

## **The Beit Midrash Research Project**

A project of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education,  
Brandeis University

<http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/beitmidrashresearch/index.html>

## ***A Theory of Havruta Learning***

Orit Kent

### **Abstract:**

Modern educational scholarship has not substantially investigated the learning practice of *havruta*, paired study and focused conversation around classical Jewish texts. In this paper, the author analyzes videotapes and transcripts of real-life *havruta* interactions and proposes a theory of *havruta* learning as composed of three pairs of core practices: listening and articulating; wondering and focusing; and supporting and challenging. Through a close analysis of one particular *havruta* session, the author illustrates and probes the *havruta* practices and the ways in which they can give rise to generative, textually grounded interpretive discussions of classical Jewish texts. This theory may also be a helpful lens for both studying and elucidating text-based discussions of other kinds of texts in small and large group settings.

This article has been published as:

Kent, O. (2010). A Theory of Havruta Learning. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 76:3, 215-245.

# A Theory of *Havruta* Learning

## Orit Kent

### Part I: Introduction

As a form of study, *havruta* (Jewish text study in pairs) has been appropriated in many modern contexts such as adult Jewish learning, day school and supplementary school settings, Hillel gatherings and Jewish professional development programs.<sup>1</sup> In these contexts, people study a range of texts. The pairs sit with one another, read the text together, discuss its meaning and, perhaps, explore broader questions about life that the text raises. While *havruta* is most generally used in Jewish contexts, it is sometimes used in other contexts as well where student engagement with texts is central. As a form of textual learning, *havruta* offers learners opportunities to foster interpretive, social and ethical engagement and thus has great potential for a range of people in different contexts with different learning goals.<sup>2</sup>

Some people who study in *havruta* report enjoying the *havruta* process, noting, for example, that it gives them space to think about the text in the company of someone else. This space can enable a sense of ownership of the text itself or a sense

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<sup>1</sup> The Aramaic term *havruta* means friendship or companionship and is commonly used to refer to two people studying Jewish texts together. In this article, the term *havruta* refers to both the learning pair and the practice of paired learning. The history of *havruta* as a widespread learning practice is subject to scholarly debate. See Orit Kent (2008) for a discussion of this issue. The reason for my focus on *havruta* is that in our historical context, it has come to be seen and used by many Jewish teachers and learners as a core mode of text learning and as such, is worthy of investigation.

<sup>2</sup> Parts of this article appear in Orit Kent (2008), "Interactive Text Study and the Co-Construction of Meaning," where many of the ideas are further elaborated. I'd like to thank Sharon Feiman Nemser, Helen Featherstone, Susan Fendrick, and Meir Lakein for their astute feedback on this article, the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education for its ongoing support of this research, and my students, whose questions and comments have helped sharpen my thinking about these ideas.

of being in conversation with the text. Not everyone experiences *havruta* in such positive terms, and some even find the process frustrating-- *havruta* partners may not work well together, or get stuck and don't know what to do next, or spend most of their time digressing from the topic at hand. However, in both instances--those in which participants have meaningful experiences and those in which participants are disappointed--there is generally little critical understanding of the specifics of the process that took place leading them to their particular endpoint, and thus little knowledge about how to recreate or avoid such endpoints in the future.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps because *havruta* has generally been used in traditional Jewish contexts such as *yeshivot*, modern educational scholarship has not taken a close look at this learning practice in order to unpack it and explore what makes for better or worse *havruta* experiences.<sup>4</sup> In my own research, I have used the lens of educational and learning theories to analyze real-life *havruta* interactions in all their specificity. I ask the question: What can we learn about text study and students' meaning making through a close examination of adults studying classical Jewish texts in one particular *beit midrash*<sup>5</sup> setting?

In the early phases of my research, I conducted a pilot study in order to illuminate some of the rhythms and complexities of *havruta* learning. I identified *havruta* as a complex and potentially powerful Jewish interpretive social learning practice involving norms, phases, moves and stances. It involves social interaction between two

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<sup>3</sup> These examples of satisfying and unsatisfying experiences are drawn from discussions over several years with my students in the DeLeT Beit Midrash for Teachers as well as from their written reflections.

<sup>4</sup> In recent years, there have been a few published studies dealing with some aspects of *havruta*. For example, Miriam Rader-Roth and Elie Holzer (2009), Steve Brown and Mitchel Malkus (2007), Feiman-Nemser (2006), Elie Holzer (2006), Orit Kent (2006), and Aliza Segal (2003).

<sup>5</sup> *Beit midrash* literally means "house of study" and refers to a place where Jews study texts, often in pairs or *havruta*. Traditionally, the *beit midrash* was a place where Jewish men studied Talmud.

human partners, and meaning-making efforts involving three partners-- two people and the text (Kent, 2006).

In my next study of many more *havruta* interactions, I developed a theory of *havruta* in one context. This theory reflects a set of six core practices in three dynamic pairs. In this article, I will present my theory of *havruta* learning through a close look at one *havruta* session. It is not meant to be "the" definitive theory, but one important frame for helping practitioners and scholars better understand this complex learning experience and make it as fruitful an experience as possible. This theory may also be a helpful lens for both studying and elucidating text-based discussions of other kinds of texts in small and large groups settings.<sup>6</sup>

## **Methodology and Background Literature**

My research takes place in the DeLeT (Day School Leadership Through Teaching) Beit Midrash for Teachers,<sup>7</sup> a modern *beit midrash* for teacher candidates enrolled in the MAT/DeLeT program at Brandeis, and is part of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education's Beit Midrash Research Project, founded in 2003 by myself and Elie Holzer. The Research Project -- of which I'm currently the director -- investigates text study, meaning making through discussion and *havruta* and group learning.<sup>8</sup>

The Beit Midrash for Teachers is part of DeLeT's summer program and includes

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<sup>6</sup> In my use of the term "theory," I draw on Magdalene Lampert's discussion about developing "theories" of teaching and learning (1999, 2001). Like Lampert, my work is context specific and is not meant to generalize "findings" about the nature of *havruta* learning but to provide scholars and practitioners with a language and framework for talking about and investigating *havruta* learning.

<sup>7</sup> I wish to acknowledge Elie Holzer for his partnership in developing and guiding the work of the DeLeT Beit Midrash for Teachers from 2003-2007.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/beitmidrashresearch/index.html> for more details.

women and men studying a range of Jewish texts in *havruta* over a five week period. For four summers, I collected audio- and videotapes of nine *havruta* pairs in 51 *havruta* sessions in order to analyze how they make meaning of Jewish texts while working together.

I have found that the *havruta* encounter provides a particularly generative site for studying the ways people make meaning on a moment-to-moment basis through what they read in the text and hear from their partner. I have been particularly influenced by educator and scholar Patricia Carini's definition of meaning-making, which emphasizes that meaning arises through relationship with others—persons or things. In Carini's words: "Meaning arises through the relationship among things or persons: that mutual reciprocity that occurs in the act of truly 'seeing' something" (1979, p. 15). In *havruta* learning, then, meaning arises through the interaction and relationship of the three partners of *havruta*, the two people and the text. It therefore becomes important to notice these interactions and relationships.

I used a grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Cutcliffe, 2000) approach to identify some of the central practices in which *havruta* partners engage. I then used tools of discourse analysis (Goodwin, 1990; Gee, 2005) to further probe the contours of these practices and the ways in which they shape the *havruta's* meaning-making process.

My work is informed by an eclectic group of educational researchers interested in learning and teaching and peer learning, in addition to scholars in the fields of sociocognitive psychology and studies of interpretive discussion and text-based learning.

I integrate scholarship from three areas: research on text-based learning; research on peer learning; and research on classroom discourse. Specifically, I am indebted to Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon's work (1991, 2009). Haroutunian-Gordon, a philosopher and teacher educator, is interested in the conversational aspect of meaning-making or what she calls "interpretive discussion." In her research, she identifies elements that enable rich interpretive discussion and factors that hinder it. While Haroutunian-Gordon studies whole-class discussions of literature, I consider *havruta* discussions of classical Jewish texts to be another example of interpretive discussion.

