

1. Studying Torah With A Partner

“Make a Teacher for Yourself” *Mishnah, Pirkei Avot 1:6*

The Goals of *Chevruta*: “The Juxtaposition of Text and Person”

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Synagogue2000

About *Chevruta* Study

Chevruta study is the traditional practice of learning with a partner, taking turns reading a text aloud and discussing the material together. While usually thought of as working in pairs, *chevruta* learning can also be done in small groups. Studying in *chevruta* is a time-honored, traditional Jewish model of learning. Rabbi Chalafta taught, “If two sit together and are engaged in the study of the Torah, the presence of God comes to rest between them.” Studying in *chevruta*, with regular or rotating partners from session to session, can help the team deepen intimacy and trust. Studying Torah together facilitates shared Jewish spiritual experiences between team members.

Mishnah, Pirkei Avot 3:6

Talmud Torah Ke-Neged Kulam— The Study of the Torah is Equal to Them All

Studying Torah is the greatest of the *mitzvot* and it deserves to be undertaken for its own sake. But the study of Torah, the *Mishnah* teaches, is equal to all other *mitzvot* because it leads us to fulfill them. Teaching and engaging in *chevruta*-style study can further the development of the congregation as a spiritual community, and have the potential to become a central part of transformational change in the synagogue. This form of study makes each learner an active participant, brings learners into direct contact with the Jewish religious tradition, and creates dialogue and connection between members of the community.

Mishnah, Peah 1:1

“Make a Teacher for Yourself”

This passage is from the collection of rabbinic sayings called *Pirkei Avot*, *Teachings of the Sages* (literally, “Chapters of the Fathers,” now often rendered “Wisdom of the Sages”). *Pirkei Avot*, or just *Avot*, is a tractate (section) of the *Mishnah*. *Mishnah* (literally, “the Teaching”) is the title of the first rabbinic legal code, compiled and edited in the Land of Israel in the second century. While the rest of the *Mishnah* is concerned with legal matters, this tractate is filled with ethical maxims and rabbinic proverbs. Many of the best-known sayings of the Rabbis are from *Pirkei Avot*. A traditional custom is to study one of the six chapters in *Pirkei Avot* on each Shabbat afternoon between Passover and *Shavuot*. *Pirkei Avot* is therefore printed in many prayer books.

The *Mishnah* is divided into orders, tractates, chapters and paragraphs. Each individual law or paragraph in the *Mishnah* is also called a *mishnah*. The *Mishnah* is cited

by the name of the tractate, followed by numbers for chapter and *mishnah*. Our text is from *Avot* 1:6, i.e., the tractate of the *Mishnah* called *Avot*, chapter 1, *mishnah* 6.

Torah of Self and Others

The second study text is from a modern Jewish teacher, Rachel Adler. Adler, an important contemporary Jewish feminist thinker, teaches at the University of Southern California and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, and is the author of *Engendering Judaism*. Adler sees the companionship and openness of *chevruta* study as an exemplary model for all social relationships. Adler's language evokes the I-Thou dialogue of Martin Buber. In this passage, Adler emphasizes that the joint engagement with sacred text by study partners can create a place of sacred meeting. We encourage the study of these texts about *chevruta* in *chevruta*.

Mishnah, Pirkei Avot 1:6

יהושע בן פרחיה אומר,
עשה לך רב, וקנה לך חבר,
והוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות:

Reuven P. Bulka, *Chapters Of The Sages: A Psychological Commentary on Pirkey Avoth*. (Northvale, N.J.: J. Aronson, 1993), p. 30.

Max Routenberg, "Pirkei Avot: Teachings of the Sages." *Siddur Sim Shalom* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, United Synagogue of America, 1985), p. 604.

Yehoshua the son of Perachya says:
Make a teacher for yourself,
acquire a companion for yourself,
and judge all individuals charitably.

Joshua ben Perachya taught:
Select a master-teacher for yourself;
Acquire a colleague for study;
When you assess people, tip the balance
in their favor.

The Goals of *Chevruta*: "The Juxtaposition of Text and Person" Rachel Adler

The *chaverim* (study partners) do not simply study Bible. . . . The very structure of their relationship and the nature of its boundaries present a Jewish model for the relation between self and other. In this relationship, people experience each other as whole, rather than as fragmented, beings. . . .

