

## **“Either a *hevruta* Partner or Death”: A Critical View on the Interpersonal Dimensions of *hevruta* Learning**

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*How might one perceive the role of his or her hevruta partner in the hevruta learning relationship? Drawing on recent developments in the scholarship of rabbinics, this article offers an interpretation of a Talmudic legend that discusses three forms of interpersonal relationships in hevruta learning. Rather than considering hevruta learning as a formal setting meant to serve the learner’s own learning, this interpretation offers a dialogic view of hevruta learning in which the learner carries a responsibility for the learning of his or her hevruta partner as well. The article concludes by suggesting further considerations of the interpretation of Talmudic legends as a resource for Jewish education and of hevruta learning as a locus for moral education.*

One is always in the wrong but with two, truth begins.

F. Nietzsche

### INTRODUCTION

Studying in a *hevruta* learning setting (two people studying a text together) represents a past as well as a contemporary mode of Jewish and devotional study. No longer confined to traditional institutions and traditional Talmudic circles, *hevruta* learning has recently made its way into a variety of professional

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and lay learning contexts, reflecting new social realities in the world of traditional Jewish learning. Despite the growing popularity of *hevruta* learning, the research literature on this topic represents no more than initial steps toward systematic conceptualization and practical application of this learning activity. I believe that different scholarly genres drawing from different sources may contribute to a better understanding of various aspects of this particular learning mode and to its more effective use in educational settings. Drawing on historical sources, Halbertal and Hartman (1994), Jaffe (1992), Stampfer (1995), and Tishby (1979) offer historical perspectives of *hevruta* learning. Conceptual and educational perspectives of *hevruta* learning are also discussed in a generic approach by Siegel (2003), and by Brown and Malkus (2007), Feiman-Nemser (2006), Holzer (2006), and Kent (2006, 2008), with reference to concrete educational settings and/or by drawing on empirical data.

One genre that may contribute to a more conceptual and philosophical perspective on *hevruta* learning is textual resources from the rabbinic tradition. Ratzersdorfer Rosen (2003) made such a contribution by discussing short Talmudic statements about the importance of cooperative learning, specifically focusing on the *hevruta* setting. In this article, I draw on Talmudic legends, *Midrash Aggadah*, a different literary genre of rabbinic literature that has become a branch of scholarship. I discuss one legend that, in my understanding, raises in a subtle and critical manner an important aspect of the interpersonal dimension of learning in *hevruta*, specifically, one's potential perceptions of the partner's role in the *hevruta* learning relationship.

## ON THE INTERPERSONAL DIMENSION OF LEARNING

From a broad perspective, the view that learning should take place in and through interpersonal relationships rather than as a solitary activity seems to be typical of the learning culture in the Talmudic academies of Babylonia and Palestine. Initially edited as a record of debates, arguments and counterarguments, the basic texture of the Talmudic text itself highlights the importance of interpersonal dialectics in the development and acquisition of knowledge. Explicit Talmudic expressions emphasize the importance of the interpersonal dimension of learning. For example:

. . . just as in the case of iron, when one implement sharpens another, so too do two Torah scholars sharpen each other when they discuss questions of Halakhah together . . . just as fire cannot be made to burn with one piece of wood alone, so too the words of Torah cannot be retained by someone who studies alone . . . (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit, 7a, Steinsaltz translation)

Elsewhere, the Talmud states that scholars who study on their own will be cursed, grow foolish, and ultimately fall into sin (Tractate Ta'anit, 21a). Moreover, learning with and from others is not limited to partners of similar status or scholarship. One rabbi is quoted as saying: "I have learned much from my teachers, and from my colleagues I have [learned] even more. But from my students I have learned more than from all of them" (Tractate Ta'anit, 7a).

While the figurative language used in the text quoted above deserves a close analysis, which however is beyond the scope of this article, for our purpose it is enough to say that these statements reflect the importance that this culture attributes to the interpersonal dimension of learning which is also captured in the concept of *bevruta* and *bevruta* learning. The term *bevruta* is used to refer both to the study partner, stressing the fact that she or he is a friend or colleague, and to the actual learning setup of both partners studying together. One telling Talmudic expression says: "Either *bevruta* or death" (Ta'anit, 21a), which may suggest that the opportunity to study together with a *bevruta* partner is considered a matter of life and death, that is, considered critical for learning.

More recently, psychological theories have conceptualized the social and interpersonal nature of learning (Rogoff, 1990; Vigotsky, 1978). Philosophers too have addressed the interpersonal dimension of learning by attending to the role of human dialogue. They stress its moral quality, based on mutual respect and egalitarianism as well as the epistemological advantages of dialogue as a means to acquire knowledge (Buber, 1970; Burbules & Bruce, 2001; Freire, 1968, 1985; Levinas, 1981).

Nonetheless, not all verbal learning interactions between two people necessarily represent a similar view of dialogue or a similar view of what one means by the interpersonal dimension of learning. Socrates' dialogues, for example, can hardly be said to be representative of an open-ended investigation, a shared co-construction of knowledge by both learning partners, or an egalitarian practice in terms of power relationships. Interpersonal learning relationships might take any of several forms, each of which reflects fundamental assumptions about the nature of inquiry, knowledge, the nature of communication, and the roles to be assumed by the participants in the common learning experience (Burbules & Bruce, 2001).