I also draw on Elizabeth Cohen (1994, 2002) and David and Roger Johnson's (1975, 1999) research on peer and cooperative learning. Cohen's (2002) argument about the idea of group knowledge--that is, groups can construct knowledge beyond the capacity of any single individual with the proper support-- is particularly important to keep in mind. She also identifies a positive correlation between open-ended, conceptual tasks and the amount of interaction among participants in the task (1994). In many ways, *havruta* learning resembles Cohen's open-ended conceptual tasks and her research helps underscore the value of understanding how these *havruta* interactions can increase the quality of learning.

I also draw on the work of linguists and researchers of classroom discourse such as Sarah Michaels (1996, 2008), Courtney Cazden (1988; 2001), and Douglas Barnes and Frankie Todd (1995). Finally, underlying my work are assumptions drawn from sociocultural theories of knowledge based on Lev Vygotsky's work. Sociocultural theorists such as Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger argue that learning happens through co-participation, not merely in an individual's head, and that learning happens in practice, not by exposure to abstract knowledge out of context and then internalizing it (Lave

and Wenger, 1991, Lave, 1993). Since learning is socially produced and situated, it becomes impossible to separate social processes (how we interact with people) from intellectual processes (how we make sense of particular subject matter). In fact, sociocultural theory leads us to understand that social and intellectual processes are not distinct but inherently intertwined and together comprise the basis of human learning. This helps explain the symbiotic relationships within *havruta* between a pair's working relationship and their development of ideas; the way in which they build ideas affects their relationship and the quality of their relationship affects their learning and thinking.

### **A Theory of *Havruta* Learning: Overview of Six Practices**

When I use the term *havruta*, I am talking about more than a simple strategy for students to brainstorm together for a few minutes, or what is known in language arts classrooms as "pair and share" (Calkins, 2001). I use the term *havruta* to refer to two people working together for some period of time to together make sense of a text. This requires drawing on skills for how to interpret a text **and** how to work with someone else independent of a teacher's direct guidance. In this kind of *havruta*, effort is directed at constructing ideas and also relationships, and the ways in which ideas are constructed affect the working relationship and vice versa. Ideally, the two people involved in the *havruta* are responsible for their own learning and for each other's learning. Their success is viewed as interdependent. Furthermore, since there are not only two partners but three--the two people and the text--for meaning making to occur, there must be interaction not only between the people but also between each and both of them and the text.

During a *havruta* discussion, participants construct and reconstruct the meaning of the text through their moment-to-moment interactions. While these interactions are highly complex and, in their particularity, may be highly varied, there are key elements to these interactions. Through my analysis of my data (audio and video recordings of *havruta* sessions) and informed by an understanding of good *havruta*, I have identified three pairs of core practices in which *havruta* learners engage: (1) listening and articulating; (2) wondering and focusing; and (3) supporting and challenging.

In many ways, listening and articulating are the engine that start the *havruta* and keep it going. Most basically, listening means paying attention to and articulating means expressing one's ideas out-loud. Listening and articulating are the building blocks of both idea and relationship development in *havruta*. By both listening and articulating, *havruta* partners create space for each human partner and the text to be heard and be part of the *havruta* learning process. This back and forth opens up room for new ideas to emerge and for shaping and refining ideas on the table.

The second pair of practices is focusing and wondering: concentrating attention and exploring multiple possibilities. A *havruta* needs to wonder in order to generate creative ideas. At the same time, a *havruta* needs to be able to focus in order to deepen an interpretation and come to some conclusion about the meaning of the text. While listening and articulating are the engine, wondering and focusing are part of the steering wheel—they help determine the direction that the conversation will take.

And finally, there are the practices of supporting and challenging. Both of these practices can help a *havruta* further shape their ideas, but each does so in a slightly different way. Supporting consists of providing encouragement for the ideas on the table and helping further shape them by clarifying them, strengthening them with further



evidence and/or sometimes extending them. Challenging consists of raising problems with ideas on the table, questioning what's missing from them, and drawing attention to contradictions and opposing ideas. These practices also help steer the conversation and can help the *havruta* partners sharpen their ideas.

In order to have a *havruta* conversation of any kind that is more than just parallel monologues, these practices must take place in some kind of balance. The exact balance will differ from pair to pair, interaction to interaction and even moment to moment and will help determine the result of the *havruta* interaction. The practices in each pair are, on the surface, mutually exclusive. For example, to focus on an idea, one must put aside thoughts of other paths not taken. However, one can never fully do so or else one runs the risk of discussing stagnant ideas. A tension inheres within each pair of practices in trying to strike some sort of balance between them—a tension that can make *havruta* interactions dynamic, undetermined, hard and potentially, engaging.

These practices are best supported in a learning environment that fosters collaboration. This does not mean that everyone needs to agree. A collaborative environment is one in which students understand that their success as a *havruta* is interdependent and that they are therefore responsible to and for one another. Furthermore, such a context places a high value on participants working together to develop the most compelling ideas possible and not simply sticking with one's own original idea at the expense of all else.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Collaboration" and "collaborative environment" are further discussed later in this article.

## **A Close Look at One *Havruta* Session**

In what follows, I closely examine one *havruta* session in order to illustrate the practices described above. The case is not an ideal type; I am not trying to describe the perfect *havruta*, but instead to look at one rich real-life *havruta* session in order provide images of what *havruta* can look like, especially with particular kinds of framing and support.

The pair in the session below are two DeLeT fellows studying in the DeLeT Beit Midrash for Teachers at Brandeis. This is the fourth time they are studying together in *havruta*. Debbie and Laurie are young women in their twenties.<sup>10</sup> Debbie is entering her second summer of the program, having spent the past year working in a first-grade classroom. Laurie just started the program two weeks earlier. Both women come to the *Beit Midrash* with experience studying Jewish texts--Debbie attended Hebrew schools and Hebrew high school, majored in Jewish studies in college and studied in Israel before entering the DeLeT program, and Laurie attended Jewish day school for nine years and took Jewish studies courses in college—although neither has spent significant time studying talmudic texts in their original or studying in *havruta*.

The text that Debbie and Laurie are studying--a very short narrative about two rabbis--is from the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Ta'anit 9b). They have been given the text reproduced line by line in the original Aramaic, as well as English and Hebrew translations. The English (based on the Soncino Talmud translation) of the text handout reads as follows:

- I. R. Shimi b. Ashi used to attend [the lessons] of R. Papa and used to ask him many questions

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<sup>10</sup> Debbie and Laurie are pseudonyms used to maintain the anonymity of these study participants.

2. One day he observed that R. Papa fell on his face [in prayer] and he heard him saying:
3. May God preserve me from the insolence of Shimi
4. The latter thereupon vowed silence and questioned him no more<sup>11</sup>

Their assignment reads: “Together with your *havruta*, study this text very carefully ... Offer a compelling interpretation of the story of R. Shimi and R. Papa. Then insert 2 sentences (not more!) to help a potential reader better understand your interpretation of the story. This interpretation needs to be an outcome of your *havruta* study. You may offer a second interpretation on a separate sheet.” They have 45 minutes to work on this in *havruta*.

Debbie and Laurie begin their *havruta* by agreeing on a process for reading the text together out loud. In this first phase of their *havruta*, they read the text four different times and clarify the basic plot of the narrative. In the second phase of their *havruta*, they begin an interpretive discussion, which is focused on exploring the motivations of the characters in the text: Why would R. Shimi ask so many questions? Why does R. Papa have a problem with the question asking? During the third phase of their *havruta*, they step back to clarify their overall theory about the text's message about the teacher-student relationship. They discuss a number of different big ideas that they learn from the text (e.g. that one should always be careful of what one says no matter where you are and that one must always be aware of the potential impact of one's words). Finally, in the fourth phase of their *havruta*, they move from their interpretive discussion of the text to focusing on completing their written assignment.

