

Havruta with a Twist

by Merav Berger

One of the fundamental beliefs in Judaism is that we are all made *bi-tzelem Elokim*, and, in so being made, we are imbued with the capacity to create. We create meaning and construct knowledge as individuals and as connected groups of people – and Judaism has a distinct way of doing this.

During the Summer of NewCAJE 2020, I presented a workshop, “Havruta with a Twist,” on a creative process I developed to study traditional Judaic texts. This article presents some background on traditional *havruta* study and expressive and creative arts-based pedagogy, describes a method of a process I call “HavrutArt,” and then concludes with how that process translated to an online format for the NewCAJE summer workshop.

HAVRUTA

At the core of traditional Jewish education is mastering the reading, interpretation, and understanding of Judaic sacred texts or *midrash* (both as a process and as a genre of literature). Jewish learning is also a social and communal activity; one of the most common methods of *midrash* is *havruta* learning.

Havruta study, according to Judaic thinking, is vital to analyzing, discussing, and debating shared text. It is peer-guided and involves social interaction between two partners whose efforts to make meaning actually involves three partners – two people and a text.¹ *Havruta* embraces the “two heads are better than one” philosophy, as a similar saying from the *Talmud* explains that “two scholars sharpen one another.”²

Since Jewish texts are layered, creative analogy can make the familiar look strange in order to see it in a new way.³ Ben Bag Bag says about the *Torah* that we should “turn it over and turn it over for everything lies therein,”⁴ which suggests that there always is more to be discovered when viewed from different perspectives and that there is more than one way to study text.

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Jewish modes of study rely on creative thinking because interpretation requires imagination. Best practices reveal that “in order for students to relate to the subject matter, [they] need to be active participants in the discovery of the story.... [and that] discovery, like revelation, is a source of enlightenment.”⁵ It is in those moments that true learning and internalization occurs. So how do we get enlightened from text study?

In Jewish exegesis, there are four components to learning text.⁶ The *p’shat* represents the plain, literal meaning of the text; the *remez*, or clue, is the connection to other texts, places, and times. The *drash* is the rabbinic, creative, and personal interpretations of the text. The *sod* represents the hidden meaning or the ultimate personal meaning for the individual.

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These four components accompany *havruta* text study as well and can act as stages in the dynamic dyadic structure. In moving through these modes, partners can deepen and challenge their thinking and understanding of a text as it applies to them and to their world.

EXPRESSIVE ARTS-BASED LEARNING

Before delving into the “how” of using expressive and creative arts with traditional *havruta* learning, it is important to briefly examine the “why.” The literature relays evidence that arts can transmit information and knowledge⁷ and that effective and affective domains share equal weight when it comes to learning something.⁸ The act of making art uses a creative intelligence and “when used in contemplative ways can produce understanding, truth, and wisdom that involves our whole being, mind, body, and spirit.”⁹ Expressive arts practices nurture sensitive perception and foster the imagination, and this interaction of our senses and imagination enriches meaning.¹⁰ Both arts-based learning and religious education consider existential questions, and both spiritual study and interpretation through art are “an ongoing and creative movement where the interpreter responds to one form of creation with another, imagining the image further.”¹¹ Spirituality and art often go hand-in-hand, as both are rife with ritual and creative connection.

When learning through creative processes, the learning “ceases to be only cognitive and academic, it becomes personal, sometimes even intimate.”¹² Grappling with concepts of God is deeply personal and can be overwhelming. Art can bring it to a tenable level by giving access to deep, complex theological issues,¹³ and meanings can emerge that “are often surprising, revealing, and deeply engaging.”¹⁴ So how do we make traditional text study fun and engaging?

HAVRUTART

HavrutArt integrates expressive art processes with traditional text study using the four modes of study. The first two modes, the *p’shat* and the *remez*, share the same actions; that is both in traditional *havruta* and in HavrutArt, the first two steps involve the reading of a text and an initial discussion related to one or several questions about the text. In this manner, students engage in the cognitive, or effective, realm that uses language and reason. Once each partner’s initial thoughts are on the table, the deeper exploration toward understanding can begin.

In traditional *havruta* learning, the deeper explorations, which occur in the *drash* and *sod* modes, often involve heated and

chaotic exchanges between partners, with the goal of raising unexpected and challenging questions.¹⁵ Learning happens when someone engages with a new or opposing view, and, in this space, a student’s perspective may be enriched or challenged. Traditional *havruta* study seeks to make sense of something, either by reaching a new or different understanding or by strengthening an existing one.

