YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur #29**

**Rabbinical Views on Pedagogy, Part II: The *Chavruta***

In the classic yeshiva setting, the bulk of one’s learning is with a *chavruta* (study partner). This week, we will conclude our discussion of *Chazal*’s pedagogic views by considering a number of *sugyot* that offer insight into this crucial form of *talmud Torah.*

**The Value of *Chavruta* Study**

*Ta’anit* 7a, which we have cited in previous *shiurim* regarding *Torah lishmah* and learning from disgraced teachers, stresses the importance of studying with a *chavruta*.

Rabbi Chama son of Rabbi Chanina said: What is the meaning of the verse (*Mishlei* 27:17), “As iron sharpens iron, [so one person sharpens another]”? This is to teach you that just as one piece of iron sharpens the other, so also do two Torah scholars sharpen each other in Halakha.

Rabba bar Bar Chana said: Why are the words of the Torah likened to fire, as it is said (*Yirmeyahu* 23:29), “Is not my word like as fire? says the Lord”? This is to teach you that just as fire does not ignite of itself, so too the words of the Torah do not endure with one who studies alone.

This is in agreement with what as Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Chanina, said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “A sword is upon the boasters (*ha-baddim*), and they shall become fools (*ve-no’alu*)” (*Yirmeyahu* 50:36)? A sword upon the enemies of Torah scholars [a euphemism for Torah scholars themselves], who sit alone [*bad be-vad*] and study Torah. And furthermore, those who study alone grow foolish; and what is more they are guilty of sin. For here it is written, “And they shall become fools (*ve-no’alu*),” and there it is written, “For that we have done foolishly (*no’alnu*) and for that we have sinned” (*Bamidbar* 12:11). If you wish, you can infer it from the following verse (*Yeshayahu* 19:13), “The princes of Tzo’an are become fools . . . they have caused Egypt to go astray.”

Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said: Why are the words of the Torah likened to a tree, as it is said, “It is a tree of life to them that grasp it” (*Mishlei* 3:18)? This is to teach you. just as a small tree may set on fire a bigger tree, so too it is with scholars, the younger sharpen the minds of the older. This is in agreement with what Rabbi Chanina said: “I have learnt much from my teachers, and from my colleagues more than from my teachers, but from my disciples more than from them all.”

Thus, a *chavruta* makes one sharp and ignites one’s passion for Torah, while one who studies unaccompanied becomes “stupid” and is led to sin. While this passage stresses the importance of studying in pairs, it does not pinpoint what mistakes one avoids by learning in this format. One possibility is that a *chavruta* will note errors in logic; another is that a *chavruta* will fill in gaps in one’s knowledge.

What if a person learns more effectively on one’s own? *Iyun Ya’akov* acknowledges this possibility and proposes that the Gemara does not decree an ironclad rule. Instead, the Gemara means that one who studies independently must be wary of the potential pitfalls and find a way to compensate for them.

Another classic aggadic treatment of studying with a *chavruta* sheds light on our topic. *Bava Metzia* 84a records the classic tale of the initial encounter between Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish, in which Reish Lakish chooses to abandon the life of a bandit and study with Rabbi Yochanan. When Reish Lakish dies, the sages seek to supply a new study partner for Rabbi Yochanan. The Gemara recounts:

Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat went and sat before Rabbi Yochanan. With regard to every matter that Rabbi Yochanan would say, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would say to him: “There is a ruling which is taught in a *baraita* that supports your opinion.”

Rabbi Yochanan said to him: “Are you comparable to the son of Lakish? In my discussions with the son of Lakish, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the law by itself would become broadened and clarified. And yet you say to me, ‘There is a ruling which is taught in a *baraita* that supports your opinion.’ Do I not know that what I say is good?”

In this inspiring passage championing the unyielding quest for truth, Rabbi Yochanan implies that a study partner is meant to serve as a check and balance, presumably regarding both sources and logical arguments. Study partners help each other arrive at the truth.

Indeed, the Talmudic record makes it clear that, at least in Amoraic times, the method of *chavruta* study was frequently employed and highly valued. Echoing part of the Gemara *Ta’anit*, *Bereishit Rabba* (69:2) teaches:

Rabbi Chama bar Chanina opened with the following verse: “Iron sharpens iron” (*Mishlei* 27:17).

Rabbi Chama bar Chanina said: A knife will become sharpened only at the side of another. So too, a Torah scholar can only become sharpened by a friend.

Picking up on another thread from *Ta’anit* 7a, *Berakhot* 63b reinforces the notion that idea that Torah can be acquired best in a group setting, expounding the verse (*Devarim* 27:9): “*Hasket* and hear, Israel, today you have become a people to the Lord your God.”