In each of the sections that follows, I will focus on a different pair of *havruta* practices, looking at excerpts from Debbie and Laurie's *havruta* and then analyzing the

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<sup>11</sup> Elie Holzer designed the presentation of this text.

excerpts through the lens of each set of practices. In an actual *havruta*, the practices are often interwoven, but for the purposes of illustrating them clearly, it is useful to artificially separate them in order to focus on one pair of practices at a time. Furthermore, while all six of the practices apply to the interaction between the two people in the *havruta* and between the people and the text, for the purpose of this analysis I will at different points more heavily focus on one or another aspect of the interaction.

## **Part II: The Practices of Listening and Articulating**

### ***What is the Text About?***

After Debbie and Laurie clarify the meaning of the words in the text and which lines in the text seem to refer to R. Papa and R. Shimi, Debbie suggests that they read the text in full for a fourth time, this time making clear as they read, which line is being said by whom. Here they are both working hard to make sense of the text--to listen to what it has to say. As before, they take turns reading each line.

Upon completing the reading, Debbie opens up the conversation by turning to look directly at Laurie and asking: “What do you think this is about?” This is typical of their *havruta*—they read the text to hear what it has to say and then look to each other and explicitly invite the other person’s articulation of meaning.

**DEBBIE:** What do you think this is about?

**LAURIE:** Oh, my gosh. Well, okay, so it seems, I mean the first thing that stands out the most is this insolence thing, because there's something that Rabbi Papa really, really doesn't like about the fact that he's asking him so many questions, or I think, at least I'm connecting the rudeness with the question asking. It doesn't say that specifically, but do you think, what do you think? What connection would you make between –

**DEBBIE:** The rudeness –

**LAURIE:** - rudeness and what's already happened?

Instead of merely making a pronouncement about what she thinks the text must mean, Laurie, uses the word “seem” to articulate her idea. Her interpretation is exploratory and not definitive. Laurie invites Debbie into her thinking by explaining how she arrives at this idea—she is connecting rudeness with question asking. She makes it clear that this isn’t an idea said explicitly in the text, but is her inference based on what she has learned from listening to the text. Laurie concludes her articulation by inviting Debbie’s response, inviting Debbie to begin to articulate, and making clear she's ready to listen to Debbie.

Debbie agrees that there’s a connection between rudeness and question asking.

**DEBBIE:** Well, it's funny because I do think there's a connection, but the connection is so ambiguous and it's weird because you would think asking questions is a positive thing we want students to do.

**LAURIE:** Ya.

**DEBBIE:** So it must have been, the insolence must have been in the kinds of questions.

**LAURIE:** Hmm.

**DEBBIE:** I'm guessing. Maybe he was asking questions that were either not appropriate or maybe of ways to make, maybe, the teacher look bad-

**LAURIE:** Hmm. Ya

**DEBBIE:** -or that were condescending, or something that was inappropriate so that Rabbi Papa would say “may God preserve me” from taking action on this student, beating him into the ground. ((laughter)) But it seems to seem it has something to do with definitely the questions.

**LAURIE:** Ya.

**DEBBIE:** And then what's funny is something, an action has to happen right here for Shimi the student, well, actually, not the action because Shimi did see him-

**LAURIE:** Ya

**DEBBIE:** -observed him, so then Shimi learned his lesson, “lesson,”-

**LAURIE:** Ya

**DEBBIE:** -and decided not to question him "no more."

As Debbie starts to talk, one sees from her articulation that Debbie is listening to a number of things: she is listening to what Laurie said about there being a connection between the questions and insolence and responding to it; she is listening to the text stating that R. Papa prayed to God to "preserve him" from R. Shimi's questions; and, she is listening to her own notion that asking questions is generally a good thing for students to do. Building off of the ideas she has gathered through listening in different directions, Debbie determines that R. Shimi's questions must have been insolent and then gets more specific in articulating her interpretation, providing examples of the types of rude questions that R. Shimi may have asked.

The conversation continues as follows:

**LAURIE:** Yes. So I wonder if there's some kind of internal thing maybe going on with Shimi here, like he feels something. Maybe he's embarrassed or maybe he's ashamed or he—

**DEBBIE:** What do you mean...by that?

**LAURIE:** Well, no, because I liked what you were saying about how there's an action that takes place here or something, or then you said oh, no, wait, he did see him, so he knew what he said. I think that's what you were —

**DEBBIE:** Hmhm.

**LAURIE:** -- that's how I heard it.

**DEBBIE:** Right.

**LAURIE:** But I agree with you that there's still some kind of transition that occurs here where he changes his attitude and he vows silence. So there's just some, the way I see it, there's some internal change or something, like he's no longer inquisitive. He's silent for whatever reason, whether, and I'm curious what you think, whether, I mean maybe there's not a person who's right and wrong, but is it, was he really asking rude questions or was he just, or was the teacher just overreacting and he's now silenced his student, who is just curious and is trying to inquire? So I don't know. Maybe we can talk about that in a minute, but —

Laurie listens closely to Debbie's articulation of a question about an internal shift that takes place with R. Shimi, closely enough to repeat the point back to her, and wants to have listened well enough that she makes sure she understood correctly. Laurie then expresses agreement with Debbie's idea that there's something that happens that is missing from the text that makes R. Shimi vow silence. The gap that Laurie has noticed in the text prompts her to re-listen to and reconsider their idea that R. Shimi is asking rude questions. She begins to think about the meaning of the text from another perspective and to question R. Papa's reaction--was he perhaps overreacting? As happened with Debbie before, Laurie's close listening sparks new, deeper ideas for her to articulate.

## ***Analysis***

### *Types of Listening*

Debbie and Laurie's exchange calls attention to a number of different ways that *havruta* partners listen to one another: listening to follow along, listening to understand and listening to figure something out (for slightly different categories, see Haroutunian-Gordon, 2003). Debbie and Laurie both listen in order to follow the other's ideas. Listening to follow along means that one focuses on hearing the other's words in order to keep up and not lose the place. (Sometimes the objective in listening to follow along is to gear up for one's own turn, though that runs the risk of not really listening while one mostly waits out the other person until one can articulate). Debbie and Laurie provide each other with many listening cues to demonstrate that they are following along, as discussed on the next page. Listening to understand is different from listening

to follow along. When one *havruta* partner tries to understand the other's ideas, the partner moves the other from an object of attention to a subject in his or her own right. To understand the other, one needs to practice both outer and inner silence-- creating an outer space for the other to articulate and also silencing the many internal voices that arise in one's own heads so that s/he can truly pay attention to what the other is trying to say (Waks, 2008). In order to grasp another's meaning and/or draw it out further, some listeners find they must ask both clarifying and critical questions. Laurie indicates her listening to understand when she makes reference to Debbie's earlier statement, checks in to make sure she heard it correctly and makes space for Debbie to correct her.

**LAURIE:** Yes. So I wonder if there's some kind of internal thing maybe going on with Shimi here, like he feels something. Maybe he's embarrassed or maybe he's ashamed or he—

**DEBBIE:** What do you mean...by that?

**LAURIE:** Well, no, because I liked what you were saying about how there's an action that takes place here or something, or then you said oh, no, wait, he did see him, so he knew what he said. I think that's what you were —

**DEBBIE:** Hmhm.

**LAURIE:** -- that's how I heard it.

**DEBBIE:** Right.

And Debbie indicates this type of listening when she responds to and builds off of Laurie's statement and question about the connection between rudeness and questions.

**LAURIE:** What connection would you make between...rudeness and what's already happened?



**DEBBIE:** Well, it's funny because I do think there's a connection, but the connection is so ambiguous and it's weird because you would think asking questions is a positive thing we want students to do... So it must have been, the insolence must have been in the kinds of questions.

