and in havrutot (two people studying together; the singular is havruta) to study texts and to explore and rehearse the dynamic practices of havruta learning -- based on Kent's theory of havruta learning practices.<sup>2</sup> We also worked with the staff to bridge both content and havruta learning practices into their classrooms.

Kent's theory proposes core havruta practices that work together in pairs in dynamic relationship. The pairs of core practices are: listening and articulating; wondering and focusing; and, supporting and challenging. The foundational set of practices are listening and articulating -- they set the ground and enable text-based discussion. The other two sets of practices -- wondering and focusing and supporting and challenging -- help steer the conversation in

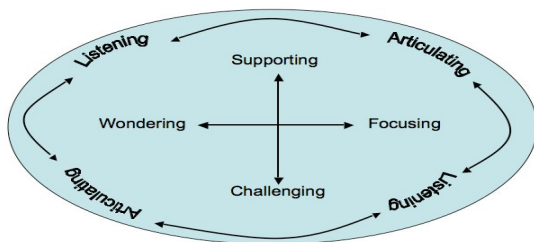
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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see <http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/beitmidrashresearch/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Orit Kent, "Interactive Text Study and the Co-Construction of Meaning: Havruta in the Delet Beit Midrash." (PhD dissertation, Brandeis University, 2008) and "A Theory of Havruta Learning," (Working Paper, 2010).

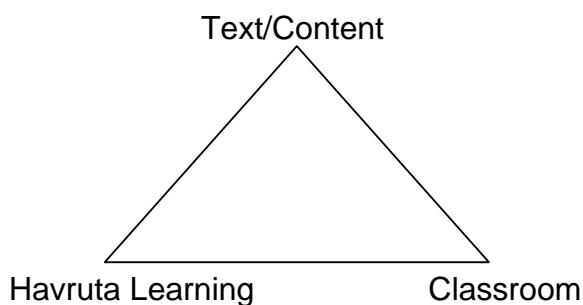
different directions depending on their exact balance with one another. Kent has developed particular definitions and identified teacher and student moves associated with each of these practices.

The Keshet Beit Midrash sessions, as well as the “homework” between sessions, proceeded according to the interacting building blocks of Kent's theory of havruta learning. We drew on this theory as a way to explore the elements of meaningful text- based discussion and collaborative work. Kent's diagram illustrating the relationship between these building blocks became an important visual construct for the Keshet Beit Midrash:



### Introduction of Kent's six havruta practices

At our first beit midrash meeting, we also presented the teachers with a diagram of a triangle, which illustrated a three-part framework for how our work together would proceed. We continued to refer to and make explicit which aspect of “the triangle” we were privileging at any given segment of our session. This framework proved helpful, if not necessary, for all of us to keep track of the ambitious and multi-dimensional nature of doing this work.



In addition to establishing the above framework, we put in place other norms designed to create and set apart the beit midrash from other Keshet work experiences. We did so by altering the physical environment of the classroom, beginning and ending each session with a particular niggun, and initiating our direct text study with the *bracha* (blessing) for “engaging in words of Torah.”

## **Core Activities**

We dedicated beit midrash sessions to learning about Kent's six core havruta practices and practicing them in the context of our havruta text study and large group discussions. We used the fourth and sixth sessions to “put the pieces together.” In these sessions, we observed and analyzed video of havrutot, thought about our particular classrooms and how the ideas and skills we were learning in the beit midrash could inform each teacher's teaching practice and his and her students' learning.

Our texts were chosen for one of two reasons: because they were foundational to the Values and Ethics curriculum that teachers were teaching, or because they reflected in content the very practices we would be rehearsing in our havrutot. The “homework” -- perhaps more accurately described as “work-work”--was intended to extend learning from the beit midrash sessions into teachers' own classrooms. Teachers were asked to observe relevant phenomena. For example, they had to reflect on how they listened and articulated to their students when teaching and the ways in which their particular use of these practices affected student learning. Teachers were also asked to try out new teaching moves. For example, they had to choose a question that they wanted to practice during text based discussions, intentionally try it out in their classrooms and reflect on its effects on the discussion and on particular students. As we moved further into the semester, the homework often became more involved. We asked teachers to add elements to their lesson planning, provide their rationale for their plans and reflect on what occurred in their classrooms. Critical to the impact of any piece of the project was the Keshet director's role in keeping the “language” of havruta practices and content themes

alive between sessions and directly assisting teachers during planning meetings to incorporate beit midrash assignments into their plans and teaching.

Throughout the beit midrash sessions, teachers participated in a variety of exercises and text study. Teachers reflected on their own styles, strengths and challenges as havruta partners and took on different roles in havruta as the “listener” or “articulator” and the “supporter/challenger.” Teachers similarly reflected on their strengths and challenges as classroom teachers in the same categories. Teachers presented their colleagues’ text interpretations as well as their own through writing, drawing, and presentation; participated in a havruta fish bowl exercise; learned a typology of questions and generated and classified different types of text study questions; watched and analyzed video of adults and children participating in havruta; and engaged in what was often lively havruta study and full group discussion of texts.

## **Themes and Challenges**

Upon reflection, several themes and challenges have emerged from this first part of our work at Keshet. One such theme is the critical importance of the partnering school being fully committed to this work, as Keshet’s director, has been. Indeed, Rafi has helped to shape and make the beit midrash meaningful and relevant to teachers as well as to imagine the potential of havruta study for enriching teachers, students, the Keshet curriculum and the larger Keshet community. As time went on, we began to see the need for Rafi to continue the beit midrash learning more actively and explicitly in his regular curricular meetings with teachers as well as in the more informal aspects of Keshet’s teacher culture. He did so effectively; such an arrangement could be made more explicit and detailed at the outset of any similar work of the project.

