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THIS ISSUE

WHAT MAKES A SCHOOL THOUGHTFUL?

THE SCIENCE OF COLLABORATION

TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL AT 18: A PARENT'S GRATITUDE

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Jewish educators are drawn to using chevruta learning in their classrooms for many satisfying reasons. As a traditional mode of Jewish study, simply studying text in pairs lets students experience a valued Jewish way of learning. Educators and students alike get excited about the intellectual possibilities — picture images of lively pairs fulfilling the Talmudic adage of "iron sharpening iron."

As talk of twenty-first-century learning enlivens educators' professional discourse, the intellectual and social potential of chevruta learning heeds the call for critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. Chevruta learning also provides a fertile laboratory for social skills. It is compelling to see how the pedagogical structure of chevruta, when thoughtfully designed and supported, meets today's educational ideals and indeed surpasses them with intriguing potential as an ethical and spiritual practice. There is a lot that Jewish educators can do to deepen their use of this learning structure and become designers of an intentional chevruta learning practice that will nurture their students intellectually, socially, ethically, and spiritually.

Consider this component of a beit midrash (house of study) exercise designed to induct students into what we call "intentional chevruta learning."

Take a few minutes to write about a time when you felt that someone else really understood you. Then write about a time when you felt misjudged or misunderstood. What happened there? What did the other person do or not do to make you feel understood or misunderstood? Share your stories with your chevruta.

For the seventh graders who participated in this exercise, vivid and heartfelt memories of being understood — or not — emerged easily. Stories of teachers, parents, friends, and peers who demonstrated understanding or misunderstanding contributed to a list of attitudes and actions that students characterized as leading to understanding on the one hand or to misjudgment on the other. Students explored the idea that their study in a chevruta partnership was not only about decoding a text or taking turns talking, but also about "seeking to understand" and "being understood." Throughout the chevruta learning, exploration of the intent "to seek understanding" remains a focal point alongside the teaching of standard text study skills. Through the thoughtful use of intentional chevruta learning, learners develop ethical and spiritual, intellectual and social capacities in tandem.

We use two main research-based frameworks that help students grow in multiple dimensions. The first framework is "the chevruta triangle," which opens discussion and
builds imagery for an ideal chevruta partnership. This is not a partnership of two, but a partnership of three: two people and the text. "The chevruta triangle" can be drawn as an equilateral triangle with one partner at each corner. We "seek to understand" not only that our partner has her/his own ideas, thoughts, and voice, but also that the text has its own "voice" and multiple meanings. Each partner works to demonstrate his/her openness to listen, understand, and respond to the other's ideas and to achieve new understandings and interpretations.

The shared imagery of the chevruta triangle lets students monitor their own activity within the partnership; they can assess how well they hold open the triangle and whether all three partners have a presence and a voice. Here are some reflections from seventh graders on what they learned through their chevruta partnerships after a few sessions:

"I need to take a breath and tune in to what I am doing and be more conscious of my partner and myself."

"I need to analyze [the text] more than once and leave my mind open to other views. I also learned not to judge it [the text]."

"It's hard to share power but I must."

The students express an unprompted "I need to" or "I must" message about being a chevruta partner to both the text and their peer, implying that their chevruta partnership obligates them to behave in certain ways for themselves and their partners. This sense of obligation and responsibility to the other taps into an essential and ethical underpinning of the chevruta relationship: we are responsible to and for one another and through this mini-universe of obligation we gain new knowledge, interpretations, and insights.

In the student reflections we also hear overtones of a spiritual vitality that allude to attentune, wonder, and a sense of connection. A student reminds herself to "take a breath," "tune in," and "become more conscious," there is a sense of needing to slow down and pay attention. Another student seeks "remaining open," a stance towards sustaining wonder.

It is one thing to identify the importance of becoming more attuned to one's partners or to remain open to different ideas; it is another thing to know how to do it. The "how" is where our second major framework comes in: "the six practices of chevruta." This framework builds the skills needed to establish the relationship and realize the learning possibilities of studying texts closely with others.

Through lessons, tools, exercises, and feedback, we work with students to enact and enhance "the six practices of chevruta"—listening and articulating, wondering and focusing, and challenging and supporting. Each set can entail intellectual, social, ethical, and spiritual engagement, particularly when applied to all three chevruta partners. Notice how a chevruta student refers to his own experience of "listening and articulating":

I think that the text is telling you something that makes it a partner but you have to listen to what it is telling you...you can't do that with the text...just by scanning it...the same with any person. You really have to get to know them... (Our emphasis.)

What begins as an intellectual exercise in closely reading a Jewish text becomes reframed as a practice of "listening" to a text that has something to "articulate" to readers. Even the text engages in listening and articulating and through our own use of these practices we can "really get to know" and connect with the text and with people. The student's reflection shows both ethical and spiritual reverberations: an ethical responsibility to seek textual understanding—beyond a cursory look—and the spiritual understanding that the text will speak to us if we listen.

We hear similar reflections from students using the "challenging and supporting" set of practices. These require critical thinking and introduce the idea of "evidence" to build and evaluate ideas together. Students embrace these practices not only as the tools of intellectual creativity and refinement, but also as the means to develop the ethic of intellectual honesty. When students describe the "voice" of the text as "challenging" or "supporting" their ideas, again we see the spiritual significance of chevruta practice.

To design and participate in intentional chevruta learning requires time and energy. In the words of one pair of seventh graders looking back over their beit midrash program: "We worked hard!" For these students and for many others, the pedagogy of intentional chevruta learning opens possibilities for growing in multiple ways, a reward that is well worth the effort.

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