Listening to understand goes a long way to helping *havruta* members feel respected and also to making sure that different perspectives and questions get raised and responded to.

Debbie and Laurie also listen for the purpose of figuring something out. That is, as they are engaged in trying to figure out the motivations of the characters in the text, they listen both to one another and the text, to figure out the puzzle before them.

### *Listening Cues*

It is not necessarily always clear to one *havruta* partner that the other partner may be listening to her, and Laurie and Debbie provide each other with many cues to indicate listening and their interest in hearing each other's articulations. They demonstrate that they are following along when they fill in each other's words, with their many "hms" and "ya's" after each other's comments, and by their attentive demeanors. They look at each other and the text a lot, they nod their head as the other one is speaking, they say "yes" over and over again in response to what the other one says and they invite the other to speak by saying: "What do you think?" or stating an interpretive idea as a question. They also paraphrase or "revoice" the other's words (O'Connor & Michaels, 1996). All of these cues indicate that each partner takes the other person's ideas seriously and listens to them, encouraging further articulations. These listening cues are very important because they can encourage the articulator to keep working at his or her articulation and not stop thinking about the particular idea

before she has tried to fully work it out. The listening and articulating dance thus continues.

### *Types of Articulations*

Laurie and Debbie's exchange also call attention to two types of articulations: exploratory articulations and definitive articulations. Much of the early parts of Laurie and Debbie's *havruta* is full of exploratory articulations, articulations that have the quality of thinking out loud. For example, at the very beginning of the transcript excerpt, Laurie thinks out loud about the sense of the text and tries to elicit a response from Debbie. Again:

Well, okay, so it seems, I mean the first thing that stands out the most is this insolence thing, because there's something that Rabbi Papa really, really doesn't like about the fact that he's asking him so many questions, or I think, at least I'm connecting the rudeness with the question asking. It doesn't say that specifically, but do you think, what do you think? What connection would you make between ... rudeness and what's already happened?

She has not yet arrived at a conclusive understanding of why R. Shimi's questions were so troubling to R. Papa. Rather than simply thinking about this issue in her head, she invites her *havruta* partner into her thinking by articulating it out loud and specifically asks for a response to her ideas. In addition to inviting one's partner into one's thinking, this kind of articulating can also help people work through their own idea. The more they talk, the more they get clearer on what they are actually thinking and wanting to say.

The second type of articulating, definitive articulation, is stating one's idea. At first Debbie articulates to think out loud, suggesting different ways that the questions may have been insolent.

**DEBBIE:** Well, it's funny because I do think there's a connection, but the connection is so ambiguous and it's weird because you would think asking questions is a positive thing we want students to do...I'm guessing. Maybe he was asking questions that were either not appropriate or maybe of ways to make, maybe, the teacher look bad-

As she continues to talk, her articulation becomes less exploratory and more definitive.

**DEBBIE:** -or that were condescending, or something that was inappropriate so that Rabbi Papa would say "may God preserve me" from taking action on this student, beating him into the ground. ((laughter)) But it seems to seem like it has something to do with definitely the questions.

She says that there's "definitely" a connection between insolence and questions.

However, even as she becomes more definitive, she still uses language like "it seems," leaving space for Laurie to offer other alternatives. In this way, she creates a context for their *havruta* work to keep drawing on the interpretive resources they both bring to the table, even as their conversation progresses and begins to focus on certain interpretive ideas.

### *Holding Three Voices*

In addition to the tensions inherent in figuring out how to take turns in these roles of articulator and listener, *havruta* partners need to be able to listen to multiple things at the same time: to the text, their partner's ideas and their own ideas.

Throughout their *havruta*, there are many examples of Laurie and Debbie trying to juggle these multiple foci of their attention. As discussed earlier, Laurie listens to Debbie wondering whether R. Shimi has an emotional reaction to hearing R. Papa and listens to the text well enough to notice that it leaves that information out, which then gives her the help she needs to come to a more nuanced interpretation of what is happening in

the text. While ideally the focus is on all three partners, in practice at any given moment people studying in *havruta* tend to focus on two out of three voices, with one falling temporarily into the background.

### *Taking Turns Listening and Articulating*

Debbie and Laurie take turns listening and articulating to one another, which allows them to build a respectful working relationship, to draw on both of their ideas and to move the conversation productively forward. Taking turns listening and articulating is slow and hard work--it entails focusing on the other person and the text, restating the other's ideas and building on those ideas further. However, by taking turns in this way, *havruta* partners bring everyone each other and the text into the conversation and can create a sense of respectful dialogue in which all parties' ideas have space to be articulated and heard.

Besides building a sense of respect, this kind of turn-taking takes advantage of both people's thinking in order to synergistically enhance the pair's overall ideas. Ultimately, for *havruta* to be not a monologue in which one person uses the other to bounce off ideas, but an interpretive discussion that draws on the collective wisdom of all parties, each partner must have time to articulate and listen. In this way, it is a partnership with all parties contributing as subjects in their own right and responding to one another.

By taking turns listening and articulating, Debbie and Laurie avoid getting stuck on only one reading or on one or two details, examine multiple dimensions and multiple readings of the text (see Table 1), and keep building on and developing their ideas. If they had just stopped with Debbie's initial articulation, the idea of whether the

questions actually were insolent and the uncertainty about R. Shimi's and R. Papa's motivations would have gone unexplored. However, as Debbie has been honing her interpretation, Laurie has been listening to understand Debbie and to figure out the connection between questions and rudeness and R. Shimi and R. Papa's motivations for their actions. Based on her listening, Laurie reexamines the ideas that the questions were insolent and poses an alternative reading.

Table 1: An example of the development of Laurie and Debbie's ideas through their close listening and articulating in this *havruta* session

<b>LAURIE:</b> “[T]here’s something R. Papa really, really doesn’t like about the fact that he’s asking him so many questions…”
<b>DEBBIE:</b> “So… the insolence must have been in the kinds of questions…Maybe he was asking questions that were either not appropriate or maybe made the teacher look bad…or something that was inappropriate…Shimi… observed him [R. Papa praying], so then Shimi learned his lesson and decided not to question him any more.”
<b>LAURIE:</b> “I wonder if there’s some kind of internal thing going on with Shimi…maybe he’s embarrassed or maybe he’s ashamed…maybe there’s not a person who’s right and wrong…was he really asking rude questions…or was the teacher just overreacting?”

Through their back and forth between listening and articulating, Laurie and Debbie develop a respectful working relationship, while increasing the “interactivity” (Elbow, 1986) of their various ideas. And in the space of interactivity -- a space in which ideas get bounced about, rubbed up against one another, elaborated or discarded -- there is the potential for fresh insights. Because they not only articulate but also listen in various ways, they are able to build on each other's ideas, incorporating pieces of each other's ideas and developing them further. In this way, they draw on their collective thinking potential.

### Part III: The Practices of Wondering and Focusing

#### To Explore or to Move On?

In the early minutes of Debbie and Laurie’s *havruta* session, there are many examples of their initial wondering, about both their partner’s ideas and the text. They finish reading the text for the fourth time and immediately turn towards one another with open-ended questions about what the other person thinks about the text (Table 2).

They also wonder a lot about the meaning of the text, raising a long list of questions (Table 3).

