

- **What happened? (Describe the workshop)**

I recruited two friends who have a background in Jewish text study to participate in havruta study of the R. Papa and R. Shimi text. I explained that I would facilitate their learning of a text with the goal of forming interpretations of the text and challenging and supporting divergent interpretations.

- **How did you (or did you not) use the prompts and language that were provided in the guidelines for the assignment?**

I used the ciprompts as written and read them to the learners.

- **How did this compare with what you assumed or hoped would happen?**

I asked people who were practiced at studying rabbinic texts and who would dive right in, form interpretations, voice them strongly, and be prone to disagree and argue for their interpretations. This is what I hoped would and is in fact what happened.

Following is a script of the havruta session with new language of support and challenge highlighted in yellow and language that falls into "old norms" of discourse highlighted in blue:

PARTICIPANT 1: The story is about *derekh etetz* in the direction of the pupil towards his teacher. R. Papa is the teacher of R. Shimi, and Shimi is evidently in the practice of peppering R. Papa with difficult questions; evidently he is a talented student and habitually puts the teacher on the spot. Shimi witnesses R. Papa's prayer, where R. Papa prays that he not be disgraced by Shimi's probing questions. Evidently, R. Shimi, having witnessed this prayer, vows silence and decides not to ask any questions; he feels bad about having aroused this sentiment in his teacher. I think the thrust of the story is that R. Shimi realizes he was doing something wrong. Shimi is a very bright student who likes to hear himself speak and show off his brilliance with difficult questions and doesn't take into account that the teacher is a human being and that dealing with his questions is stressful and impossible.

FACILITATOR to Participant 1: How might you support your interpretation?

PARTICIPANT 1: The redactor of the text seems to be saying, by the way the story is laid out, the last word is that R. Shimi is affected by R. Papa's prayer. He thinks he caused a crisis for his Rebbe. He vows silence, and he vows not to question him anymore.

PARTICIPANT 2: I don't know in fact that R. Shimi interpreted R. Papa's prayer accurately. In traditional Torah study, someone who asks great questions is an asset and stimulates both students and teacher. Shimi may be hard to handle, but in another way, he is a dream student. Papa is not saying save me from Shimi; it seems like he is stressed out that the questions are hard, but he might well think that Shimi is fabulous.

FACILITATOR TO PARTICIPANT 2: How might you support your interpretation?

PARTICIPANT 2: The substance of R. Papa's prayer is to save him from being disgraced by Shimi; he is not sure he is up to fielding Papa's difficult questions. He doesn't say God save me from Shimi. It just seems that he's very challenged to have a brilliant student; what if you don't have good answers at the ready or you can't satisfy your brilliant student. It might be that Shimi is pushing his teacher hard, but it's not a bad thing. Shimi takes it upon himself to label it a bad thing because he changes his behavior. Evidently Shimi's conclusion is that he is doing something untoward towards his teacher. But I'm not sure that Papa would have wanted him to go this way. Maybe Shimi overreacts to Papa's prayer. Yes, it's stressful to have a brilliant student, but does that mean the student has to shut up? The story doesn't necessarily condemn Shimi's questioning.

PARTICIPANT 1's CHALLENGE TO PARTICIPANT 2's INTERPRETATION: You seem to be suggesting that R. Shimi's conduct was a force for good and that R. Shimi may have been misinterpreting R. Papa's prayer. However, the arc of the story as given to us in the text seems to suggest that Shimi is affected by Papa's prayer and makes a resolution that even if his questions were good and stimulating, the fact that he is stressing out his rebbe and that his rebbe appeals to God for help. So I will stick to my original assertion that the student realizes that his rebbe is a person too and just because you are brilliant, doesn't mean you have to run your mouth all the time. It's as if in the *reisha* of the story Shimi thinks of his questions, peppers the rebbe, and never takes into account the rebbe's humanity, and in the second half his humanity becomes apparent to Shimi. It's an omg moment, "my rebbe is a person too".

PARTICIPANT 2'S RESPONSE: I understand that that might be the way the arc of the story is going on the one hand; on the other I know about Torah that good questions, is desirable, so it's hard for me to buy that a brilliant student should just shut up. That might be what Shimi pronounces on himself at the end of the story, but Papa doesn't ask to be rid of Shimi.

FACILITATOR TO PARTICIPANT 2: Here is some alternate challenge language: "How do you account for the fact that according to your interpretation the punchline is that the brilliant student renders himself silent"?

PARTICIPANT 1: I think the text has room for his interpretation in the sense that R. Papa's doesn't admonish Shimi or ask for salvation *from* Shimi. So I think there is room in the text to believe that R. Papa continues to admire Shimi and finds him a valuable student. So the notion that Shimi was doing a good thing by asking tough questions might be borne out by the text since at no point does Papa condemn Shimi. I don't think there is an implied criticism of Shimi. Once Shimi realizes that he has stressed out his teacher, that alone gets him to take a vow of silence and stop questioning completely. He has empathy for his teacher for the first time and that's why he stops doing what he's been doing.

PARTICIPANT 2: Yes, he realizes what he's been doing, but by stopping talking completely, he may be overreacting to Papa's prayer. Papa didn't say, "Shimi shut up; God, protect me from Shimi"; he's just saying, I need your help with Shimi's questions. So maybe Shimi needs to tone it down a bit and not ask so many hard questions. Are we really in a position that we really want to say to a brilliant student: No more questions? Don't share your insights? Is that a place you want to end up? I don't think so.

PARTICIPANT 1 TO PARTICIPANT 2: In the text it says that Shimi asked a lot of questions and saw Papa praying, and his response is to vow to stop asking questions. I understand that your interpretation suggests that Rav Shimi's difficult questions were good, or that he should not have taken this vow, but how do you reconcile that with the story as it is told? Where do you find support for your point of view in the story as it is told?

Your interpretation helps me understand that Shimi, this brilliant student, is simply acting on his brilliance when asking all these questions; rather than seeing him as a boorish showoff that needs to back off, you are presenting the hacham as someone who is brilliant, coming up with insights, arouses responses, and your interpretation lends pathos to the story in that the denouement is that Shimi bottles up his brilliance.

- **Were there aspects of what happened that surprised you?**

No surprises

- **Were there aspects that pleased you? Why?**

I was pleased that both participants eventually got the language of support and challenge and were able to subtly shift their discourse. I was also able to see the difference after I made one or two interventions in the conversation.

- **What did participants report about their experience and/or learning?**

"It's a challenge to really be attentive to other points of view. Everyone wants to expound on their own views. I'm not used to responding in this way."

- **Read the Journal entry you wrote on your learning of these practices during our last seminar:**

Anything new you've learned?

I learned that it takes practice and conscious effort to change the culture of discourse, but that it *can* be done!

- **Any new question or insights you have about your learning of these practices?
Any new question or insights you have about teaching these practices to colleagues?**

I recruited friends rather than colleagues because the end of the school year is too hectic to corral teachers into an activity like this one. I will pursue this activity with teachers in my department in the fall during our August meetings. I would like to discuss specific language to use with my teachers regarding the practical application of this activity to their teaching. It is clear to me how this is *hevruta* activity is a rehearsal for mentoring; I need language to convince difficult teachers that this is useful in the classroom and for the discourse within our department!