The same may be said about *bevruta* learning. It goes without saying that having two learners talk, ask questions, or offer answers about a text and its interpretations, is not necessarily a description of optimal *bevruta* study. Following Apel (1987) and Habermas (1984), I believe that for *bevruta* communications to be successful, partners need a set of shared norms involving forms and purposes of communication. These norms are usually implicit and unnoticed until one of the participants questions them explicitly or unless they are explicitly taught by a teacher outside the *bevruta* pair and cultivated among learners.

In a previous article, I discussed what I believed to be several of these norms and dispositions in relation to *hevruta* partners and texts (Holzer, 2006; Kent, 2006) by drawing on a view of conversation grounded in philosophical hermeneutics. In this article, I offer an interpretation of a Talmudic legend, which, in my understanding, draws attention to one element of the *hevruta* learning mode, specifically, how one perceives the role of the *hevruta* partner in the *hevruta* setting in relation to one's own learning, and the practical implications of these perceptions. My methodology is hermeneutical: While using a close reading, I offer an interpretation of a Talmudic legend that I understand as addressing three different views of the role of a *hevruta* partner in relation to one's own learning. The first view sees the *hevruta* partner merely in the role of a "yes man" while the second view sees his role as a "sparring partner." The sole focus of interest in both of these views is one's own learning. I will try to show that this legend was carefully crafted as a means to critique both views of the role of the *hevruta* partner. In contrast, I offer a view of the *hevruta* partner as a partner in dialogue, as someone whose learning and mine are interdependent and intertwined, someone for whose learning I assume responsibility. I begin by introducing the scholarly and methodological approach on which my interpretation of this Talmudic legend is drawn.

### THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TALMUDIC LEGENDS

Over the centuries, and especially during the middle-late medieval period, Talmudic legends were the focus of systematic scholarly attention (Gross, Barkai, & Melamed, 2008). To mention only two examples, scholars like Maimonides (1974) and the Maharal of Prague (Adlerstein, 2000; Neher, 1996) conceptualized Talmudic legends as a repository of moral injunctions and philosophical ideas, and a distinct literary genre, requiring its own methodology of study. In the nineteenth century, with the rise of the historical school in the humanities, several attempts were made to conceptualize these legends as historical sources of the Talmudic period, an approach that has been heavily criticized (Neusner, 1981, 1992). It is only during the last three decades, under the influence of hermeneutic and literary theories, that Talmudic legends have been conceptualized as "literary-artistic creations" (Rubenstein, 2003). In this approach, the legends are viewed as purely fictional and didactical. This is to say, the reader should relate to the characters as purely fictional and explore the potential ideas that were intended to be conveyed by the legends' authors.

To understand the legends, readers require tools and concepts of literary analysis. This means for example to attend to their structure, the relation between the parts and whole, the use of metaphors and repetitions, the choice of nuanced vocabulary in the dialogues, the imposed silence of the

literary characters, and the omission or the deferral of information. Since the pioneering work of Fraenkel (1991, 2001) and Meir (1977, 1982–1983), scholars have engaged in careful readings of rabbinic stories using a variety of tools of literary analysis (Boyarin, 1999; Kosman, 2002; Rubenstein, 2003). The emerging scholarship of this Talmudic literary genre has opened a window to the cultural world of the redactors of the Talmudic literature. While the study of Torah is recognized to be the highest value in the Talmudic culture, several legends have been interpreted as reflecting an elevated awareness of the conflicts, existential dilemmas, and tension involved in the very activity of Torah study. In fact, these literary creations serve as a subtle vehicle to heighten self-criticism and self-awareness of the potential flaws and inherent dangers of this culture without undermining the primary value of Torah study.

Many rabbinic stories of *Midrash Aggadab* share several common features. For example, unlike epic stories, they use minimal descriptions of the outside world; in contrast to lyric stories, they pay little explicit attention to the characters' emotions (Fraenkel, 1991). Fraenkel (1981) also stresses the legend's "internal self-containedness," by which he means that the literary piece stands on its own, providing all the information needed for the ideas it is designed to convey. Yet, together with Rubenstein (2003), we believe that the legend's self-containedness should not preclude the potential contribution of other legends, or Talmudic texts involving, for example, similar characters or themes, to the meaning of a specific legend.

#### A LEGEND ON RABBI YOCHANAN AND RESH LAKISH

The Talmudic legend concerning R. Yochanan and Resh Lakish is recorded in the tractate of Baba Metzia 84a–84b (see Appendix 1). Its two central characters are R. Yochanan and Resh Lakish. In the Talmudic literature, both are recorded to have lived in Palestine in the second half of the third century A.D. R. Yochanan is introduced as the head of the leading Talmudic school of his time. As this particular legend implies, Resh Lakish was a gladiator or the head of a group of robbers until his encounter with R. Yochanan, which is the topic of our legend.