In HavrutArt learning, the *drash* and *sod* modes are the creative and collaborative spaces where opposing, new, contradictory, or unclear ideas can be freely and safely explored through communal artmaking. Rather than aiming to understand, the partners aim to discover, and it no longer becomes a clash of opinions, but rather a mutual endeavor to find...more. The art modality used can vary depending on the lesson; the strengths of the teacher; the availability of resources, budget, and more; but, in this article, I’m sharing a specific technique I’ve developed using poetry with visual and performance art.

HAVRUTART WORD POEMS

Just like traditional *havruta*, HavrutArt starts with a text shared between partners, or, in some cases, groups of three. It is important that the text be developmentally appropriate, both in content and in readability. With HavrutArt, the text can include complex sacred writings and commentary for older, more developed populations, and they can be simple Jewish children’s stories that relay a Jewish value, blessing, holiday, or concept for the younger groups. The keys are that the text introduce, support, or enhance the subject matter being explored and that the participants can access and understand the text at their appropriate level.

Following are two examples of the HavrutArt process. The first example connotes the process as I used it with a group of fourth graders and a group of kindergarteners and represents how the process works in person. The second example comes from the work I did with a group of adult Jewish educators and demonstrates how the technique was used online.

Word Poems: In-Person Sessions

My fourth-grade class was exploring the tumultuous relationship between King Saul, his son Jonathan, and the future King David. Split into *havruta* pairs, they were given simple instructions on the *havruta* process: Partners take turns reading the text out loud to each other. Partner A says what they feel and think about what they just read and heard, then Partner B says what they feel and think about it. Then the pair discusses what was the same and what was different about what they thought or felt about the text. The students

were encouraged to go with their first thoughts and to not think too deeply about it just yet.

They were then prompted by three questions:

1. What emotions were expressed in the text?
2. What actions were taken to reflect those emotions?
3. What were some of the ways in which the three men tried to resolve their conflicts?

They were invited to respond to one, two, or all three of the questions artistically by cutting up strips of lines and words from the text¹⁶ and creating poems that could be arranged and re-arranged as multiple creative responses. One *havruta* pair played around with various arrangements, going back and forth reading their mini-poems out loud, actively engaging with one another until they settled on a poem they were satisfied contained both of their ideas (see Figure 1).

In turning and turning the words from the Jewish text, the students became agents and witnesses to their own spiritual discovery of Jewish concepts, values, and even language.

One highlight from their process was their discovery of two lines – “a dark mood” and “overcame Israel” – that led them to an existential dialogue on good leadership using these figures as reference points.

Another *havruta* pair initially began by arranging words in lines like their classmates, but, at one point, their arrangements began to take a shape and form that symbolically expressed their answers (see Figure 2). They explained that in addition to arranging the words and sentences in a certain order, that order formed the shape of a peace sign. They further explained that the sign itself symbolized the overall need for peace, but that each “leg” of the peace sign represented one of the three figures in the story. One new meaning that emerged for them was that King Saul, Jonathan, and David all needed to be included for true peace to occur. One partner noted that the peace sign wasn’t whole if one of the legs was missing. That prompted another student from a different *havruta* group to respond, “Hey, the root word of *shalom* is whole, so *shalom* means whole and peace,” and this began a riff on all the definitions of the word and how it related to the text.

In turning and turning the words from the Jewish text, the students became agents and witnesses to their own spiritual discovery of Jewish concepts, values, and even language. Figure 2 also shows another response from the same *havruta* pair that symbolized, both in word order and visual

arrangement, Saul throwing his spear at David, which led to a *havruta* conversation about bullying.

The creative exploration was then taken one step further, when each *havruta* pair was invited to share their poem with the rest of the class. The students were encouraged to either read it out loud as is, to read it accompanied by sounds and movement, or to recreate the poem in a dramatic two-person scene. These performative aspects infused a kinesthetic value in the inquiry process, and the students truly engaged their minds, bodies, and spirits through the HavrutArt word poem activity.

Word Poems with Pre-Literate Students

When I work with Pre-K children through first graders, instead of having them read text and cut out lines, I read a story

and invite them to work with a partner to create images that express part or all of the story they’ve just heard. They then come together and collectively place their drawings into a mural or graphic novel type of shape, arranging and re-arranging the pieces to tell a new story, which is told collectively through sound and movement.