In connection with Rafi’s role as a guide between beit midrash sessions, we found that the homework was a necessary venue for teachers to connect their learning with classroom practice. As time went on, we strived to create homework assignments that better fit into the work Keshet teachers were already

doing while also maintaining the assignment's function as an extension of the particular learning of a beit midrash session.

A substantial challenge we faced in doing this work was the range of text study experience and approaches to text study among the Keshet teachers. (Interestingly, all Keshet teachers but one are fluent in Hebrew -- making the foremost challenge for this group different from the language barrier between learners and the text often found in other settings.) We learned that we needed to use shorter pieces of text in the beit midrash sessions. We also decided that teachers would benefit from our facilitating the initial inquiry into a text with the whole group, rather than moving them into havruta right away. By so doing, we were able to help the whole group develop a shared understanding of what constitutes a factual understanding of the text, and what kinds of comments and ideas are instead more interpretive or evaluative. (These categories of questions are used as part of the Shared Inquiry approach to text study developed by the Great Books Foundation.) In this way, we were also able to model for teachers a way to help their own students begin to develop shared language and tools for text study.

The related and overarching challenge facing us in the Keshet Beit Midrash has been the familiar teaching struggle of wanting to do "too much," both over the course of our time together and also at each individual beit midrash session. A typical beit midrash session would, by design, often move around our triangle from content discussion to the meta-discussion of havruta learning to classroom application, out to teachers' personal experiences and back again. Now that we have completed Phase I, we recognize a tension between the impulse to contract some of our goals in order to create more focus and clarity, and appreciation for the complexity and reward of stretching ourselves to hold multiple dimensions of practice simultaneously.

We feel that we were able to give teachers a taste of all the different elements of the beit midrash, establish a working language of havruta study, and invite teachers into the cognitive demands of thinking on multiple levels. Points of learning that left us and the teachers feeling unsatisfied, such as not having

enough time to more fully explore the potential of *supporting* or *challenging* students or to analyze and create productive, grade level havruta tasks leave us eager to continue to build on this work during Phase II of the project, and beyond into future years.

## **Initial Impact on Teachers and Teaching**

The Keshet Beit Midrash has already begun to have an effect on the Keshet teachers and their teaching. We know this from teachers' own reports, both shared in the group and in written reflections, as well as from other unsolicited communication. We have heard corroborating reports from the Rafi Esterson, the director of Keshet. In fact, we know that every single Jewish studies class in Keshet except for the youngest group (K-1) is trying out havruta study, each in different and purposeful ways. The use of havruta study and various elements of havruta practice have emerged in Keshet classrooms not so much as an imposed new learning format, but rather from teachers' careful consideration of their class' dynamics, needs of individual students, and the kind of learning they saw or didn't see happening in their classrooms.

For example :

In the **2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom**, the two co-teachers had been trying many different means to manage full-class discussions so that students were respectful listeners and participants in the group and could focus on the topic. These teachers shared with us that they decided to try havruta study when they realized that the full group discussion -- which benefits from the high degree of teacher direction -- was in effect giving individual students "a big stage" (teacher's words) on which to perform. The teachers decided to induct the students into a well-structured pair study, taking into account physical environment and placement of the havrutot, the pairings, the text and task, and even how the students entered the room. The teachers found that havruta study changed the dynamics in the room, and -- different even from the small group work that the class was used to doing -- challenged individual students to represent themselves in an intimate situation in which there was no "big stage" to

perform. This classroom is continuing to work on havruta learning. The students' text work that emerged from havruta study is now displayed on a Keshet bulletin-board.

The teacher of the **4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom** credits his experience in the beit midrash as having a significant impact on his teaching. He wrote in his reflections that his experience studying texts with his havruta, who had a very different understanding of the same text as he did, made him think about the need to draw out the thoughts of quieter students for the sake of everyone's learning. He also consciously adopted pieces of language we use in the beit midrash such as, "how did you arrive at your idea?" which resulted in, "the kids [getting] deeper into the meaning of the text" when they studied texts together as a whole class.

In the **7<sup>th</sup> grade**, the teacher reflected that she, "had been struggling...to have discussions happen more independently..." among students. She wrote that the beit midrash taught her, "how to structure questions in order to lead classroom discussion to deeper levels." In a Keshet Beit Midrash session, she shared how particular tools in the beit midrash had helped her observe her own students and "diagnose" where the breakdowns in student conversations over texts were happening. As a result, she reported, she is better able to craft discussion questions as scaffolding according to student needs. She also noted that working with her own havruta partners during our teacher beit midrash sessions helped her learn to be a better listener and, "[work] with what's happening in the moment."

## **Conclusion**

Through the course of our work these past few months, we have come to see more clearly the value of creating a beit midrash for Keshet teachers and teaching the havruta practices for inducting teachers into a language and way of thinking about the teaching of Jewish studies across different grade levels. *The meaning that teachers are drawing from our work together is not related solely to*

*their use of havruta pairs in the classroom, but has also engaged them in seriously re-thinking their approach to text teaching and the creation of meaningful (Jewish) discourse in their classrooms.*

In Phase II of this project, when we are working with two teachers directly in their classrooms and documenting their planning and teaching of two lessons, we will be able to begin analyzing the effect of our intervention on specific classroom practice. We will also begin to explore some of the pedagogical insights and dilemmas that arise as teachers with different degrees of training and background test out their new ideas in very different classroom contexts. Finally, we hope we will be able to capture (through video and audio recordings) images of Keshet classrooms engaged in meaningful text study and generative havruta discussions.