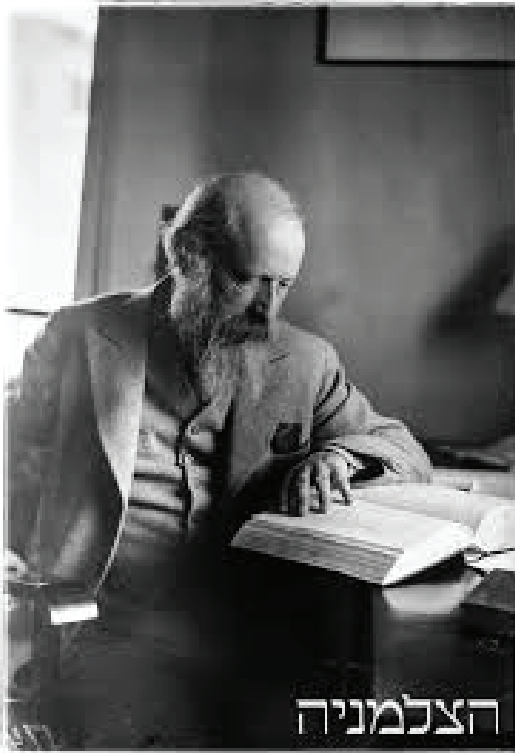


# Hevruta: The Relational Character of Jewish Learning



Portrait of Martin Buber, 1961

Photograph by Rudi Weissenstein, Hatzalamia (Photo House) Collection

Hevruta, coming from the Hebrew word *haver* (friend), is a traditional study format in which two partners discuss and debate Jewish texts. Torah study is not designed as a solitary intellectual pursuit but as a social activity whose goal is to create co-learners, cultivate relationships, and build community.

- Do you generally prefer to study alone, with a partner, or in a group?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each study arrangement?
- How can disagreements strengthen a relationship?

## Martin Buber

When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.

Martin Buber was a philosopher best known for his philosophy of dialogue, which he explained in his most famous essay "I and Thou." According to Buber, in an I–Thou relationship (in contrast to an I–it relationship), each person fully and equally turns toward the other in dialogue and "total presentness." Judaism highlights learning that is done in an I–Thou relationship – in true dialogue with another person.

- Try articulating what characterizes an I–You relationship in your own words.
- With whom do you feel you have the most developed I–You relationship, meaning a person you relate to most authentically and without objectification or judgment.

One of the Jewish community's primary institutions is the Beit Midrash or house of study – a vibrant space where many havrutot engage in peer dialogue, discussion, and debate. Sometimes, as depicted in this photo, the Beit Midrash and the Beit Knesset (the synagogue or, literally, the house of gathering) shared the same building.



Great Beit Midrash in Zagare, Lithuania, 2007

Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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Maimonides (Rambam) Laws of Talmud Torah 4:9

רמב"ם, הלכות תלמוד תורה ד', ט'

The sanctity of a Beit Midrash is more binding than that of a Beit Kneset.

קדושת בית המדרש חמורה מקדושת בתי כנסיות.



Tikkun Leil Shavuot, Kibbutz Yifat, 1972

NLI

- What characterizes the study that takes place in a Beit Midrash?
- How is a Beit Midrash different from a library?
- Why would the Rambam say that the sanctity of the study hall is greater than that of a synagogue? Do you find this ruling surprising? Do you agree with this statement?
- Is there a space in your life that you would consider your personal Beit Midrash – a place where people discuss, debate, and build community and relationships?

## Celebrating Shavuot by Learning Torah Together

- Does your community hold a learning event on the night of Shavuot? If so, what does it include? Are there special activities for children and teenagers?

The text at the bottom of the poster announces a Tikkun Leil Shavuot event, during which it is traditional to study the Torah all through the night. There is also an announcement for a party to celebrate the giving of the Torah, which is decorated with a picture of the tablets of the Ten Commandments.



Michelle Cohen Farber's Daf Yomi women group studying Talmud in Ra'anana, The Jerusalem Post, 2019

Photo credit: Ardon Bar-Hama

- Where do you think this photograph was taken? What are the people in the photograph doing?
- Why is study so central to Jewish life, and why is it usually done in pairs or groups?
- Tikkun Leil Shavuot is still practiced in many communities today. If you were going to study all night, what would you choose to study and why?
- Compare the photograph above to the one below. What are the differences and similarities between the two photographs?