Table 2: Wondering questions they pose about what the other partner thinks

<b>Debbie:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think this is about?</li> <li>• What do you mean by that?</li> </ul>
<b>Laurie:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think? What connection would you make between the rudeness and what’s already happened?</li> <li>• What do you think? Was he really asking rude questions or was the teacher overreacting?</li> </ul>

Table 3: Wondering questions they pose about the content of the text

<b>Laurie</b>	<b>Debbie:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“Was he really asking rude questions or was... the teacher just overreacting...”</li> <li>•“If Shimi only had good intentions...then what does this say about the teacher? Is he misinterpreting his student...”</li> <li>•“Who is overreacting?”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“What is the nature of this kid?”</li> <li>•“What is [R. Shimi’s] intention?”</li> <li>•“Is he misinterpreting his student...is the teacher the one overreacting...or is the teacher who is not overreacting and the student is being mischievous and inappropriate in some way?”</li> </ul>

Their partner questions (Table 2) are all open-ended, encouraging the other person to freely talk through her ideas. Laurie’s partner questions are often followed by more specific questions that help her partner focus her response. Debbie and Laurie’s

text wondering questions (Table 3) are sometime generated when they look again at the text and sometimes it is the questions themselves that generate another look. The text questions indicate that Debbie and Laurie continue to entertain different possibilities about what this story is about. They consider many of the details of the text and work hard to figure out how they fit together in this short narrative. Their text questions also point to a focus of their wondering: they are both trying to figure out who is at fault in this story. While they do not specifically articulate it as such, this question hovers over most of their interpretive discussion.

As the early wondering phase of their *havruta* continues, Debbie and Laurie focus on details of the text and interpretive ideas *and* wonder about these things. Their wondering leads to focusing, which in turn leads to further wondering.

**LAURIE:** ...maybe there's not a person who's right and wrong, but is it, was he really asking rude questions or was he just, or was the teacher just overreacting and he's now silenced his student, who is just curious and is trying to inquire...

**DEBBIE:** ...One of the things that I think you also touched upon is what is the nature of this kid.-

**LAURIE:** Ya.

**DEBBIE:** - Is this kid doing something that is, you know, not appropriate or is the teacher overreacting, or is the child, you know?

**LAURIE:** Because there are definitely kids who say "teacher, teacher," all the time, but-

**DEBBIE:** Right. But what is the intention. I think what's important is the intention behind that-

**LAURIE:** Ya.

**DEBBIE:** -Because what's interesting is I would think if let's say there were only three lines, I would say oh, wow, so Shimi must have been asking questions that were inappropriate and this and that, but think about a kid in the classroom who specifically wants to make a stir. Just by hearing the teacher saying, you know, "may God preserve me from the insolence of" the student, I don't think necessarily that child would make a change if their intent was to be mischievous in their questions,-

**LAURIE:** Hm.

**DEBBIE:** -but it seems that Shimi, it's almost as if maybe he was asking, maybe he over-asked questions, but maybe his intention was positive because that was such a change. I mean hearing those words made such an effect and I would say a negative effect...

Following their discussion about the connection between rudeness and questions, Laurie asks whether R. Shimi was really asking rude questions or whether the teacher was overreacting. Laurie's question is motivated by wonder, and the result is that it focuses Debbie's attention on R. Shimi's nature. Earlier in the conversation, Debbie had proposed that R. Shimi was merely asking rude questions. This time, her focus on R. Shimi's nature leads her to wonder more about what type of person Shimi is. She specifically wonders: "What is (Shimi's) intention?" This question shifts the conversation to consider the intentions behind R. Shimi's actions and not just the actions themselves. Debbie's new focus leads her to wonder about R. Shimi's intentions, and she then spends a few minutes building a compelling case based on the idea that R. Shimi may well have had very good intentions.

As they develop their ideas and also become aware of the passage of time, they shift their discussion from an exploration of characters' motivations. Debbie becomes more focused on the task and Laurie helps them step back to consider their interpretation of the overall text.

**DEBBIE:** So how about we start? Okay. ((She's reading out loud from the text.)) "Rabbi Shimi b. Ashi used to attend the lessons of Rabbi Papa." Okay, so-

**LAURIE:** "and used to ask him [many questions.]"

**DEBBIE:** Two lines.]

**LAURIE:** So. Okay, wait. First, sorry. Before we make our sentences, I'm just trying to go back to the bigger picture.

**DEBBIE:** Okay.



**LAURIE:** Do we want to talk about that because maybe it will help us clarify our theory about-

**DEBBIE:** Oh, okay, you're right.

**LAURIE:** So what do we think this is saying or could be saying about the teacher-student relationship maybe. Or, I mean I guess that also depends on how we interpret it, but what do you think, just your gut feeling, when you?

**DEBBIE:** Oh, gosh. You know, the first thing is that any discouragement a student gets, you could really shut them off and really, it makes a big impact on their willingness to be open just based on the tiniest thing...What do you think?

**LAURIE:** ... I guess it's you have to be really, really careful because you don't know who can hear you or if your students are there, they might misinterpret what you're saying.

While Debbie has started to focus on the task, Laurie pulls them back to consider “our theory” and consider the Big Idea behind the narrative. Debbie at this point has an interpretation with which she is satisfied and hence is interested in shifting gears. She feels that she has answered the question of “who is at fault” -- R. Shimi was overly inquisitive and R. Papa overreacted, so both R. Papa and R. Shimi are at fault in some way. Laurie is not satisfied with this as an answer; there are still issues she is trying to figure out.

Laurie’s question about what this text says about the teacher-student relationship reframes their discussion from being just about R. Shimi and R. Papa to being about a much larger concept. Because Debbie maintains a sense of wonder toward the text and Laurie's ideas (even though she has arrived at one explanation), she engages Laurie's question. In the process of going back to the text to respond to the question, Debbie clarifies her larger understanding of the meaning of the story -- that this text is a warning about what discouragement can do to students -- and also clarifies her understanding of a detail in the text -- that R. Papa’s intentions were not malicious and that he did not mean for R. Shimi to overhear him. Laurie extends Debbie’s

articulation, qualifying it to say that the text is about the need to be “really, really careful” when you speak, because you don’t know who can hear you or what the impact of your words might be. (Table 4)

Table 4: Key wondering and focusing moments in Laurie and Debbie's *havruta*

1. Laurie and Debbie engage in early **wondering**, exploring many aspects of the text. Their wondering is **focused** by an overarching question: Who is at fault?
2. Laurie notices the time; Debbie begins to **focus** on the task and **focuses** on a particular interpretation (R. Shimi overasked questions and R. Papa overreacted)
3. Laurie continues to **wonder** about the meaning of the text and how to resolve the question “Who is at fault.” She raises various alternative ideas (e.g. Shimi was questioning R. Papa as a person). Debbie considers Laurie’s ideas.
4. Debbie **focuses** on the assignment. Laurie stops her to **wonder** about the “big picture” and what this text says about the teacher-student relationship.

## **Analysis**

### *To Wonder or to Focus?*

In the case of Laurie and Debbie, wondering often takes the form of working on different ways of understanding a text. This occurs when the *havruta* is curious about the meaning of the text and considers different alternatives in an attempt to figure out the best way to make sense of the text. Wondering entails asking many questions, most basically, “What does this mean?” Debbie and Laurie also focus on particular ideas or ways to understand the text. They keep those ideas at the center of their attention for a given period of time. This kind of focusing gives *havrutot* an opportunity to deepen an initial idea and try to work it through. In generative *havruta* discussion, focusing on a

way of understanding the text occurs in dynamic relationship with wondering about the meaning of the text.

When *havrutot* initially read a text, they often respond in one of two ways in their effort to make sense of the text: 1. They very quickly come up with an interpretation about the meaning of the text, focusing on that one approach. 2. They leave things more open and wonder about the meaning of the text, returning to it multiple times in order to figure it out. In this example, Debbie and Laurie use the second strategy. This phase of their discussion is a time to immerse themselves in the text and wonder out loud about its meaning, coming up with many creative ideas about how to read the text. The unstated and even unconscious dilemma is that if the *havruta* wonders in too many directions, it will end up *wandering* and not move forward with any one idea. At the same time, if *havrutot* do not wonder, they often get carried away by unexplored and underdeveloped first impressions. In addition, the act of wondering seems to allow partners to take hold of the text in their own ways, sparking a certain level of creative energy that helps fuel and refuel the *havruta* interaction. While Debbie and Laurie engage in this kind of immersive wondering in the early phase of their *havruta*, as time passes, they become more focused on their emerging ideas and also on completing the task at hand.