For example, the photograph in Figure 3 shows a story panel created by a group of kindergarteners who had heard a story about King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba in a learning theme about caring for animals and the environment. Once each pair placed their completed images in a certain order, they were invited to create a sound and/or movement for their images and then, pair by pair, panel by panel, the group co-constructed a new story using multiple senses. In so doing, the whole group experienced the story in a re-imagined and re-interpreted manner. The plethora of flowers and bees depicted in many of the images, along with movements and sounds reflecting growth, flying, and love, reflected the children’s processing of the Judaic text, in this case a children’s story exemplifying Judaism’s core concepts of *Shomrei Adamah* and *Tza’ar Ba’alei Chayim*.

Word Poems: Online Sessions

I originally intended to present “*Havruta* with a Twist” as an in-person workshop for the annual NewCAJE Conference, but Covid-19 changed all that. In figuring out how to bring creative and experiential learning in general, and HavrutArt specifically, online, I discovered some technological tools

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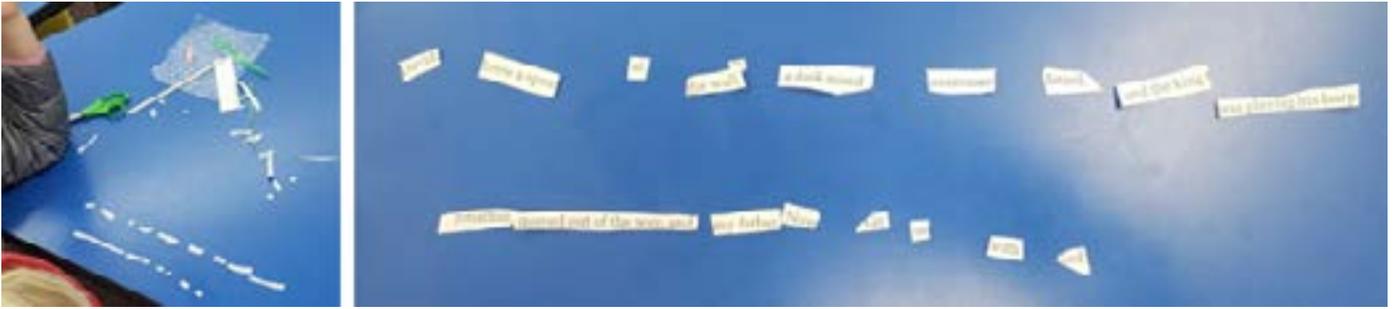


Figure 1: A Word Poem created by a HavrutArt pair

Note. The poem reads: “David threw a spear at the wall. A dark mood overcame Israel. And the king was playing his harp. Jonathan moved out of the way, and my father. Now Go on with God.” The spacing and which strips were left out became a part of the conversation about expressing anger. One of the students remarked, “Those spaces and missing strips are like when we’re angry, like we don’t have all the information, and sometimes there’s too much or not enough space between people.”