This story about their encounter and their subsequent relationship has been the object of numerous interpretations (Boyarin, 1999; Fraenkel, 1981; Kalderon, 2001; Kosman, 2002; Liebes, 2004; Wiesel, 1990). With the exception of Kosman (2002), virtually none of these interpretations frame the story to be essentially about *bevruta* learning, although the *bevruta* relationship of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish has been pointed out over the centuries as an example of a productive, successful, and some would even say an ideal *bevruta* model (e.g., Shmuel Idelsh [Maharsha], a 16th–17th century commentator in his commentary on Baba Metzia, 85a). There is no

doubt that this view draws on the following part of the legend, which is also the starting point for our analysis although it appears later in the legend:

Rabbi Shimon son of Lakish died, and Rabbi Yohanan was greatly distressed over Resh Lakish's death. The rabbis said, "Who will go and relieve his mind?" They decided to let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, for his statements were sharply formulated (and his acumen might serve as a satisfactory substitute for that of Resh Lakish). Rabbi Elazar went and sat before R. Yohanan. After each statement made by Rabbi Yochanan, Rabbi Elazar would say to him, "There is a Baraita [a textual source supporting] your position." But Rabbi Yohanan was not comforted by Rabbi Elazar's remarks and he said to him, "Do you suppose that you are like Rabbi Shimon the son of Lakish? Whenever I would say something, the son of Lakish would raise twenty four objections to what I said and I would then give him twenty four answers. And the subject would thereby be clarified. But all that you say to me is 'There is a Baraita that supports you.' Do you imagine I do not know that what I said is correct?"

Indeed, there seem to be good reasons why later commentators considered the *hevruta* relationship of R. Yochanan and Resh Lakish a model of *hevruta* learning. The passage above describes an interaction in which both study partners are active, the knowledge that is presented by one is not taken for granted but is challenged by his partner (the 24 objections). Moreover, the model values the dynamics of objections and answers, and their contribution to the clarification and the understanding of the matter under discussion. This "ideal" *hevruta* dynamic is further reinforced in the narrative through the account of its opposite model, that is, the relationship between R. Eleazar ben Pedat and R. Yohanan. In this dynamic, ideas are not challenged; and as a result, the interaction lacks the dialectics of objections, questions, and answers, and fails to comfort R. Yochanan.

A closer reading of this passage suggests that the relationship between R. Yochanan and Resh Lakish may be more complex than it first appears. Let us examine the two images of the *hevruta* partner's role that are represented in this passage by R. Yohanan's two *hevruta* partners. R. Eleazar's role as a *hevruta* partner seems to be one of a "yes man." No objecting, no dialectics: R. Eleazar is confined to the role of supporter of R. Yohanan's statements, one who mobilizes textual support for the latter's views. But how shall we characterize what seems to be the contrasting role represented by Resh Lakish?

Resh Lakish's role in the *hevruta* relationship appears to be limited to listening to R. Yochanan's exposition and challenging him by posing objections. As readers, we learn that Resh Lakish contributed to R. Yohanan's understanding by posing challenging and thought-provoking objections to his own arguments. Yet, this description by R. Yochanan disregards the role of Resh Lakish's own views, or R. Yochanan's own role in relation to Resh

Lakish's own learning. Resh Lakish seems to be confined to the role of a sparring partner whose sole purpose is to improve the performance of the primary player. In other words, because of the literary effect that presents the description of their *bevruta* relationship from the perspective of R. Yochanan, we understand that the latter does not expect Resh Lakish to voice his own opinion on the subject matter. In fact, Resh Lakish's own understanding of the matter does not seem to hold any interest for R. Yochanan, and does not appear to be relevant or important for the purpose of the study. The only thing that genuinely matters to R. Yochanan is the improvement of his own understanding. In his view, then, *bevruta* partners are there solely to serve as facilitators for his understanding by creating a dialectic process.

We now understand R. Yochanan's critique of R. Eleazar who fails to challenge him. R. Yochanan concludes his partnership with R. Eleazar with the words, "*Do you imagine I do not know that what I said is correct?*" R. Yochanan does not seek alternative or opposing views per se. He seeks what a sparring partner can provide him with: objections that will enhance the understanding of what he *already* knows. This was indeed, the role formerly played by Resh Lakish, again, according to R. Yochanan's own words: "*Whenever I would say something, the son of Lakish would raise twenty four objections to what I said and I would then give him twenty four answers. And the subject would thereby be clarified.*"

Perhaps there is some irony, from the redactor's perspective, when R. Yochanan is quoted as saying to R. Eleazar "*Do you imagine I do not know that what I said is correct?*" At a closer look, this view may also reflect R. Yochanan's basic assumption about all his *bevruta* relationships, including his former relationship with Resh Lakish.

This is not to say that Resh Lakish did not learn anything new from the exchange of objections and answers. Indeed, a sparring partner may gain understanding, but this is of little consequence to the main player. Moreover, the main player does not see his role as including the need to attend to the sparring partner's own learning, nor does the main player take into account the possibility that his own understanding of something new may occur in collaboration with his *bevruta* partner.

This part of the legend, which I understand to be the key to its main idea, describes two different roles of the *bevruta* partner. I have labeled these as "yes man" and "sparring partner." This interpretation implies a portrait of R. Yochanan as a very self-centered character whose concerns are limited solely to his own edification.

