

Hevruta: Learning Together

In the Jewish tradition, shared learning is the norm: “Two scholars sharpen one another” (BT Ta’anit7a, quoted in myjewishlearning.com, “Hevruta: Learning in Pairs”). *Hevruta*, an Aramaic word meaning “fellowship,” is a form of study wherein a pair, or a group of no more than four, works its way through a passage of the Torah. The goal is to understand the meaning of the passage and to apply it to larger issues in modern life. This is peer-guided study, where a teacher is available for questions and clarification, but where students are expected to share their knowledge, skills, and wisdom. Often after the *hevrutot* (plural form) have completed their work, the larger group will join together to compare their own readings to the teacher’s interpretation of the passage—and to challenge that interpretation.

Why Hevruta?

According to Rabbi Dov Gartenberg, the study of Torah in the Jewish community has always been dialogic and multivoiced. As Gartenberg puts it, “While most of Western thought is primarily concerned with the ‘Answer,’ Jewish thought is preoccupied with the ‘Question.’”¹ *Hevruta* offers many benefits to students. It encourages learning by actively engaging students in dialogue with others about the text. Daniel B. Kohn, in his book *Practical Pedagogy for the Jewish Classroom*, explains how *hevruta* helps students to develop a wide variety of skills that are useful across the curriculum and, indeed, throughout life²:

- teamwork
- listening to another’s ideas
- higher-level thinking skills
- persuasive abilities
- self-reliance
- trust in other’s abilities
- tolerance for different learning styles

¹ Gartenberg, Dov. “Rabbiblog: The Web Log (Blog) for Rabbi Dov Gartenberg.” Nov. 16, 2005.

² Daniel B Kohn, *Practical Pedagogy for the Jewish Classroom: Classroom Management, Instruction, and Curriculum Development* (The Greenwood Educators’ Reference Collection) (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 30–32.



Making *Hevruta* Work in Your Classroom

Consider arranging *hevruta* rather than allowing students to choose to work with a friend or a student of a similar ability level. The purpose of this learning method is to allow students to share disparate knowledge and viewpoints, and to support one another in developing new learning skills. Pairing or grouping students with different experiences, worldviews, and learning styles will benefit the students in the long run.

Levels of Interpretation

After pairing or grouping the students, instruct them to take turns reading aloud. Let them know that each person should feel free to ask questions at any time. Some rabbis use a three-tier approach to a text that will sound familiar to teachers who use *lectio divina* with their students. The pair, or group, begins with the most straightforward understanding of the text, given the context in which it was written. Next the pair seeks modern applications to their own life situations, or to modern issues. Finally, the pair can explore whether the text leads to action³.

Tasks for Each Student

Consider assigning tasks to each student in a pair or group, especially if you have selected the pairs or groups yourself. Students with little confidence tend to rely on a partner to carry them when working in groups, and students with a history of academic success may assume leadership roles without a second thought. Assigning tasks ensures a shared level of involvement and also helps the pairs or groups know how to proceed. You may want to include the following tasks:

- reading the text aloud
- looking up unfamiliar words and creating a glossary for the text
- recording the viewpoints expressed in the discussion⁴

The Underlying Concept

The key to *hevruta* is the concept that every text has multiple meanings. Likewise, the *hevruta* itself has multiple objectives. Members should explain their own reading of the text to enlighten their partners. They should listen to their partners' viewpoints to learn from them. Finally, members should challenge their partners' views to help hone that person's thinking.

Remind the students that the term *hevruta* is related to the Hebrew word *haver*, which means "friend." Pairs or groups enter into a fellowship of learning, where they bring different understandings together. Sometimes perspectives combine to create a new understanding. The desired outcome of *hevruta* is that pairs or groups arrive at truths that none could have achieved alone.

³ Gartenberg, *ibid.*

⁴ Kohn, *ibid.*

