Ideas in Jewish Education and Engagement

Pedagogy of Partnership and the Power of Relationships

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What do we mean by teaching and learning? What do (we want) people (to) learn? And how do they learn both subject matter and values, ways of being in the world? We asked Orit Kent and Allison Cook, co-founders of Pedagogy of Partnership, to look at how teaching and learning happens in relationships — particularly in the context of student relationships and Torah learning. This blog post aims to expand our understanding of what education is through the process of relationship-centered learning.

Pedagogy of Partnership will be running a joint program for day school teachers with Mechon Hadar, June 25-29. For more information about Pedagogy of Partnership and to bring them to your community, please email Orit Kent or Allison Cook.

Imagine the following day school scene:

Morah Rebecca: "OK guys, time to wrap up your discussions!"

Fourth-graders shouting: "No! We are having SUCH a good Torah discussion. Can we have a few more minutes? Pleeeeaaase?"

Morah Rebecca: "This is the third time I've tried to wrap up. It is wonderful the discussions you are having. I'm hearing some great theories on the possible meanings of the word '*yifga'enu'* [He will strike us] and who exactly the 'us' can be referring to and also about Pharaoh's possible motivations in these *psukim* [Torah verses]. I'm putting on a timer: two more minutes, and that is really it! We have to come together to do the wrap-up and then you have to go to gym."

This scene happens often in this fourth-grade Jewish studies classroom. Amazingly, these fourth-graders do not want their Torah discussions to end — they will choose to miss parts of recess, lunch and gym so that they can have a few more minutes in class. They have been learning Torah through the Pedagogy of Partnership (PoP), a student-centered approach for developing specific attitudes and skills to learn in relationship with Torah and with peers.

In this classroom and other educational settings, learners of all ages explicitly learn and practice what it means to listen to one another and to the text they are studying in order to seek understanding, of both the text and each other. In PoP's framing, Jewish wisdom is not just **what** you learn or talk about, but also **how** you learn and **how** you talk. Learning becomes an inherently ethical endeavor and supports participants to develop a sense of empathy and responsibility toward one another and toward Torah. Through PoP's methodology, students of all ages learn ways to talk with one another and use those same skills to interpret Torah and co-construct meaning.

It turns out that this experience of discovering and building meaning with others is highly satisfying for students. Through a process of joint discovery, the Torah, a revered source of wisdom, becomes a teammate in meaning, a generator of wonder, as well as a provocateur, and peers become teachers, friends, sparring partners, and supporters. By framing learning in terms of relationship, all the learning partners — students and texts alike — take responsibility for one another and expand one another's horizons.

A visitor to Morah Rebecca's class shared her observations: "When students began to talk, their bodies were turned towards one another and they made eye contact with each other. There was a buzz in the room … learners are excitedly talking about texts … This excitement about Torah study was so inspiring to see."

This "buzz" does not happen magically. **Learning to be in relationship with others and with the subjects we study may feel like magic, but it is not; it is a competency-based skill set like any other that we may want our students/campers/adult learners to acquire, and it is indeed achievable.** To make it happen, educators in any setting can work on core practices that make the process and the experience of "seeking to understand" one another and Torah possible.

PoP has identified three pairs of core practices that help each of us learn to connect to and seek understanding of both one another and the texts or subjects we are studying. They are Listening and Articulating, Wondering and Focusing, and Challenging and Supporting. Morah Rebecca's enthusiastic fourth-graders have been exploring and working on these practices on their own developmental level through specific "talk moves" that help put these practices into action. On this day (as on many others), their teacher asks them each to name one "talk move" they are each going to try to use with their peer partners. In this Torah study class, students often practice these skills in *hevruta*, a pairing of two students working in partnership with a text. Students talk about their peer partners as "my *hevruta*" when they share which talk moves they are going to work on using:

Jacob: "I am going to make sure that if I don't understand what my *hevruta* is saying, to ask, '*Can you explain that in a different way or give an example*?'"

Lisa: "I am going to ask, '*Where's your evidence in the text*?' when my *hevruta* gives an interpretation and try to understand how she got to her idea."

Robin: "I am going to try to not talk so much and listen to my *hevruta* partner — because I know I am a big talker!"

Jacob's chosen talk move — "Can you explain that in a different way?" — highlights the idea that when he does not understand, he will not simply move on but it is his job to explicitly seek understanding of both his peer partner and the text by asking follow-up questions. Lisa is going to use the talk move of "Where's your evidence in the text?" both to make sure that the conversation is true to the text and to dig deeper into her peer partner's train of thought. Robin expresses her awareness that she needs to take up less air time and give her partner time to speak and so she is going to focus intentionally on listening more and talking less. All of these students are using their talk moves both to better listen to and connect with the text and each other and to practice profound respect and responsibility by truly paying attention to their partners.

During the wrap-up — minutes before gym class — the teacher debriefs her students on their new ideas and questions about the text as well as on the experience of exercising their partnership skills. Their teacher asks them what went well and what was challenging for them. How readily the students share makes it clear that the students value and are familiar with both questions as they reflect on their learning:

Miriam: "It was a little challenging today because our question got us excited to talk about some examples that happened to us in our own lives and we ended up getting kind of off-topic, but then we realized it and we went back to the text."

Matan: "Our discussion was great because we figured out that we each agreed on a certain answer to a question we had but for totally different reasons — we had different evidence from the text! It was really cool."

At one point the teacher probes to see if students think the goal of *hevruta* is to convince your partner of what you think. Students answer, "No. My job is to make sure that my *hevruta* understands why I think what I think based on what we both read in the Torah." They have learned how to communicate, to lead their own Torah discussions, and they understand that the goal is not to be "right" but to seek greater understanding through their joint exploration of the words of Torah. And they have learned that while they help each other to seek understanding, they may arrive at understanding through different paths and/or their understandings may be different.

By exploring, practicing, and reflecting on their use of core partnership attitudes and skills, the fourth-grade students exhibit not only a "joy in their learning," as our visitor later remarked, but also demonstrate a close connection to one another and to the Torah they are studying. They have taken ownership over their joint enterprise of making their learning come to life.

This relational approach to learning transcends curricular or programmatic particularities because it is based not in specific activities, content, or learning formats. Rather, it is based in teaching specific attitudes and practices of relationship building among peers and the subject they are studying. These fourth-graders demonstrate that there is real potential for lifelong Jewish education to reach toward some of its highest ideals by tending directly to the relationships among students and Torah and focusing on teaching the core practices that get us there. In today's world where many seek meaningful relationships, connection, and conversation, these relational competencies are needed more than ever, both in and out of the classroom, to help us build and sustain flourishing communities of Jewish life and learning.