At this point, I offer further evidence for my proposed interpretation. First, I show that this interpretation not only fits with but is also reinforced by the other sections of the legend. Indeed, it is my understanding that this literary piece uses its characters in an archetypical way to illustrate possible roles of *bevruta*. For this purpose, the authors of the legend do not hesitate

to exaggerate distinctive features of important rabbinic figures, even in a grotesque manner.

Second, following Rubenstein's (2003) view on the connections that one Talmudic legend may maintain with additional Talmudic texts, I juxtapose another Talmudic text, which I believe complements this one, shedding a unique light on our legend, offering a third alternative view of the role the *hevruta* partner in *hevruta* learning.

To place the proposed interpretation in the context of the legend as a whole, I now turn to a literary analysis of the legend in its entirety. The story describes a meeting between R. Yochanan and Resh Lakish. R. Yochanan is bathing in the Jordan River. The Talmudic reader already knows that R. Yochanan has been described as handsome and close shaven (Baba Metzia, 84a), while Resh Lakish as appears as a person of great physical strength and a former gladiator or leader of a band of robbers.

*Section 1:* One day R. Yochanan was swimming in the Jordan River. Resh Lakish saw him [according to several manuscripts the text renders here: *and believed him to be a woman. He plunged his spear into the ground plunged his spear into the ground* (Boyarin, 1999, p. 216)], and jumped into the Jordan after him. R. Yochanan said to him, "Your strength should be directed to the study of Torah." Resh Lakish said to him, "Your beauty should be directed to women." R. Yochanan answered, "If you repent I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beautiful than I am." Resh Lakish undertook to repent. He wished to climb back to the river bank to get his clothing but was unable to do so. (Steinsaltz translation)

For what purpose did Resh Lakish jump into the water? If indeed he was a robber, it could very well be that he meant to harm R. Yochanan and steal his belongings. Another interpretation suggests that Resh Lakish was driven by sexual attraction. The phallic symbol suggested by the spear signifies either homosexual attraction (Boyarin, 1999) or heterosexual attraction (Kosman, 2002). This latter interpretation is based on the fact that in the second century, beards served as a central distinctive feature between sexes, and R. Yochanan, known to be beardless, may have appeared to be a woman from afar.

Notwithstanding the motive attributed to Resh Lakish's action, the legend seems to contrast two types of human beings from the outset. Resh Lakish represents an individual driven by powerful instinctual urges. In contrast, R. Yochanan represents an individual driven by intellectual and spiritual motives dedicated to the study of the Holy Law. The exchange between the characters is both telling and puzzling: R. Yochanan instructs Resh Lakish to channel his physical strength in the service of intellectual and spiritual goals. To further induce him to make this change, R. Yochanan offers him his sister in marriage. This last detail is unsettling for the Talmud reader who



knows that a woman's consent is indispensable for a marriage to be legally recognized according to Talmudic law.

I will return to this detail later in the analysis. At this point, I wish to reflect on Resh Lakish's reaction to R. Yochanan's offer. Resh Lakish seems to be ready to make a radical change in his life and dedicate himself to the study of the Law, an intellectual and spiritual activity, in a totally new social environment where what is valued is not physical strength. Was Resh Lakish predisposed to do so? Had he already been searching for an opportunity such as R. Yochanan's offer? As we said, Talmudic legends typically minimize the description of the protagonists' feelings and inner thoughts: Actions and events are used as indications of the latter. The metaphor of his inability to climb up onto the river bank suggests that Resh Lakish is undergoing a profound existential transformation. He is weak; devoid of physical strength, which had characterized him more than anything else in the past. The symbolism of this line is extended: Resh Lakish is unable to grasp his clothes, often a symbol of one's social identity. This is to suggest that behind what superficially seems to be a simple action of emerging from a river, Resh Lakish is experiencing a very deep and transformative moment. Symbolically, he can't put his clothes back on, because he does not want to be (or perhaps he no longer is) the same person. The account indicates the deep inner change that Resh Lakish is undergoing, disconnecting himself from his social environment and its cultural values, ready to enter a new environment and embrace a very different cultural system, the culture of the *Beit Midrash*.

*Section 2:* R. Yochanan personally tutored Resh Lakish, he taught him Bible and Mishna and made him into a great scholar.

From this section we learn that R. Yochanan takes Resh Lakish under his wing. Paying careful attention to the details of this section, with their future *bevruta* relationship in mind, one notices the dynamic that is at play, quite naturally, at this stage of Resh Lakish's education. R. Yochanan is the one who teaches, who provides the knowledge, while Resh Lakish is the one who absorbs, learns, and receives the knowledge. The syntax of this sentence presents R. Yochanan three times as the active subject and Resh Lakish as the passive object of R. Yochanan's actions: *tutored, taught, made*.

The next passage describes an incident later in time, when Resh Lakish is not only recognized as a great scholar but also serves as R. Yochanan's *bevruta* partner. On this backdrop, the narrator introduces the following incident:

*Section 3:* One day there was a difference of opinion in the study hall: A sword and a knife and a dagger and a spear and a handsaw and a sickle—from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity? From the time

that their manufacture is complete. And from when is their manufacture complete? R. Yochanan says, From when he tempers them in the furnace.