Self and other are not sharply separate here. To be *chaverim* is to be neither fused nor counterposed, but to be juxtaposed. The root CH-B-R means to join together at the boundaries. The curtains of the tabernacle, for instance, are *chevrot isha el ahotah*, "joined one to another"

Some boundaries are barricades—chain link fences guarded by [watch dogs]. Others are not primarily barricades but *loci* of interaction. A cell membrane, for example, is part of the living substance of the cell. It is the perimeter at which the cell conducts its interchanges with other cells—the contacts, the flowings in and out, which maintain its life within its environment. The boundary between self and other [in the study partner relationship] resembles this living, permeable boundary. . . .

I would like to argue that as Jews we have available to us a different way to define the relation between self and other: to reconstitute the objectified other as a subject, and to understand a subject as a self with permeable boundaries contiguous with the boundaries of neighbor-selves. This Torah of self and other, which we [see reflected in the study partner model], grounds not only our capacity to be *chaverim* but our capacity to create *tzedek*, justice-as-righteousness. *Tzedek* is a justice far richer and more particularized than the abstracted, objective fairness of Western liberalism. Its goal is to embody the Torah of self and other in a social matrix that allows all human beings to flourish.

Rachel Adler, "A Question of Boundaries: Towards a Jewish Feminist Theology of Self and Others," *Tikkun*, Vol. 6, No. 3, pages 43-44.

Probing the Text

1. Read the first passage out loud. If you can, read it in Hebrew and English.
2. What are the differences between the two translations?
3. Restate this *mishnah* in your own words.
4. Is there a difference between making/selecting ("*aseh*") and acquiring ("*k'neh*")?
5. Can one person be both teacher and companion?
6. What is the relationship between the two halves of the *mishnah*:
 - a) "get a teacher and a companion" and b) "evaluate others charitably"?
7. What, according to Adler, is the significance of the Hebrew root *ch-b-r*? What does this word suggest about the relationship between *chevruta* partners?
8. What, in Adler's description, is the ideal boundary between one person and another?

Ourselves and Our Congregations

1. What experiences have you had in making and finding teachers and companions?
2. Have you ever been asked to be a teacher, whether in formal or informal settings?
3. Are mentoring relationships encouraged or nurtured in your congregation? What would be different in your synagogue if people were encouraged to "make yourself a teacher"?
4. What is the role of the synagogue community in facilitating or supporting friendship?
5. Have you had study companions? Were these important connections for you?



6. Does Adler's description of what happens in *chevruta* study resonate with your life experiences?
7. How might the "Torah of self and others" that Adler imagines "ground our capacity to create justice"?

For Further Study

TRANSLATIONS AND COMMENTARIES

There are many excellent translations of *Pirkei Avot*. Several to consider are:
 Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky. *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary On Jewish Ethics*. New York: UAHC Press, 1993.
 Reuven P. Bulka, *Chapters of the Sages: A Psychological Commentary on Pirkey Avot*. Northvale, N.J.: J. Aronson, 1993.
 Rami M Shapiro, *Wisdom of the Jewish Sages: A Modern Reading of Pirke Avot*. New York: Bell Tower, 1995.
 Max Routenberg, "Pirkei Avot: Teachings of the Sages." *Siddur Sim Shalom: A Prayerbook For Shabbat, Festivals, And Weekdays*. Harlow, J., ed. New York: Rabbinical Assembly: United Synagogue of America, 1985, 602-663.

How to recognize that a quote is from the *Mishnah*

Mishnah may be designated with one of the these abbreviations:

M.
 m.
 Mish.

Mishnah is cited by tractate, chapter and paragraph:

Mishnah Berakhot 1:1

Mish. Rosh Ha. 2:5

m. Toh. 3:4

Ketubot 3:4

Tractate names may be abbreviated. This is "*Rosh HaShanah*."
 Often the first three letters are used, as in *Mishnah Tohorot*.

The designation "*Mishnah*" is missing; the citation Chap:Par shows that this is from the *Mishnah*.