#### *Wondering Driven By a Gap in the Text*

Debbie and Laurie's wondering is motivated by the fact that the text does not explain R. Papa and R. Shimi's actions in full. There is a space or gap in the text that engages them in wondering and theorizing about Shimi's questions. Wolfgang Iser (1978) writes that textual gaps engage readers since the reader is driven to try and fill

the gaps in order to make sense of the text. In this way, wondering about gaps pulls Debbie and Laurie's conversation forward. And their overarching question (or what Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon calls, their "genuine issue"), which emerges through their wondering, keeps them engaged with each other and the text. It creates a purpose to their conversation -- to figure out whether R. Shimi is at fault because somehow his questions were rude or whether R. Papa overreacted to R. Shimi. The result is that the wondering is not wandering, but allows them to build a more and more comprehensive interpretation. This is a kind of focused wondering, with a focus that is sustained over time. Debbie and Laurie's conversation will conclude when they have satisfactorily addressed their genuine issue.

#### *Wondering and Focusing In Multiple Directions*

*Havrutot* such as Debbie and Laurie can wonder and focus on a number of things. Debbie and Laurie first focus on the text, reading it and trying to listen to it to discern its meaning, before intentionally bringing in their own ideas. If, as *havruta* partners try to understand the text, they focus too narrowly, they may miss important details in the text; if they focus too broadly and try to tackle the entire text all at once, they may become overwhelmed and not have an opportunity to probe particular details. Debbie and Laurie's focus on the text leads them to wonder about particular parts of it. Through this wondering, they generate interpretive ideas, some of which they focus on in order to deepen the idea and their understanding of it.

Debbie and Laurie also focus on the assignment given to them for this *havruta* session. *Havrutot* may find themselves vacillating between focusing on the task and

letting it fall into the background as they get carried away by a particular idea or part of the text.

In addition to directing their wondering and focusing on the text, its interpretation, and the assigned interpretive tasks, Debbie and Laurie also very explicitly wonder about and focus on each other's thinking. The beginning of each part of their interpretive discussions is framed in the following way. One of them starts by saying: "What do you think this is about?", proactively drawing out her partner's thinking. This question puts a focus on the partner and clearly indicates that the first person is wondering about her partner's ideas. The partner responds by thinking out loud and then asks the first one what she thinks about what she just said. This pattern of "what do you think?"--motivated in part by their wondering about and focus on each other--helps Debbie and Laurie engage with the material together and get inside each other's thinking.

### *The Interplay between Wondering and Focusing*

There is a more dynamic and iterative relationship between wondering and focusing than simply that the pair wonders about the meaning of the text and then focuses its attention on an interpretation and then is done. Each practice is enacted against the backdrop of the other and keeps leading to the other. Neither Debbie nor Laurie (nor the pair as a unit) engages in one practice to the exclusion of the other. For example, when Laurie wonders about their larger theory, this question is connected to trying to complete the assignment and work out an interpretation of the full text. Her wondering is focused on helping them answer an important question. This is focused wondering--wondering that is targeted to one area. And while Debbie is focused on her

interpretive idea that R. Papa overreacted, she still engages with Laurie's wondering and continues to think through her interpretation and entertain other possibilities. She demonstrates wondering focus—a focus that has room for new questions, ideas, and foci.

Laurie and Debbie's example suggests that, in order for there to be a productive tension between wondering and focusing, *havruta* participants must be willing to engage in both practices and move back and forth between them. In concert with this, productive tension also seems to entail being respectful of one's partner and being genuinely open to and interested in her approach, even when it is different from one's own. This is crucial to Laurie and Debbie's success. In this way, both partners are able to complement each other, learn from the different approach each may take, and build something together, rather than simply aggravating each other with each going in a different direction.

## **Part IV: The Practices of Supporting and Challenging**

### ***Supporting to Develop Ideas and Create a Collaborative Spirit***

Returning for a final close look at the case of Laurie and Debbie through the lenses of supporting and challenging, we see many examples of how they support one another in their *havruta* discussion and how this support helps them build and expand on each other's ideas.

Laurie and Debbie make supportive moves to explicitly help each other develop her ideas.

**LAURIE:** So what do we think this is saying or could be saying about the teacher-student relationship maybe. Or, I mean I guess that also depends on how we interpret it, but what do you think, just your gut feeling, when you?

**DEBBIE:** Oh, gosh. You know, the first thing is that any discouragement a student gets, you could really shut them off and really, it makes a big impact on their willingness to be open just based on the tiniest thing, but what's hard about what I just said and hearing myself saying it is that this was not meant to be heard, it seems because “one day he observed that,” you know, it seems that this was supposed to be private. So I don't know if this was, if it wasn't intentional. I wish I knew what happened afterwards with Rabbi Shimi and Rabbi Papa, their interaction and, and ya. What do you think?

**LAURIE:** Ya, I agree. I think (10) Sorry. I got distracted ( ). I definitely, I agree that I think, I agree with you that this wasn't meant to be overheard. So it's not necessarily, it wasn't necessarily meant to lead to him being silent. That's the interesting thing is he's not asking for him to be silent. He's not going directly to him and saying please don't ask me any more questions, so I don't know that it was meant to make him be silent, but then why would he. But I guess it's like you have to be really, really careful because you don't know who can hear you or if your students are there, they might misinterpret what you're saying.

Laurie asks a question: “What do we think this is saying ...about the teacher student relationship?” This question, asked in the plural, further emphasizes the collaborative nature of their work -- figuring out the lesson of the text is not an individual endeavor. The question is a supportive move since it is meant to help them flesh out their larger understanding of the text together—supportive of not any particular idea or question but of her partner's thinking process. It is representative of many of the questions that they ask each other, questions that are open ended, that do not have a right answer but support their joint work. Laurie's supporting move creates space for Debbie to think through her ideas. Debbie points out that the text teaches that discouragement can shut a student off. At the same time, she poses a challenge to her idea -- that what R. Papa said was not meant to be overheard. In the context of a collaborative *havruta* in which both partners continuously draw attention to alternative understandings of the text, challenging oneself makes perfect sense.

After Debbie has finished articulating her idea, Laurie offers supportive language to Debbie. She starts out with general support- “Ya, I agree.” And she then gets more

specific: “I definitely, I agree with you that this wasn’t mean to be overheard...” She then builds on Debbie’s idea that R. Papa’s prayer was not meant to be overheard by extending it to mean that the prayer was not meant to make R. Shimi become silent. The lesson she draws from this is that “you have to be really, really careful of what you say because you don’t know who can hear you” or if your students will misinterpret your words.

Up until this point, they have maintained a strong collaborative spirit through the different forms of support they provide to one another. They seem to be completely on the same page and instead of directly challenging one another, allow the text itself to challenge their thinking.

#### *Challenging to Help, not to Argue*

This sense of total agreement comes to an end when Laurie extends her idea a little bit further.

**LAURIE:** I think it's going to the extreme and it's saying even when you're alone and you don't think anyone's listening, it can still filter out and, your students can still pick up on it.

**DEBBIE:** But then doesn't that go against the whole notion of being able to pray and open up to God? Let's say you're, you know, it's during the lunchtime and he's doing the *minchah* service and he did this as he's praying. He said this, hoping, maybe to get strength, you know, like you said before, to preserve him from lashing out at this child. And then Shimi heard that. So I wonder: Is it saying to not open up your feelings even alone because somebody might hear you because if you don't, you know, it seems like he's calling out to God to help him. You know, “Please preserve me from this rude child so I won't kill him.” But Shimi, I mean I think it's, line four is a pivotal point because it shows the outcome of hearing such a prayer.