The legal issue under discussion in the study hall involves the laws of impurity and specifically addresses the legal issue of the stage of the manufacturing process at which an object acquires full legal status. The objects that are discussed are a knife, a sword, and a dagger. R. Yochanan says that once these objects are tempered in the furnace they acquire their full status as objects and thus are subject to the laws of impurity. If we were to add the following line based on R. Yochanan's later account of his *hevruta* dynamic with Resh Lakish, at this point we would hear Resh Lakish posing a series of (24) objections to R. Yochanan, challenging R. Yochanan's statement. In our legend, however, Resh Lakish merely intervenes by stating:

*Section 4:* "Resh Lakish said, From when he furbishes them in water."

A careful reading is in place: According to the economy of this legend, Resh Lakish is not fulfilling his role as R. Yochanan's sparring partner but instead stands up to express his own view on the matter. While there are many accounts of legal disagreements between R. Yochanan and Resh Lakish in Talmudic literature, Resh Lakish's intervention is very significant in this instance of a self-contained literary work and in the chronological economy of this tale: It presents Resh Lakish as failing for the first time to fill the role of the absorbing student or sparring partner. From a literary perspective, this is the first time that Resh Lakish explicitly expresses his own personal view, which is contrary to R. Yochanan's legal statement. The effect of R. Yochanan's subsequent reaction is staggering to the reader:

*Section 5:* R. Yochanan said to him, "A robber understands about robbery."

R. Yochanan is now faced with an alternative source of knowledge that is based on his *hevruta* partner's actual life experience (we recall that Resh Lakish was a robber or a gladiator in the past). R. Yochanan's response—an *ad hominem* attack—implies that instead of taking advantage of this opportunity for a dialogue on the matter at hand, R. Yochanan attempts to extinguish all alternative and relevant voices, by reducing Resh Lakish to his former self, a robber. R. Yochanan uses the *present* tense to say "a robber understands about robbery." This is especially insulting because even the readers know that Resh Lakish has undergone a profound existential change, symbolized both by his physical weaknesses and his not being able to retrieve his former clothes.

This section reinforces the effect created by the carefully crafted literary character in this legend. For R. Yochanan, the sole role of the *hevruta* partner is to serve as sparring partner, not to offer alternative interpretations based

on personal knowledge and experience. R. Yochanan has no doubt that what he says “*is correct*,” so that there is no point for the *hevruta* partner to introduce an alternative view based on personal knowledge. This section also almost brutally reinforces R. Yochanan’s image as a self-centered and domineering character. This image is further reinforced in the subsequent sections. But first, we attend to Resh Lakish’s reaction:

*Section 6:* Resh Lakish said to him, “And what good have you done to me? There they called me Master and here they call me Master.”

I understand Resh Lakish as saying: “If I am still a robber, and am therefore not entitled to voice my opinion in the Hall of Study, I wonder what it is that you believe to have contributed to me? Why did you challenge me to leave my former life and social environment and invite me to enter your cultural milieu?” In essence, says Resh Lakish, there is no difference between the society of robbers from which he came and the Beit Midrash environment, which is centered around learning. Despite what seems to be their total contrast in values and norms, he now understands that human relationships in both societies are based on power and competition rather than on the recognition of one’s value as an individual with ideas of one’s own (Kosman, 2002). He is saying, “In my former life, I could rely on my physical strength and this is what made me the leader: I was called a “Master.” When I joined the Beit Midrash, the holy society of Torah study, I expected to enter a society where relationships are based on different norms; not on power and authority but on the basis of human dialogue in the common pursuit of knowledge and understanding. But what did I discover? Here too, they call me Master, this time based on my intellectual knowledge and capacity. But what infuses this recognition of power and authority? Not a radical different human relationship based on dialogue. My title is the result of the role that is assigned by you, R. Yochanan, to the members of the Beit Midrash. So what do you think you’ve contributed to me?” In retrospect, Resh Lakish feels that the status of Master in the Beit Midrash is not truly different than a master among robbers or gladiators (Kosman, 2002). He says to R. Yochanan: “This understanding is illustrated by your attitude toward me the moment I expressed my own personal view on the matter.”

*Section 7:* R. Yochanan said to him, I have done you good by bringing you under the wings of the Shekhinah (the Divine Presence). R. Yochanan was deeply offended and Resh Lakish became ill.

I understand the first sentence of this section to be central to the interpretation of this legend. From a literary perspective, we should note, not only does Resh Lakish fail to reply to R. Yochanan’s response, he becomes

literally speechless. Indeed, the literary construct of the legend is such that from this point onward, we no longer hear Resh Lakish's voice directly. I suggest that Resh Lakish's illness (which sounds more like a very intensive feeling of offense that eventually leads to death) has a direct connection to the first line of this section, that is, with R. Yochanan's statement: "I have done you good by bringing you under the wings of the Shekhinah (the Divine Presence)."