# Hevruta: The Relational Character of Jewish Learning



Ruth Greif's Group Confirmation

Courtesy of Centropa Archive

In the early 19th century, the Reform movement introduced a new custom of Confirmation – a group ceremony that was originally intended to replace the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. It took place around the age of 16 after a period of group study. Confirmation ceremonies usually took place on Shavuot, the festival of receiving the Torah.

Would you prefer to celebrate your Bar/Bat Mitzvah as an individual or with a group? Why?

What are the advantages of celebrating together on a meaningful date (like Shavuot) as opposed to each teen celebrating on their own birthday?

Can you give an example of a successful group study process you have experienced? What made it successful?

## Hevruta at Home

The value of hevruta is evident in Jewish homes on Pesach/Passover Seder night when it is prescribed to ask questions, study texts, and tell stories. This is a page from a Haggadah that was published in Vienna, Austria in 1929, and was written in English and Hebrew. The page depicts the following part of the Hagaddah:

It happened that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Eleazar son of Azariah, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon were reclining [at the Seder] in Bnei Brak. They spoke of the Exodus from Egypt all that night.



Passover Haggadah – Vienna 1929

The sages portrayed in this picture are not actually the ones mentioned in the Haggadah but other well-known sages from a totally different historical time period: Rambam, Rashi, Ba'al HaTurim, Beit Yosef, and Rav Alfasi. Nonetheless the picture corresponds with the text to highlight the fact that Jewish study has always been a group activity and an opportunity and tool for relationship and community building.

- Why would the artist depict a group of rabbis who are not from the time period mentioned in the text?
- In what ways does the Passover Seder encourage hevruta-like learning, especially between family members?
- How does the value of hevruta manifest in your family or community celebrations and gatherings?



Shabbat Afternoon, Moritz Daniel Oppenheim

Joseph and Margit Hoffman Judaica Postcard Collection, Folklore Research Center, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

# Hevruta: The Relational Character of Jewish Learning

Hevruta is practiced as part of family life at home as well. The picture on this postcard portrays a Jewish family relaxing and studying in the dining room on Shabbat afternoon. In a famous Talmudic story, we learn about one married couple (Rabbi Meir and Beruriah) who learned together, and how that made an impact on their behavior:

## Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot, 10a

There were these Zealots in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood who caused him a great deal of anguish. Rabbi Meir prayed for God to have mercy on them, that they should die.

Rabbi Meir's wife, Beruriah, said to him: What is your thinking? On what basis do you pray for the death of these hooligans? Do you base yourself on the verse, as it is written: "Let sins cease from the land" (Psalms 104:35), which you interpret to mean that the world would be better if the wicked were destroyed? But is it written, "let sinners cease"? Let sins cease, is written. One should pray for an end to their transgressions, not for the demise of the transgressors themselves. Moreover, go to the end of the verse, where it says: "And the wicked will be no more." If, as you suggest, "transgressions shall cease" refers to the demise of the evildoers, how is it possible that the wicked will be no more, i.e., that they will no longer be evil? Rather, pray for God to have mercy on them, that they should repent, as if they repent, then the wicked will be no more, as they will have repented.

Rabbi Meir saw that Beruriah was correct and he prayed for God to have mercy on them, and they repented.

- What happened when Beruriah disagreed with Rabbi Meir? What are other ways she could have responded? How does she convince Rabbi Meir that he needs to rethink his position?
- How did studying in hevruta impact Rabbi Meir's study and practice?
- Have you ever changed your opinion or approach as a result of discourse and dialogue with someone? What were the conditions that enabled you to make a change?

## Hevruta Partners



Photo of Shalom Aleichem and Ravnitzky

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- Shalom Aleichem and Ravnitzky were writing partners. Why do you think authors sometimes co-write with someone else?
- What do you imagine the relationship must be like in order for the collaboration to be successful?
- How do those qualities parallel the traditional hevruta relationship?
- Do you have someone who you consider to be your "thought partner"?