Debbie challenges Laurie’s interpretation, suggesting Laurie’s idea could be interpreted to mean that one should not open up to God in prayer, which logically does not make sense. She draws out the scene in which R. Papa was praying to God in order to help make her case. She then poses a challenging question to Laurie: “Is it saying to



not open up your feelings even alone because somebody might hear you ...” However, she starts out by saying “I wonder,” making clear that the question is not just a question to challenge Laurie but is a question that she too is wondering about. Debbie then shifts the focus of the conversation back to line four of the text, “The latter thereupon vowed silence and questioned him no more,” which to her is the key to understanding the lesson of the text.

Laurie responds to the challenge by at first seeming to agree with Debbie. However, she does not simply acquiesce to Debbie’s challenge and retreat, as she might have done if she either felt threatened by the challenge and/or was not particularly invested in her own idea. Debbie’s gentle challenge has pushed Laurie to clarify her idea further. As Laurie talks, it becomes clear that she has another point she is trying to make.

**LAURIE:** Yah. And I think the other thing is that Shimi, I think there's, I agree. I think that there's sort of a disconnect here, where this [Shimi becoming silent] shows what happened, but Shimi could have also gone to him and said “I heard you. What's that about?” instead of just becoming silent, and he, Rabbi Papa, could have talked to him instead of, I don't think it's saying don't open up to God but it seems like –

Laurie is suggesting that the story could have been played out differently -- that it might have had a different ending if R. Shimi had talked directly to R. Papa or if R. Papa had talked directly to R. Shimi. She is not trying to say that the lesson is not to open up to God but that saying things when you are alone doesn’t help you avoid negative consequences and so perhaps it is better to think about speaking to people directly. In this example, Debbie's challenge is the catalyst that pushes Laurie to begin to think through a clearer version of her alternative interpretation of the main point of the text.

### **Analysis**

### *Types of Supporting Moves*

We can see in Debbie and Laurie's *havruta* examples of three different types of supporting moves. One kind of supporting move that they make quite frequently is to offer each other "supporting language." For example, when Debbie speaks, Laurie often says "hmm" in response to Laurie's articulations. The "hmm" doesn't necessarily indicate that Laurie agrees with Debbie's idea but signals to Debbie that Laurie is paying attention to Debbie's idea and that the idea may be worthy of further consideration. This kind of supporting move is not inconsequential. During the course of any one *havruta* session, partners come up with a great number of ideas. Many of those ideas die off seconds after being first uttered, while a few continue to be worked on as part of the discussion. Supporting language can help keep an idea in play that might otherwise meet an untimely demise and can provide needed encouragement to a partner to continue to engage with the idea even when it seems hard.

Another level of supporting is implicit supporting. It occurs when partners build on each other's ideas. By building on one's partner's ideas, one sends a signal that these are good ideas and worth working on together. Laurie and Debbie engage in a great deal of this kind of implicit supporting, known as co-building (Kent, 2006). For example, as seen in the excerpts of their discussion above, Debbie suggests that the big idea of the Talmudic text is that "any discouragement a student gets...(can) really shut them off." She then notes that R. Papa's prayer was not meant to be overheard. Laurie takes this latter idea and develops it further, stating that since it wasn't meant to be overheard and R. Papa didn't directly go to R. Shimi and ask him to be quiet, R. Shimi's silence can be understood as an unintended and unfortunate outcome of R. Shimi overhearing something not intended for his ears. Laurie's extension of Debbie's idea allows her to

suggest a slightly different big idea, which is focused less on the interaction between teacher and student and more on the unintended consequences of one's actions. As Laurie says, "You have to be really careful because you don't know who can hear you..." This is an idea that Debbie further extends in the latter part of their *havruta*.

A third level of supporting comes in the form of making explicit moves to help one's partner develop her idea. This comes in the form of asking questions about one's partner's interpretation or the text that creates space for her to think some more, clarify her ideas and flesh them out further. For example, Laurie asks Debbie, "So what do we think this is saying or could be saying about the teacher-student relationship maybe?"<sup>12</sup> and then pauses so that Debbie can think out loud. Explicit supporting moves also come in the form of offering supporting evidence for one's partner's idea. For example, as Laurie builds on Debbie's idea, she points to what is missing from the text to support their idea that R. Papa didn't intentionally silence R. Shimi. She notes that the text doesn't tell them that R. Papa went to R. Shimi to ask him to be quiet. "He's not going directly to him and saying please don't ask me any more questions." This extra bit of support for the idea seems to give the idea staying power in the *havruta*. Both Debbie and Laurie continue to be in agreement through the rest of the *havruta* that R. Papa didn't intend for R. Shimi to overhear him.

In these examples, all three types of supporting moves are focused on the ideas and the thinking, and not the person. This is important. The point of offering support is not that one likes or dislikes one's partner, or even necessarily likes or dislikes her idea, but that one is committed to helping develop the richest interpretations possible. Even

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<sup>12</sup> This question also signifies the practices of both listening *and* wondering. It is useful to notice that in one move a learner can engage in more than one *havruta* practice.

if one doesn't agree with one's partner (at least at first), one can still support her in making her ideas stronger. In the process of doing so, one may gain insight into one's partner's ideas, or even one's own. All three types of supporting moves are directed at the ideas on the table and are a means to encourage them forward.

### *Types of Challenging Moves*

There are two main types of challenging that we see in this *havruta*. First, there is a direct form of challenging in which the partners say things like: "Is this idea supported by the text?" "What are the limitations of this idea?" Or, "How would this idea stand up under this particular hypothetical situation?" When Debbie challenges Laurie's idea in the excerpt above, she is suggesting a hypothetical situation in which Laurie's idea would not stand up. Laurie has said that the text is possibly suggesting that "even when you are alone and you don't think anyone's listening," you have to watch what you say. Debbie challenges this suggestion first with a principle: "But then doesn't that go against the whole notion of being able to pray to God and open up to God." Debbie then brings a hypothetical scene to illustrate the principle and thereby calls attention to a limitation in Laurie's idea. Debbie's challenge helps Laurie step back and clarify her thinking. By helping one's partner entertain alternative evidence and ideas, this kind of challenging can help with the refinement of the *havruta's* thinking. It forces the partners to try to reconcile differences and in the process to get clearer on the limitations of a particular idea.

There is another type of challenging, a more implicit type of challenging in which the *havruta* partner simply suggests an alternative reading. Laurie does just that when she responds to Debbie's challenge. She suggests a third way to read the story--that the

story could be read as being about a fundamental communication gap between the characters, since neither rabbi talks directly to the other. The weakness of implicit challenges is that they can go unnoticed and therefore not have an impact on the larger discussion. This is in fact what happens with Debbie and Laurie. Debbie doesn't pick up on Laurie's larger point and (in a later part of the transcript) simply takes the conversation back to an earlier idea she is still holding onto.

As with the supporting moves, when a *havruta* makes a challenging move, the challenge is not to the other person but to the idea, and the challenger does not need to disagree with the idea in order to challenge it or wonder about a possible weakness in it. The point of the challenging is to be able to help each other step back and think through one's ideas: Are these ideas supported by the text? How does this interpretation stand in the face of alternative interpretations? In this way, *havruta* partners can help one another develop the strongest possible interpretations.

### *The Importance of Constructive Challenging*

In the book, *Academic Controversy* (1996), the authors Johnson, Johnson and Smith talk about the need for a "supportive climate" and a cooperative mode of working together for people to feel safe enough to challenge one another and to do so effectively. In the context in which Laurie and Debbie are learning together, the DeLeT *Beit Midrash* for Teachers, teachers spend time helping students create a spirit of collaboration, which focuses on the idea that *havruta* is a mutual undertaking -- that both parties need each other in order to maximize their learning, since we can augment each other's individual learning and there are things we can collectively do that we cannot do

as individuals -- *and* that a successful *havruta* relies on each party being willing to take responsibility not only for her own learning but for her partner's learning as well.