R. Yochanan's answer is so devastating to Resh Lakish that it literally extinguishes him: From this point onward he becomes speechless and Resh Lakish falls into a very telling (literary) silence: His voice is no longer heard in the text. However, we the readers have access to his voice in another Talmudic source and learn something of his goals when he made the radical transition to the world of study. Scholars who have interpreted this legend have failed to make a connection between this legend and two statements attributed to Resh Lakish that appear in a different tractate of the Talmud concerning the *ideal hevruta* relationship:

Rabbi Jeremiah said in the name of R. Simeon son of Lakish, "When two scholars are amiable to each other in their discussion of Halakhah, the Holy One, blessed be He, gives heed to them, for it is said, 'Then they that feared the Lord spoke one with another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard'; now speech can only mean with gentleness," [ . . . ] Rabbi Abba in the name of R. Simeon son of Lakish: "When two scholars pay heed to each other in Halakhah, the Holy One, blessed be He, listens to their voice, as it is said: 'Thou that dwellest in the gardens. The companions hearken to your voice: cause me to hear it.' But if they do not do thus, they cause the Shekhinah [the Divine presence] to depart from Israel, as it is said: 'Flee my beloved, and be you like etc.'" (Tractate Shabbat, 63a).

It is worthwhile to quote Rashi's commentary. He explains the expression "two scholars are amiable to each other" as a *relaxed exchange of ideas so they can learn from each other*. The expression "when two scholars pay heed to each other," Rashi interprets to mean *teach one another and understand one from another*.

By bringing these two statements attributed to Resh Lakish to bear on our legend, we shed light on the nature of the confrontation between Resh Lakish and R. Yochanan. In these two statements, Resh Lakish points to an ideal *hevruta* dynamic, one that is quite different from the *hevruta* role to which he was confined by R. Yochanan. Here, Resh Lakish stresses the *dialogic* nature of the *hevruta* relationship, which is characterized by an exchange of ideas between individuals who share a common purpose of learning from and through each other. This interaction is conducted with forbearance and willingness to learn from one another. In contrast to the roles of "yes man" and "sparring partner," Resh Lakish suggests that the

*bevruta* learning setting should not be used exclusively for one's own learning but serve as a reflective and genuine dialogue—in spirit and in deed.

This dialogic view of *bevruta* study stresses what I have previously described as the ethical dimension of *bevruta* learning (Holzer, 2006). In this perspective, *bevruta* learning requires the learner to open his/herself to the alterity represented by his or her learning partner. This attitude requires the cultivation of dispositions such as attention, openness and wholeheartedness toward the *bevruta* partner. Moreover, in addition to an impact on one's own learning, according to this view *bevruta* learning also entails the need to assume *responsibility* for the learning of the *bevruta* partner, thus infusing the *bevruta* learning setting with a fundamental ethical dimension to which one becomes committed (and which one needs to cultivate practically over time in concrete practices of *bevruta* learning). In this perspective, *bevruta* learning holds the potential to serve as a humanizing activity.

It is interesting to notice that the metaphor of God's listening is used in both statements attributed to Resh Lakish. The statements twice note that God listens to the dialogic relationship among *bevruta* partners, and when *bevruta* study does not include this kind of listening to one's *bevruta* partner "they cause the Shekhinah [the Divine presence] to depart from Israel."

The metaphors of God's listening as well as the presence of Shekhinah [the Divine presence] are intriguing in this context. I propose that these metaphors suggest an intrinsic connection between God's participation in the *bevruta* learning, and the actual dialogic relationship, especially if we take God to stand primarily for some transcendent quality of genuine interpersonal experience. Pointing to God's presence is less a claim regarding the presence of a transcendent being but rather a characteristic of the dialogic encounter described in phenomenological terms. Modern philosophers have articulated how transcendence does not betoken surpassing the range of human experience (Gadamer, 1996; Levinas, 1999). On the contrary, it concerns what lies within the human experience. Transcendence in the learning relationship involves the transforming experience of coming knowingly to see, to think and to feel differently due to a genuine encounter with an *other*. In other words, these metaphors attempt to capture something that happens to the *bevruta* partners when their enclosed egos open themselves to something that transcends them in the midst of the dialogic learning relationship: the *bevruta* partner.

Returning to our legend, we are now able to understand the cause of Resh Lakish's deep distress from which he ultimately fails to recover. The redactor of this story contrasts what appear to be two fundamentally diverging religious views, or two views of transcendence which have ethical implications in general and for the context of *bevruta* learning in particular. For R. Yochanan says, "*I have done you good by bringing you under the wings of the Shekhinah (the Divine Presence).*" The juxtaposition of this sentence and Resh Lakish's statements in the Tractate Shabbat on the ideal *bevruta*

relationship which is characterized by the presence of the Shekhinah provides us with two different images of the Divine, which I understand to reflect two different philosophical views of the religious quality of learning. For Resh Lakish, the religious dimension resides in the ethical, dialogic learning relationship when *hevruta* partners open themselves to each other and take responsibility for each other's learning in the *hevruta* learning encounter. In contrast, for R. Yochanan, the religious dimension resides in being a learner in the Beit Midrash (symbolized by "*being under the wings of the Shekhinah*"). For R. Yochanan, one can be brought *under* the wings of the Divine, which suggests a static view of the divine. It is situated in "a place" (the Beit Midrash, or perhaps the knowledge one possesses) under whose shelter it is important to reside. The divine presence does not, however, impose any ethical claim on the individual as far as the learning experience is concerned. In contrast, for Resh Lakish, the divine presence resides in the nature of the relationship *between* two people who engage in a genuine learning dialogue. The divine is experienced in the ethical dimension of the dialogue, when openness, caring and responsibility characterize one's way of being in study.

