

Talmudic Study Method Works in Private School, Teachers Find

By Erin O'Farrell and Kimberley Stephens

TORONTO, Aug. 17, 2006 (JTA) -- As we prepare the course materials for the 10th-grade English classes we teach beginning every fall semester at Havergal College, an independent high school for girls in Toronto, we find ourselves fixated on the Hebrew Bible and the talmudic study method known as chevruta.

We learned the chevruta technique, which calls for two study partners to wrestle with a passage of Torah by reading it aloud, raising questions, and offering individual interpretations of the text, at a summer institute sponsored by The Curriculum Initiative. This is the second year that we've attended TCI's program, which has become an important part of professional training for a number of teachers at our school.

Although our school is named in honor of Frances Ridley Havergal, a 19th-century poet and writer of Anglican hymns, and takes pride in continuing Church traditions begun over 100 years ago, we have been long committed as much to cultural diversity as to academic excellence. It should surprise no one that the Hebrew Bible is being taught as literature here.

But teaching at such an institution using a method generally found only in yeshivas and synagogue study groups is, perhaps, a bit unusual. Our students are a notably cosmopolitan bunch and represent just about every imaginable cultural and religious background; no one is likely to mistake us for a yeshiva any time soon. Nonetheless, traditional yeshiva students surely would recognize the chevruta techniques we've adapted to the requirements of a preparatory school for young women.

The usual chevruta study configuration is pairs. At Havergal, to introduce the students to this method of study, we've modified that arrangement by having the "pair" made up of the teacher as one study partner and the entire class of students as the other. This is more than fine for our initial purpose, which is to jump-start the students' ability to explicate the text we are reading together. Eventually, as students become familiar with what we are doing, they are paired in twos and encouraged to study in a manner more in keeping with traditional chevruta.

Because it engages students and teachers alike with the texts they are studying on an incredibly intimate level, and does so in a remarkably short period of time, chevruta is an outstanding technique for teaching a wide variety of topics, not just Talmud. Indeed it is not at all far-fetched to believe that math teachers could apply chevruta to word problems to excellent effect.

We use chevruta to study Greek and Iroquois myths, the poems of Keats,

Shakespeare's sonnets, the Gospels and Jesus' sermons, as well as stories from the Pentateuch. By focusing on the words themselves rather than the historical background or literary theory behind them, chevruta allows students with little or no familiarity with these texts to dig right into them and achieve a level of understanding usually found only in more advanced course work.

Consider the story of Pandora's Box. Traditionally, this cautionary tale about the dangers of ignoring taboos in order to satisfy one's curiosity is taught as an example of the values and traditions of the ancient Greeks.

While that is all well and good, it can take several sessions of valuable class time to bring students up to speed with the historical and cultural background required to understand the importance of the Greek myths, both as artifacts of an ancient religious system and as a cornerstone of our modern literary tradition. But chevruta speeds up the process by an order of magnitude.

What normally would take months takes mere hours. Students cut right to the chase, identifying themes, concepts, and relationships that are startlingly sophisticated. Why is the story about a woman? What is the importance of assigning blame? Are humankind's worst impulses really matters of fate that our beyond our control?

Now, move on to the story of Adam and Eve and the fall from Eden. How are the stories similar? How different? Compare them both to Anita Diamant's best selling novel, "The Red Tent." How does her retelling of the biblical story of Dinah update the themes found in the older texts? What does the novel have to say about woman's role in determining the fate of humankind?

Chevruta sparks the minds of our students in such a way that they can grapple with these questions like literary masters. And, they love it because they feel, as one student remarked last year, "so smart."

We love it too, because chevruta helps them realize that they are smart. The chevruta method gives students permission to ask questions and offer opinions they might find difficult otherwise. It frees them from feeling abashed by their lack of authoritative knowledge. This is especially true when teaching the Hebrew Bible, which can be intimidating to students who have little personal experience or knowledge to draw from.

And yet they come away from their encounter with a deep respect not only for the text but the Jewish traditions that inform it. Chevruta doesn't only "make students smarter," it makes them more open to diverse ways of thinking and unfamiliar value systems, not in a passive and acquiescent way, but, rather, in a mode that is fully engaged with the world of ideas.

This, of course, is the very essence of a true liberal arts education.

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