Even before DeLeT students begin to study with each other, *havruta* partners meet to discuss their strengths and weaknesses as teachers and learners and how they might best be able to support one another through the course of the *Beit Midrash*. They continue to pay attention to their working relationship, reflecting on it and giving each other feedback about it throughout their time in the *Beit Midrash*. In fact, in the middle of the course, each pair must tape record itself so that pair members can look for evidence of ways that they are helping their partners' learning and also examine instances when they make moves that get in their partners' way. For example, some students have pointed to the fact that they cut their partners off, not fully listening to their partners' ideas and helping them develop them further. This sense of collaboration can help *havrutot* successfully engage in challenging one another's ideas.<sup>13</sup>

Part of building a collaborative environment entails helping students develop a commitment to working together to develop the most compelling ideas possible, not simply sticking with an idea at the expense of all else. It is this commitment that can motivate them to put their own ideas aside for a moment, and stop to think about someone else's idea and how to make it stronger through supporting as well as investigate its weak points through challenging moves. In this way, constructive challenging is very different than debating, in which the goal is to win by making points that are often at the expense of one's colleagues. The goal of constructive challenging

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<sup>13</sup> A commitment to and sense of collaboration is an important basis for all of the *havruta* practices and engagement in the practices can serve to reinforce this sense of collaboration. I specifically highlight collaboration *here* because there is more risk associated with challenging, and it is therefore even more important that the *havruta's* work be based in a sense of collaboration to help make the challenging constructive.

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

### *The Interplay Between Supporting and Challenging in Debbie and Laurie's Havruta*

Looking across the entire *havruta* session, Debbie and Laurie evince a great deal of support for one another's ideas and their challenges are very gentle-- so gentle that at times they go unnoticed. While it is important for a *havruta* to engage in supporting, too much supporting with little challenging can lead to uncritical affirmation. Debbie and Laurie's *havruta* is at times at risk of moving into "affirmation" territory. While they generally steer clear of simply affirming one another, if they were to continue to work together, it would likely be useful for them to focus on increasing the amount of challenging and making it more explicit.

Too much challenging with little support also has its risks. In such a case, a *havruta* can easily enter a never-ending cycle of debating, in which they simply take stands rather than exploring ideas. Finally, little challenging with little supporting can lend itself to a very static discussion, in which each person puts forth her ideas without benefiting from interplay with her partner's thinking. As scholar Laurent Daloz (1999) posits, the ideal condition for growth is to have a high degree of supporting along with a high degree of challenging. In such a situation, the *havruta* can work on strengthening the ideas on the table, while also examining them with a critical eye and grappling with alternatives.

## Part V: Conclusion

“It’s important to learn with and from others so as to widen your perspective and think about things in new ways...It’s also good to be able to ask questions of another person and also to be able to voice your ideas out loud in order to clarify them for yourself.”  
-Laurie’s reflections

In Laurie’s words, we hear some of the potential benefits of *havruta* learning: working with a partner can expand one’s perspective. One can learn new ideas and strategies from one’s partner. One is helped by the questions that one’s partner asks. Simply articulating ideas out loud to someone else provides an opportunity for clarifying one’s thinking. Reading her remarks leaves the impression not only that she had a productive *havruta*, that learning with another positively affected her learning experience and the ideas she and her partner produced, but also that she had a sense of *how and why* she learned in a way that could continue to buttress her future learning.

Obviously, it is important for every teacher to consider her learning goals and whether or not *havruta* is an appropriate way to help meet them. *Havruta* is not a panacea for teaching challenges or the right strategy to be used in every learning situation. *Havruta* is being used more frequently in a variety of contexts, but often without a plan to assure that students learn and without pedagogic attention to its use. Too often, teachers implicitly assume that if we simply put two people together, they will have a generative discussion centered on the text. Even when learners do have productive *havruta* interactions, there is still a great deal of room for teachers to consider the greater learning potentials offered by well-framed *havruta* study. For the most part, teachers and students alike do not stop to wonder, "Why study in *havruta*? Or, "What must I know or be able to do to make *havruta* an 'educative' (Dewey, 1917, p. 37) learning experience?" To utilize *havruta*'s potential, we must step back to



consider what things people do when they study in *havruta* that create the opportunity for generative learning, what can keep this from happening, and—most significantly—what teachers can do to maximize the learning potential in *havruta*.

Debbie and Laurie's *havruta* illustrates the six *havruta* practices and the ways in which they characterize and shape a *havruta*'s interaction. By looking at their *havruta* through the lens of these practices, we have seen ways that Debbie and Laurie create space to work with each other and the text to develop and shape their interpretive ideas. Their *havruta* began with some simple questions about what kinds of questions R. Shimi asked and whether he was a troublesome student. It could easily have ended without either of them further probing the depths of the text or their own thinking, satisfied with simple, pat answers or frustrated, not being able to name what was missing. However, they take the time to revisit the text, listen to it and wonder about its underlying meaning, to listen to each other and create room for each to articulate her ideas. They focus on particular questions generated by the text and push forward with certain ideas, but don't shut themselves off from consideration of new insights. They constructively support each other, helping to build up ideas on the table, while also questioning and challenging those ideas that don't seem to quite work. Through their hard work, they take their initial underdeveloped ideas and turn them into thoughtful and rich interpretations of the text. By the conclusion of their forty-minute discussion of the text, they have developed a much more nuanced approach to it, foregoing the simple question of which character's actions were right and wrong in favor of articulating deeper questions and lessons about the nature of human interactions and the power of words.

In speaking of how teachers can find meaning in students' work, Patricia Carini writes, "What is meaning? Meaning arises through the relationship among things or persons: that mutual reciprocity that occurs in the act of truly 'seeing' something...Meaning designates the experience of relatedness which enhances and makes more vivid each of the events or persons it joins. For meaning to arise, there must be recognition." (Carini, p. 15) Carini's description of meaning-making calls our attention to seeing and relationship. Through relating, we are able to see someone else more vividly. And, according to Carini, it is through such seeing in relationship that meaning emerges.

For Carini, there is something important about the quality of attention we have for another that affects the meaning we are able to make. It is through interrelating that true seeing arises and through such powerful seeing of others and ourselves that we construct new meaning. Carini's description of what can occur between a teacher and student—the true seeing that leads to meaning-making and understanding—is no less applicable to what can occur between two *havruta* partners, and between the *havruta* partners and the text that they study.

At the heart of Laurie and Debbie's *havruta* relationship is the responsive space that each helps create in reaction to her partner and the text--that they create together through their listening and articulating, their wondering and focusing, their supporting and challenging. It is through a deliberate learning relationship such as a *havruta* that participants can create the space to notice and respond to another. Carini seems to suggest that it is in such responsive space that we begin to see not only others better but also ourselves and our own ideas, and that through this process of seeing and relating, we create meaning. Perhaps it is the power of this responsive space to which

the Talmud alludes when it tell us that when two people listen to each other when studying halakhah,<sup>14</sup> the Shekhinah--God's essence on earth--listens to them.

### Transcript Notations

.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
,	continuing intonation
( )	empty parentheses indicate impossible transcription
(word)	filled parentheses indicate best guess about what is being said
((word ))	double parentheses enclose author's descriptions or notes and
sometimes	the addition of a word to a quote so that it makes sense
to the reader	
[ ]	brackets around one word or letter indicate that a word has been
inserted	to assist the reader's understanding or that the case of a
letter has been	changed.
[ ]	brackets on successive lines indicate the beginning and ending of
	overlapping speech
-	speech is cut off (generally by other person)
=	no noticeable interruption between utterances
...	some content has been cut out
(5)	silence of 5 or more seconds, timed to the nearest second
<b>word</b>	author's emphasis

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<sup>14</sup> Halakhah refers to legal material, in contrast to aggadah, the non-legal material in the Talmud.

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