I suggest that we may now understand better why Resh Lakish reacted so extremely to R. Yochanan's claim "*I have done you good by bringing you under the wings of the Shekhinah.*" As he listens to R. Yochanan's metaphor of the divine presence, Resh Lakish realizes that their disagreement about his role as a *hevruta* learner reflects a much more fundamental disagreement on the nature of the transcendent and its relation to the ethical dimension of *hevruta* learning. Resh Lakish realizes that his disagreement with R. Yochanan is a clash between two very different religious outlooks. This realization literally closes him off to further human interaction (his deep feeling of offense), and he becomes silent in the context of the literary structure of the story as well.

At this point, it becomes even more evident that our legend is a subtle and powerful critique of a certain view of the *hevruta* relationship. As we said earlier, in order to make its point, the text does not hesitate to draw a bold portrait of R. Yochanan. I believe that this is not incidental, and is not only designed to create a profound sense of empathy between the reader and Resh Lakish. Rather, by depicting R. Yochanan as a self-centered individual who grounds his views in a particular religious outlook, the legend makes two other strong claims: first, the achievement of greatness in Torah knowledge (R. Yochanan) does not necessarily imply that the person has cultivated this particular dialogic and ethical view of a *hevruta* learner. Second, the fundamental view of one's relationship with a *hevruta* partner cannot be separated from central dispositions and core traits of one's personality. This is to say that the way people interact in *hevruta* learning is significant for who they are in life in general and vice versa. This is reinforced by the following section of the legend where the bold, self-centered image of R. Yochanan is taken to its extreme:

*Section 8:* R. Yochanan's sister came to him and wept, she said to him, "Act for the sake of my children." He said to her, "Leave your orphans to me, I will preserve them alive." . . . She said, "Act for the sake of my widowhood." R. Yochanan answered, "And let your widows trust in me." (Jeremiah, 49:11)

Resh Lakish's wife (who was also R. Yochanan's sister) fears the worst. Her husband is deeply depressed. She turns to her brother, R. Yochanan, in hope that R. Yochanan will take the first step toward reconciliation so that her husband will recover. However, R. Yochanan is unwilling to do so. Instead, R. Yochanan agrees to care for the orphans and the widow (his sister) after Resh Lakish's death. The reader cannot but help be stunned by the cruelty and lack of empathy in these responses. The key to the full meaning of R. Yochanan's answers, however, lies in the biblical verse that he quotes. Kosman (2002) noted that this is one of the subtle literary devices used by the narrator that provides us with an important insight. This verse concerns the individual who cares for widows and orphans. If the reader examines the verse in its Biblical context, he discovers that its subject is none other than God himself, who states that He will take care of the widows and the orphans (Jeremiah, 49:11). Thus, through a subtle use of a Biblical source, the narrator offers an even more shocking portrait of Rabbi Yochanan as a person of self-perceived omnipotence, one who believes himself capable of providing for the needs of all. Like God, he has no limitations.

In the light of this somewhat grotesque picture, we now re-read various details of the legend. R. Yochanan sees himself as the one who "made" Resh Lakish, personally tutored him, taught him, brought him under the wings of the Divine presence. His *bevruta* partners are confined to the role of sparring partners. We now also understand the ease with which R. Yochanan pledges his sister to Resh Lakish. Every detail of the legend implies his own sense of power, his decisions, and his ability to control circumstances and individuals—certainly not qualities that are conducive to a dialogic orientation in *bevruta* learning.

*Section 9:* Rabbi Shimon son of Lakish died, and Rabbi Yochanan was greatly distressed over Resh Lakish's death. The Rabbis said, "Who will go and relieve his mind?" They decided to let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, for his statements were sharply formulated (and his acumen might serve as a satisfactory substitute for that of Resh Lakish). Rabbi Elazar went and sat before R. Yochanan. After each statement made by Rabbi Yochanan, Rabbi Elazar would say to him: "There is a Baraita [a textual source supporting] your position." But Rabbi Yochanan was not comforted by Rabbi Elazar's remarks and he said to him, "Do you suppose that you are like Rabbi Shimon the son of Lakish? Whenever I would say something, the son of Lakish would raise twenty-four objections to what I said and

I would then give him twenty four answers. And the subject would thereby be clarified. But all that you say to me is 'There is a Baraita that supports you.' Do you imagine I do not know that what I said is correct?"

*Section 10:* R. Yochanan went into rending his clothes and weeping and said, "Where are you son of Lakish, where are you son of Lakish?" And he cried out until his mind slipped from him. The rabbis pleaded mercy on his behalf and he died.

The end of the legend is tragic, not merely because both characters die. The final section of the legend suggests some remorse on R. Yochanan's part regarding his previous beliefs and choices. R. Yochanan too rent his clothes as he mourned, providing a symmetric closure to the opening scene of the legend in which Resh Lakish was unable to grasp his former clothes, symbolizing the profound change in his personality and his way of being in the world he expected to undergo. Our legend does not say what brought R. Yochanan to his realization: Perhaps the emptiness that remained after Resh Lakish's passing made him realize that something in his own way of being was mistaken. At this point, he too symbolically rents his clothes as if to say that he should have adopted another way of being in the world.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

I conclude this article by offering two invitations, one for further theoretical research and the second for curricular and pedagogical development.

