

Havruta Assignment
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Ever since first reading Elie's book about hevruta learning and participating in our first MTEI seminar, I have been curious about what it would look like to use these techniques in my own work, and in a way that would be true to the context in which I teach. I spoke with Gail about creating a non-aggadic Talmud hevruta experience that would be relevant to my work, and she helped me to find two experienced educators and MTEI alumni who could be the "guinea pigs" for my experiment.

To that end, I convened a one-hour learning session for Rabbi Michael Balinsky and Dr. Jane Shapiro. We used [this](#) study guide to explore a small piece from Perek HaChovel, in Masekhet Bava Kamma. I taught this material to Orthodox high school students this past year, to a pluralistic group of adults last summer, and will be teaching it again to high school students this coming year (one Orthodox group, one multi-denominational).

As you can see from my study guide, I used some of the language that was provided in the guidelines, as well as language from our sessions on this topic during the seminars. Because Jane and Michael are both familiar with the MTEI approach to learning texts, I didn't spend a lot of time going over the techniques, but I did remind them (beforehand, and in the questions) about the importance of supporting and challenging.

I'm not sure I had any assumptions about what would happen beforehand, because I felt that this was highly experimental and really did not know what to expect. Overall, I was very pleased with the experience. A few things that surprised me or caught my attention:

- I was the facilitator, but was also trying to record what was happening so that I would be able to analyze it later. This dual role was difficult, and I should have thought of recording the session. I would definitely do that next time I try something like this.
- I started the session by giving them the פסוקים that (presumably) form the backdrop for the Mishnah and Gemara's discussions of these issues. I was surprised that when they were just learning these פסוקים, without having first read the Mishnah, the issues they focused on were largely very different from the subsequent rulings in the Mishnah and conversation in the Gemara. This was helpful because it made me take another look at those פסוקים, and realize that they were right: Those פסוקים really cover a lot of topics, and עין תחת עין isn't necessarily primary among them. I know that I always struggle, in teaching this topic, with when to provide the פסוקים. Before the Mishnah? After the Mishnah but before the Gemara? Let them discover it on their own by learning the Gemara? This experience just added to my uncertainty (this was the first time I've ever provided פסוקים before the Mishnah) but at the same time, it was really interesting to see how their conversation developed, and in some way I felt that it made for a more authentic experience of the Rabbinic texts. Perhaps I would do it this way again, but just devote more time to it. I'm not sure yet.
- At one point early on in the hevruta, Michael made reference to how the Gemara approaches a phrase in the Torah. Jane said: "No – pretend you don't know the Gemara!" At that point, I stepped in because I think this is an important change that has to be made in order to make this hevruta technique work in my context. I struggle at MTEI with pretending not to know things – it isn't fun, nor do I think it is an authentic mode of study, as Rabbinic texts are virtually always highly intertextual. I

told Michael and Jane that they were “allowed” to know everything that they know. Supporting and challenging must still be tied to the text, however, in two ways. First of all, if you want to reference another text or tradition, you must be as specific as possible (“everybody knows...” or “Judaism believes...” aren’t going to be maximally helpful in this context.). And secondly, if you want to put a text or tradition in conversation with the text we are learning, it is important to note how that text seems supported or challenged by the one in front of you. You can’t take it for granted that because one text reads another in a particular way, that is the automatic way to read that text.

- Supporting and challenging worked really well in this situation, where both readers were struggling to understand the meaning of the text. While stories are often ambiguous, this legal text can be virtually impenetrable without putting a lot of thought into it. Several times, Jane challenged Michael’s interpretations, cautioning him against jumping to conclusions. Michael jumped in a few times to support Jane’s reading with pieces from the text or from other texts that he knew.
- Overall, I noticed that having these guidelines in place for the hevruta experience had the effect of slowing down the learning, in a positive way: They often considered alternative readings or meanings, as part of their desire to challenge and support one another.
- In watching and listening to their learning, I realized that good guidelines for this kind of hevruta experience would include instructions on how to incorporate other tools into the learning. Dictionaries, a Tanakh, and online tools as well can all play a significant role. I think that when a learner comes up with a good question, he or she should be empowered to pursue answers if at all possible. At one point, Jane asked a question about how a word is generally used by the Gemara. A quick Sefaria search would pull up some interesting answers. Similarly, when reading the פסוקים, Michael had some questions about what the מפרשים say. While I think it is important to keep people on task, and wouldn’t necessarily allow pursuing every question in every hevruta experience, I think there’s a value in encouraging people to record those questions, and occasionally to track down answers as well.
- Listening to this hevruta made me think a lot about the power dynamics involved in who reads, in what language, and even in what order. In a context where you can read in the language of your choice, there are clearly pitfalls if one reads in Hebrew and the other cannot, even if the text is provided in English. When reading is only in English, the person who knows Hebrew may be frustrated. And in the context of my high school teaching, where Hebrew reading is the only option, there is a tendency for the “better” reader to read first or more frequently. Also, I’ve noticed that people often don’t like to correct their hevruta’s reading. I think I need to develop more language and instructions around building reading skills into the hevruta experience.

As indicated above, I learned a lot from this experience. It was much more personally meaningful to me than any of the experiences I’ve reflected about in MTEI so far. Jane and Michael reflected positively on it as well. I don’t know if it was radically different from things they have done before, because they are familiar with these techniques, but I think being held to these practices in the context of this kind of text was different and exciting. They both reflected on it with a certain nostalgia for doing this type of learning.

I would love to do this again with other colleagues/teachers, to further refine this, but it is not an easy thing to find an audience for. I will definitely be trying a version of it with my students next year, which I know isn’t important to MTEI, but I think will be valuable for my own

purposes.