

# Do We Face Each Other or God? The Model of the Cherubim



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*When we learn in relationship with Torah and other people, we can open ourselves to the possibility of experiencing a sense of kedushah (holiness).<sup>1</sup>*

In learning a holy text with another person, which voices are privileged? Must one always choose between the person and the text, or can they be balanced in the learning experience?

Hazal (the sages of the Talmud) offer a model of this tension, best expressed in the Pedagogy of Partnership (PoP) concept called the “partnership triangle”, an image of a triangle connecting three equal partners: two human peers and a text. They do this by noting conflicting texts related to the cherubim.

<sup>1</sup> The Pedagogy of Partnership (PoP) is an innovative research-based pedagogy for the design of relationship-centered education, led by Dr. Orit Kent and Allison Cook. A key PoP principle is seeing study relationships as ends in and of themselves, creating the opportunity for *kedushah*/holiness each time peers study text together.

The cherubim were perhaps the oldest model of the stance of facing each other. These amazing creatures were situated atop the cover of the Holy Ark and the space in between them is the place from which God spoke. And how were they oriented?

אַל-אַחִיו אִישׁ וּפְנֵיהֶם, they were facing each other (Exodus 25:20). God apparently speaks in the space between two beings facing each other.<sup>2</sup> But this is not the only picture of the cherubim. In fact, elsewhere in the Bible, we see that they were not facing each other, but rather: לְבַיִת וּפְנֵיהֶם, they were facing the House, the holy sanctuary (2 Chronicles 3:13)!

So which was it? Were the cherubim facing each other, or were they facing the sanctuary? Or, in PoP terms: were the *havrutas* primarily oriented toward each other, or toward the holy text?

<sup>2</sup> For more on learning partners “facing” one another, see Dr. Orit Kent’s and Allison Cook’s “What We Can Learn from God about Zoom: The Torah of Smiling”.

This is debated in the Talmud.

**תלמוד בבלי בבא בתרא דף צט.**  
רבי יוחנן ורי אלעזר, חד אמר: פניהם איש אל אחיו, וחד אמר: פניהם לבית.  
ולמאן דאמר פניהם איש אל אחיו, הא כתיב: ופניהם לבית!  
לא קשיא: כאן בזמן שישראל עושין רצונו של מקום, כאן בזמן שאין ישראל עושין רצונו של מקום.

## Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 99a

R. Yohanan and R. Eleazar (disagreed). One said: (the cherubim) faced each other, and the other said they faced the House (holy sanctuary).

For the one who said they faced each other, but it is written (2 Chronicles 3:13) they faced the House!

This is not difficult. This (when they faced each other) is when Israel does the will of the Omnipresent, and this (when they faced the House) is when Israel does not do the will of the Omnipresent.



Here we see that R. Yohanan and R. Eleazar disagreed about the orientation of the cherubim. One opinion (it is not clear who) understood this to be a hierarchy of orientations. The ideal orientation is facing each other. When Israel is in line with God's will, the cherubim are in the ideal position: faces toward each other. Only when Israel was defying God did the cherubim turn away from each other. From this we could conclude that one side of the partnership triangle is better than the others: the one where each member of the *havruta* speaks directly to each other.

But this is not the only interpretation. The other sage has a different solution to the textual contradiction:

**תלמוד בבלי בבא בתרא דף צט.**  
ולמאן דאמר ופניהם לבית, הא  
כתיב: ופניהם איש אל אחיו!  
דמצדדי אצדודי.

#### **Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 99a**

And for the one who said:  
they faced the House, but it is  
written (Exodus 25:20) "they  
faced each other"!  
They look to the side.

**רשב"ם בבא בתרא דף צט.**  
דמצדדי אצדודי - קצת לבית וקצת  
זה לזה כאדם שמדבר אל חבירו  
והופך ראשו קצת לצד אחר.

#### **Rashbam's comment (Rabbi Shlomo ben Meir, 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c. France)**

"They look to the side"—  
partly to the House and partly  
toward each other, like a per-  
son who speaks to his friend  
and turns his head slightly to  
the side.

The other opinion understands  
the contradiction in another way.  
This is not a hierarchy. No side of  
the triangle is privileged. Rather,

they are able to hold all sides of the  
partnership triangle as equal: they  
look to the side, and as such they  
are speaking, as Rashbam explains,  
"partly to the House and partly  
toward each other." The cheru-  
bim are focused on each other, but  
they are also able to connect to the  
Holy sanctuary. This, perhaps is the  
ideal—holding all sides of the tri-  
angle at once.

Is learning in *havruta* always  
at odds with taking the text seri-  
ously as a third partner? Or is there  
a world in which the face of one's  
partner *and* the holy text hold  
equal weight? Using the cheru-  
bim as a model, we can see these  
options being played out already  
in the Talmud. And perhaps this  
ethereal *havruta*—the holy cher-  
ubim—serves as the best model  
for this tension from which we  
can learn how to seek glimpses  
of *kedushah* (holiness) in our own  
*havruta* learning.

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