This article illustrates the potential that lies in the use of literary Jewish sources such as *Midrash Aggadab* to enrich our insights about aspects of learning in general and *hevruta* learning in particular. In a culture in which study was so central, it is not surprising to find reflective and critical insights about aspects of learning. Thanks to the development of scholarship and the renewed interest in *Midrash Aggadab* as a literary genre and an agent of subtle cultural self-criticism, our own interest in learning may certainly be enriched by engaging in close readings and interpretations of these sources (Holzer, 2002). It goes without saying that if taken seriously, these ideas still require further conceptual and pedagogical development and adaptation to contemporary settings of Jewish learning in light of current educational thinking.

We need however to ask: Given our awareness of the subjective and relativistic aspects of textual interpretations, does hermeneutical engagement with these ancient legends have something genuine to contribute to our work as Jewish educators? For example, the study of the legend addressed in this article might help students reflect on both the value of *hevruta* learning as well as some of its potential pitfalls. The legend might also be used to



tap into unarticulated expectations and concerns that people bring to the intimate setting that *hevruta* learning is. From a philosophical point of view, the contributions of these texts to our work as Jewish educators deserve serious attention including a theoretical foundation about the nature of the hermeneutic encounter with ancient texts (Ricoeur, 1991).

I have interpreted this Talmudic legend to bring vividly to the forefront subjective issues in the *hevruta* learning relationship: the perception of roles and the views of learning limited to one's own development and understanding, as opposed to a view which emphasizes the centrality of the interpersonal and the dialogic dimension, and a mutual responsibility for learning. The legend creates a provocative and brutally frank paradigm of self-awareness in learning, and highlights the ethical issues involved in interpersonal learning.

This is to suggest that despite its widespread contemporary renaissance, *hevruta* learning is not to be reduced merely to a formal learning mode. Rather, *hevruta* learning may also be conceptualized as the locus for the cultivation of interpersonal relationships and ultimately as a humanizing activity. This view calls for careful and thoughtful curricular design and pedagogical implementation as we engage our students in *hevruta* learning.

It is in the perspective of this dialogic view that I reread and understand the depth of the Talmud's statement about the *hevruta* learning mode: "Either a *hevruta* partner or death."

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## APPENDIX 1

One day R. Yohanan was swimming in the Jordan River. Resh Lakish saw him [according to several manuscripts the text renders here: *and believed him to be a woman. He plunged his spear into the ground.* (Boyarin, 1999, p. 216)] and jumped into the Jordan after him. R. Yohanan said to him, “Your strength should be directed to the study of Torah.” Resh Lakish said to him, “Your beauty should be directed to women.” R. Yochanan answered, “If you repent I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beautiful than I am.” Resh Lakish undertook to repent. He wished to climb back to the river bank to get his clothing but was unable to do so.

R. Yochanan personally tutored Resh Lakish, he taught him Bible and Mishna and made him into a great scholar. One day there was a difference of opinion in the study hall: A sword and a knife and a dagger and a spear and a handsaw and a sickle—from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity? From the time that their manufacture is complete. And from when is their manufacture complete? R. Yochanan says, From when he tempers them in the furnace. Lakish said, From when he furbishes them in water.

R. Yochanan said to him, “A robber understands about robbery.” Resh Lakish said to him, “And what good have you done to me? There they called me Master and here they call me Master.” R. Yochanan said to him, I have done you good by bringing you under the wings of the Shekhinah (the Divine presence). R. Yochanan was deeply offended and Resh Lakish became ill. R. Yochanan’s sister came to him and wept, she said to him, “Act for the sake of my children.” He said to her, “Leave your orphans to me, I will preserve them alive.” . . . She said, “Act for the sake of my widowhood.” R. Yochanan answered, “And let your widows trust in me.” (Jeremiah, 49:11)

Rabbi Shimon son of Lakish died, and Rabbi Yohanan was greatly distressed over Resh Lakish’s death. The Rabbis said, “Who will go and relieve his mind?” They decided to let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, for his

statements were sharply formulated (and his acumen might serve as a satisfactory substitute for that of Resh Lakish). Rabbi Elazar went and sat before R. Yochanan. After each statement made by Rabbi Yochanan, Rabbi Elazar would say to him: "There is a Baraita [a textual source supporting] your position." But Rabbi Yochanan was not comforted by Rabbi Elazar remarks and he said to him, "Do you suppose that you are like Rabbi Shimon the son of Lakish? Whenever I would say something, the son of Lakish would raise twenty four objections to what I said and I would then give him twenty four answers. And the subject would thereby be clarified. But all that you say to me is 'There is a Baraita that supports you.' Do you imagine I do not know that what I said is correct?"

R. Yochanan went into rending his clothes and weeping and said, "Where are you son of Lakish, where are you son of Lakish?" And he cried out until his mind slipped from him. The rabbis pleaded mercy on his behalf and he died.

—Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Metzia, 84a-84b. (Adin Steinsaltz' translation)