Figure 1: A Word Poem created by another HavrutArt pair
A Peace Sign and Spear



Figure 3 : HavrutArt with Kindergarteners and other pre-readers

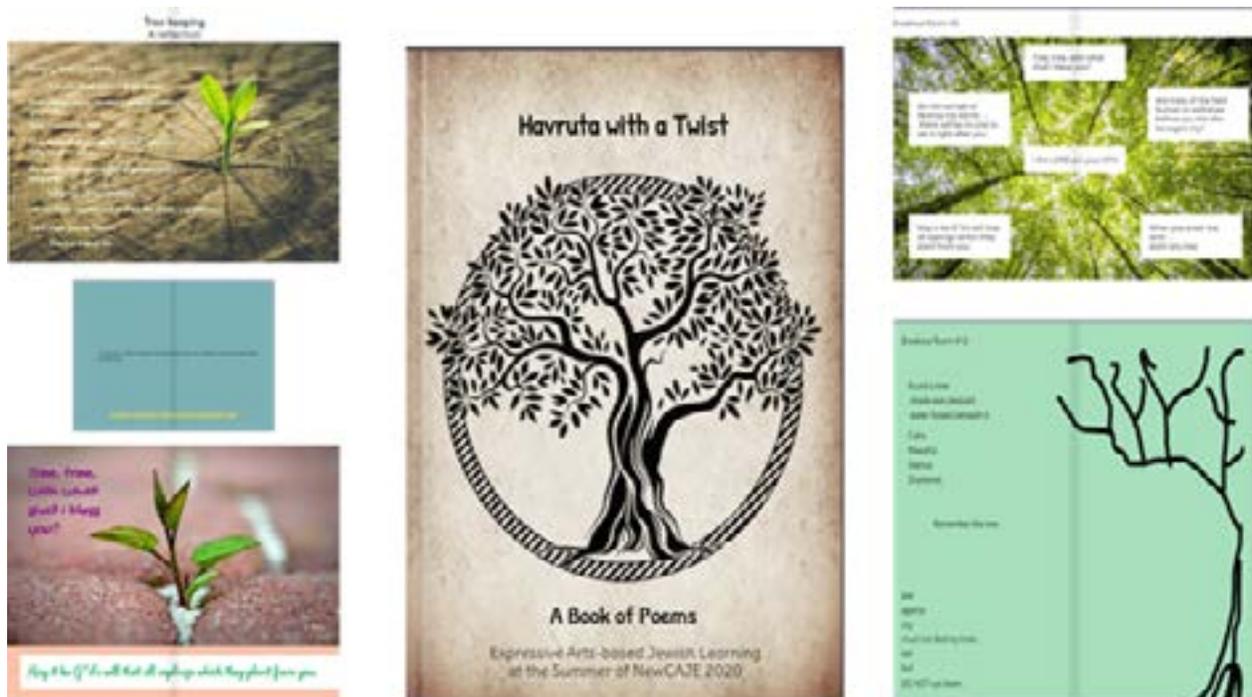


Figure 4: Images of excerpts from *A Book of Poems*

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that I felt were excellent platforms for doing the work in a collaborative and meaningful online setting.

In the *Tu bi-Shevat*-themed session with adult Jewish educators, the participants were given access to a Google document that contained excerpts on *Tu bi-Shevat* sourced from Sefaria, an online library for Judaic texts. The Google doc also included three questions about the text:

1. How are we supposed to take care of trees?
2. Why are we supposed to take care of trees?
3. What role do trees play in our lives?

Additionally, everyone was given access to an online library I set up in Book Creator, an online app that allows collaborative creations of eBooks. The group was split into randomized *havruta* pairs using Zoom's breakout room options, and each breakout room had a corresponding blank page in the eBook on Book Creator.

I invited them first to read the text out loud to each other and then share their initial reflections on one, several, or all the prompts verbally. Next, they were to respond artistically by creating word poems on their Book Creator page. However, instead of using paper and scissors, the *havruta* pair were encouraged to copy and paste phrases, sentences, and words from the Google doc onto their Book Creator page and to include imagery uploaded from online sources, personal files, or using the app's drawing and text tools.

By the end of the session, we had co-constructed a beautiful book of poetry about *Tu bi-Shevat*, each poem a creative interpretation and exploration of the text, using the text. The imagery and level of completion varied in each *havruta* pair, which is also often the case in live, in-person sessions. Ultimately, the "product" is not relevant, in that the point of these word poems is to be constantly rearranged and changed, and that makes space for spontaneous discovery of new formations and new context. (See Figure 4 for images of the front cover and a few pages from the book or access the full eBook through this link: <https://read.bookcreator.com/gSs2UukEb6gMflmuWo5z4om9Jbd2/DsFzqtXKR5-3hMb5FPV1dg>.)

CONCLUSION

Jewish text study through arts-based media offers opportunities to actively experience complex, relational issues through the safe use of imagination and interpretation.¹⁷ Creative interpretation supports the exploration of existential topics, and artistic renderings can convey emotional experiences that may create openings for transformation. By

integrating Jewish education and expressive arts, students can experience a "vital and flexible tool for developing and embodying a critical relationship to their own Jewish identities."¹⁸

In both the in-person sessions and in the online forum, engaging with the text in a physical, fun, and free-form manner allowed the participants to find their own personal connection to the content. The fluidity of arranging and re-arranging their strips of paper – or copying and pasting and finding imagery – made the creation of poems fun and accessible and demonstrated to everyone the infinite possible interpretations of a text using text from that text. A true turning and turning of *Torah*!

Endnotes:

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13. Birch, B. C. “The Arts, *Midrash*, and Biblical Teaching” in *Teaching Theology and Religion* (2005), 8(2), 114-122.

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14. Ibid, p. 119.

15. Holzer, E. Op. Cit.

16. Please be mindful when you print out text for HavrutArt that any name variations of God be written in a matter that respects the halachic tradition of keeping the sanctity of the Creator’s name.

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