

Ancient Wisdom for Modern-Day Conversations and Collaboration

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Introduction

Havruta study is a Jewish learning tradition in which two people learn a text together, reading it aloud, discussing its meaning, and exploring its broader applications to their lives. It is an age-old mode of Torah study, and it has enduring wisdom to teach us still today. Breaking down havruta study into the following six core practices highlights the profound, far-reaching lessons we can bring to any collaboration in schools, workplaces, or personal conversations and interactions. Below we describe each practice and offer phrases to enact them.

1. Listening

The world needs people who are sensitive, thoughtful, open-minded, and able to look at problems from different angles. Imagine if learners today were experienced in making space for each other's voices and perspectives. Imagine if learners understood that an integral part of learning is to consider other people's points of view along with their own. That is the power of listening.

Tell me more...

Where do you see that in the text?

Havruta study is predicated on exactly this kind of active listening. When learners approach a text for the first time, they put aside their preconceived notions and allow the text to speak to them on its own terms. They train themselves to be alert for the text's core ideas, its nuances, and its ambiguities. They are not merely information-gathering or memorizing, but engaged with the kind of mind-expanding learning that stems directly from deep listening. Plus, they must listen to each other. The other practices of havruta study will work if each partner is willing to consider the opinions, viewpoints, assumptions, and ideas of the other. Learners can get better at the practice of listening and, by so doing, foster an environment of safety, respect, and honor that will generate success.



2. Articulating

A top-down model of education leaves limited space for learners' voices. In contrast, a room filled with havruta study rings out with students' ideas, questions, sighs, silence, and laughter. Learners explore their ideas by thinking aloud in partnership, allowing one another into their thinking *before* ideas are fully formed, and opening the possibility of building ideas together. Learners also develop the skill of contributing ideas clearly so that others will understand. In this way, students transform into teachers through the act of learning. More than a performance of self expression, articulation empowers students as active learners and creates a respectful working relationship with another person and with the text itself.

I think this might mean...
What do you think?

Articulating within a havruta framework challenges the learner to go beyond stating one's own opinion. The practice of articulating equips learners to ask questions, acknowledge their uncertainties, to think aloud together in order to explore and refine their thinking, and to check for understanding by restating the other's ideas. Distinct from other habits of speech, articulating is not about talking *over* others or a text, but talking *with* others and *with* a text in a cooperatively constructed conversation. Learners can get better at offering ideas, and expressing themselves in a respectful, organized, and understandable manner.

3. Wondering

The most successful students enter into learning with the greatest sense of curiosity and wonder. Wonder nourishes a person's creativity and imagination and opens the mind to new possibilities. The attitude and skills of wonder are critical for learners to engage and to be engaged.

I notice...
I wonder...

Wondering occurs when students' minds and hearts are actively engaged in listening to the text and to each other. They notice little quirks and opacities in what they hear, and they begin to ask: "What does this mean?" Learners can build up their capacity to wonder and fuel the creative process of meaning-making and problem-solving with their observations and questions.



4. Focusing

Human attention spans are at an all time low, but comprehension depends on staying with ideas long enough to understand them, and incisiveness depends on taking the time to develop ideas fully, rather than only part-way.

Focus is necessary in order to use time wisely and move from challenges to resolutions by prioritizing which questions are the most important to address and how.

Let's dig into this question.

I'm interested in discussing this point. What about you?

In a havruta, information and ideas grow from three different sources—the text, and the two individuals—and truly curious students can get lost wandering around in a forest of questions. The practice of focusing prevents *wondering* from becoming *wandering*, and as such, focusing is wondering's twin practice; the two work together in an energizing give and take. As learners begin to explore the landscape of the text, they navigate its terrain by prioritizing their questions and focusing in on their primary goals. As students get better at the practice of focusing, they take an active role in creating and implementing their own educational goals.

5. Supporting

In educational environments, learners might be tempted to promote themselves at the expense of others. But the goal in learning is not to defend one's initial thinking, but to search together for the truth and to help each other get better along the way. Havruta study replaces this competitiveness with collaboration.

It requires a positive stance of encouragement so that feedback and responses become not critiques, but constructive steps.

Havruta study enables students to employ each other as resources for intellectual support, pushing each other to improve their thinking and grow. Even if they disagree with each other, they still spend time building on each other's ideas by brainstorming supporting evidence and helping one another to refine their arguments. Both partners will learn new things even about their own ideas, and they will become stronger learners and thinkers as a result.

I want to build on what you just said...

I think this part of the text supports what you said.



6. Challenging

One must be able to hear feedback, and also to offer it in a constructive manner. Inevitably, individuals in a havruta will have disparate and conflicting views as they wade through the material before them, but, if navigated correctly, these become flashpoints for growth and productivity. And this is where the fun begins!

Is there another way of understanding that?

I disagree because...

To challenge is to notice the limitations of ideas and hold them accountable to evidence. It is not personal or combative, but it is important for a havruta to be intellectually honest and ask each other about the limitations of their ideas, to step back and consider whether their assumptions and ideas stand up to the evidence before them. Challenging is not the same as disagreeing. Even when we agree, we still challenge our own and our partner's ideas for the sake of strengthening our ideas and logic so that our work together leads to deeper insight. Students work to get better at both supporting and challenging in order to refine, strengthen, and evaluate ideas and hold those ideas accountable to evidence.

Conclusion

A havruta is more than two people learning together. It is a space of constructive collaboration and attuned responsiveness to one another and the text as full partners in learning. Through havruta learning we develop relationships with our peer partners, with the text itself, and even with ourselves. Through these relationships, we do more than gain knowledge—we discover and create meaning. Perhaps this is the power to which the Mishnah alludes when it tells us that when two people learn together, God's presence is between them (Mishnah Avot 3:2).

[Pedagogy of Partnership](#) (PoP) is a comprehensive Jewish educational model that supports educators to bring Torah to the next generation. Rooted in Jewish values and practices, PoP enables learners of all ages to develop the habits of wonder, empathy, and responsibility toward others and Torah. PoP conducts professional development workshops, coaching, a fellowship program for a growing network of schools, and provides ready-to-use materials for educators, leaders and families. PoP is powered by the Hadar Institute.