*Hasket* — form (*asu*) many groups (*kitot*) and study Torah, for the Torah is only acquired through study in a group (*chabura*). This is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Chanina; as Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Chanina, said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “A sword is upon the boasters…”

*Makkot* 10a expounds *Kohelet* 5:9, which literally reads: “Whoever loves money will not be satisfied with money; whoever loves abundance (*hamon*), not with yield (*lo tevua*). This too is meaningless.” Although “*lo*” in the text is spelled *lamed-alef* (no, not), the Gemara reads it as if it were spelled *lamed-vav* (his). Thus, the phrase becomes, “Whoever loves abundance, his is the yield.”

Rav Ashi says it means that whoever loves studying amidst an abundances of [fellow] students has the yield, This is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Chanina, who said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “A sword is upon the boasters…”

Ravina explained [that former passage] thus: whoever delights in teaching an abundance [of scholars] has the yield, which is to the same effect as what Rabbi said: “I have learnt much from my teachers, and from my colleagues more than from my teachers, but from my disciples more than from them all.”

Similarly (*Yerushalmi Nedarim* 11:1) tells us that Rabbi Yosei ben Chalafta criticized sequestering oneself in a cave for three days to resolve a difficulty in Torah, “for you could not learn from your fellow;” while Rabbi Nehorai states in *Avot* 4:14: “Be exiled to a place of Torah, and say not that it will follow you, for it is your companions who will establish it in your possession; and do not rely on your own understanding.” Indeed, this is why *Makkot* 10a raises the issue, as the baraita rules that if a student is exiled we send the teacher with him, Rabbi Yochanan says that if the teacher is exiled, we send his yeshiva to study with him in the new location. All these texts amply demonstrate the great value *Chazal* assign to learning with others, whether by embedding oneself in a learning community (such as a yeshiva) or through *chavruta* study.

Of course, *Chazal* also recognize that the *chavruta* system, which democratizes Torah study and places an emphasis on argumentation, entails certain risks. *Yevamot* 62b teaches that Rabbi Akiva’s 12,000 pairs of students, generally understood to refer to *chavruta* pairs, died because they failed to treat one another with proper respect. *Kiddushin* 30b acknowledges that the tension between intellectually combative study partners can, at least initially, negatively impact their relationship:

“Happy is the man that has his quiver full of them; they shall not be ashamed, when they speak with their enemies in the gate” (*Tehillim* 127:5). What is meant by “with their enemies in the gate”?

Rabbi Chiya bar Abba says: Even father and son, master and disciple, who study Torah at the same gate become enemies of each other; yet they do not stir from there until they come to love each other…

Ultimately, the shared goal of truth-seeking brings together parent and child, beyond the level of their natural relationship.

**Friend or Study Partner**

Crucially, there is a fundamental ambiguity that attends the very term *chavruta*, which of course refers not just to a study partner but also to a friend. Two sources in particular play off this ambiguity.

*Avot* (1:6) states, “Yehoshua ben Perachya says, ‘Make for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend (*chaver*) and judge every person as meritorious.’" At first glance, “acquire for yourself a friend” might be taken to refer generally to the importance of striking up friendships. Indeed, in a well-known passage in his *Commentary to the Mishna* (ad loc.), Rambam, drawing on Aristotle’s ideas, delineates three levels of friendship.

The previous line of the *mishna*, “make for yourself a teacher,” however, might suggest that the subsequent line refers specifically to a friend with whom one is able to study. Indeed, Rashi and Tiferet Yisrael maintain that the *mishna* refers to finding a friend for Torah study. In fact, Rashi goes so far as to raise the possibility that “*chaver*” refers to books. This echoes the classic line, attributed to Rabbi Yehuda ibn Tibbon, who admonished his son to “make books his companions.” Adopting both positions at once, Rabbeinu Yona claims that the *mishna* refers to the acquisition of a friend for multiple purposes, including both learning and wider personal goals. According to this reading, perhaps employing intentional ambiguity, the *mishna* ties together the notions of friendship and study partner.

Much the same may be said of a classic comment of Choni *Ha-me’agel*. The Gemara (*Ta’anit* 23a) records that Choni sleeps for some seventy years. When he awakes, no one recognizes him anymore:

He returned home. He there enquired, “Is the son of Choni the Circler still alive?”

The people answered him, “His son is no more, but his grandson is still living.”

Thereupon he said to them: “I am Choni the Circler,” but no one would believe him.

He then repaired to the *beit midrash,* and there he overheard the scholars say, “The law is as clear to us as in the days of Choni the Circler,” for whenever he came to the *beit midrash* he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had.

He then called out, “I am he!” However, the scholars would not believe him, nor did they give him the honor he sought.

This hurt him greatly, so he sought mercy and died.

Rava said: Hence the saying, “Either companionship (*chavruta*) or death.”

In this *aggada*, the concepts of friendship and study partner are fused. Choni enters the *beit midrash* in search of both companionship and learning partners; alongside his family, his study partners are the people to whom he looks for company. His tragic end reflects his inability to accept the loss of both his study group and existential partners. This, then, is the rabbinic idea of a *chavruta*: a friend in whom one finds not just a source of intellectual understanding, but, as in the case of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish, an existential partner on a joint journey toward divine understanding.