

"קנאת סופרים תרבה חכמה"

## Re-examining Chavruta Learning in the Era of Social Distancing

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*The Bookworm*



*A Discussion of the Talmud*

Carl Schleicher (19<sup>th</sup> Century)

### RABBIS AND TALMUDISTS IN SCHLEICHER'S PAINTING (WIKIPEDIA)

A part of Carl Schleicher's plastic production is closely related to Judaic studies and Ashkenazi art. The exchange of ideas and interpretations among the Talmudist rabbis was a subject to which Schleicher dedicated a considerable number of oil paintings. Loaded with anecdotal material, such paintings constitute a valuable record of the uses and customs of Ashkenazi Jews in Europe...

The theme addressed by Schleicher concerns both the Jewish dialectical-exegetical experience and modern art. Schleicher's paintings are characterized by being not only descriptive, but also by sharply capturing the atmosphere of study that governed the life of the Talmudists: study certainly not without seriousness and dedication, and including interesting dialogues and surprising ideas, but also of problematic contradictions, endless discussions and humor.

The goal of this study guide is to offer some learning on how we learn; reflecting on the history and philosophy of interactive Torah study. Much like Carl Schleicher's art from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century featured above, the dynamics of Torah learning, passionate chavrutot and raucous *Batei Midrash*

are an essential piece of how our tradition has been passed down from generation to generation. Shavuot celebrates the *Kol Torah* – the booming voice of Torah study that has inspired our heritage. As you study this Shavuot please consider some of the following:

- What exactly does Chavruta mean? Where does the term originate?
- How does studying alone differ from learning in groups?
- How might the Torah we have today be different if Chavrutot were not a part of our history?

### Section 1: Rav Yochanan

*Two stories involving Rav Yochanan teach us a great deal about what a Chavruta is and why it is essential to leading a meaningful life of learning. Let's study what Rav Yochanan taught about the power of friendship and how it manifested in his amazing career.*

#### תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף כג עמוד א

אמר רבי יוחנן: כל ימיו של אותו צדיק היה מצטער על מקרא זה "שיר המעלות בשוב ה' את שיבת ציון היינו כחולמים." אמר: מי איכא דניים שבעין שנין בחלמא? יומא חד הוה אזל באורחא, חזייה לההוא גברא דהוה נטע חרובא, אמר ליה: האי, עד כמה שנין טעין? - אמר ליה: עד שבעין שנין. אמר ליה: פשיטא לך דחיית שבעין שנין? אמר ליה: האי [גברא] עלמא בחרובא אשכחתי, כי היכי דשתלי לי אבהתי - שתלי נמי לבראי. יתיב, קא כריך ריפתא, אתא ליה שינתא, נים. אהדרא ליה משוניתא, איכסי מעינא, ונים שבעין שנין. כי קם חזייה לההוא גברא דהוה קא מלקט מינייהו. אמר ליה: את הוא דשתלתיה? - אמר ליה: בר בריה אנא. אמר ליה: שמע מינה דניימי שבעין שנין. חזא לחמריה דאתיילידא ליה רמכי רמכי. אזל לביתיה, אמר להו: בריה דחוני המעגל מי קיים? - אמרו ליה: בריה ליתא, בר בריה איתא. אמר להו: אנא חוני המעגל. לא הימנוהו. אזל לבית המדרש, שמעינהו לרבנן דקאמרי: נהירן שמעתין כבשני חוני המעגל, דכי הוי עייל לבית מדרשא, כל קושיא דהוה לרובן הוה מפרק להו. אמר להו: אנא ניהו, ולא הימנוהו, ולא עבדי ליה יקרא כדמבעי ליה, חלש דעתיה, בעי רחמי ומית. אמר רבא, היינו דאמרי אינשי: או חברותא או מיתותא.

*Rabbi Yochanan said: "This righteous man [Honi] was troubled throughout the whole of his life concerning the meaning of the verse, A Song of Ascents: When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like dreamers. [Honi asked] Is it possible for seventy years to be like a dream? How could anyone sleep for seventy years?"*

*One day Honi was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked, "How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit?" The man replied: "Seventy years." Honi then further asked him: "Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?" The man replied: "I found carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted those for me so I too plant these for my children." Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he slept for seventy years.*

*When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and Honi asked him, "Are you the man who planted the tree?" The man replied: "I am his grandson."*

*Thereupon Honi exclaimed: "It is clear that I have slept for seventy years." He then caught sight of his donkey which had given birth to several generations of mules, and he returned home. There he inquired, "Is the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer still alive?" The people answered him, "His son is no more, but his grandson is still living."*

*Thereupon he said to them: "I am Honi the Circle-Drawer," but no one would believe him. Next he returned to the beit ha-midrash and there he overheard the scholars say, "The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Drawer," for whenever he came to the Beit Hamidrash he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had. Whereupon he called out, "I am he!" But the scholars would not believe him nor did they give him the honor due to him. This hurt him greatly and he prayed for mercy, and he died. Raba said: "Hence the saying, **'Either companionship or death.'**"*

#### תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף פד עמוד א

יומא חד הוה קא סחי רבי יוחנן בירדנא, חזייה ריש לקיש ושוור לירדנא אבתריה, אמר ליה: חילך לאורייתא! - אמר ליה: שופרך לנשי! - אמר ליה: אי הדרת בך - יהיבנא לך אחותי, דשפירא מינאי. קביל עליה. בעי למיהדר לאתויי מאניה - ולא מצי הדר. אקרייה ואתנייה, ושווייה גברא רבא. יומא חד הוּו מפלגי בי מדרשא: הסיף והסכין והפגיון והרומח ומגל יד ומגל קציר מאימתי מקבלין טומאה - משעת גמר מלאכתן, ומאימתי גמר מלאכתן? רבי יוחנן אומר: משיצרפם בכבשן, ריש לקיש אמר: משיצחצחון במים. - אמר ליה: לסטאה בלסטיותיה ידע! - אמר ליה: ומאי אהנת לי? התם רבי קרו לי, הכא רבי קרו לי. אמר ליה: אהנאי לך דאקרבינך תחת כנפי השכינה. חלש דעתיה דרבי יוחנן, חלש ריש לקיש. אתאי אחתיה קא בכיא, אמרה ליה: עשה בשביל בני! אמר לה: העזבה יתמיד אני אחיה. - עשה בשביל אלמנותי! - אמר לה: וואלמנותיך עלי תבטחו. נח נפשיה דרבי שמעון בן לקיש, והוה קא מצטער רבי יוחנן בתריה טובא. אמרו רבנן: מאן ליזיל ליתביה לדעתיה - ניזיל רבי אלעזר בן פדת, דמהדין שמעתתיה. אזל יתיב קמיה, כל מילתא דהוה אמר רבי יוחנן אמר ליה: תניא דמסייעא לך. אמר: את כבר לקישא? בר לקישא, כי הוה אמינא מילתא - הוה מקשי לי עשרין וארבע קושייתא, ומפרקינא ליה עשרין וארבעה פרוקי, וממילא רווחא שמעתא. ואת אמרת תניא דמסייע לך, אטו לא ידענא דשפיר קאמינא? הוה קא אזיל וקרע מאניה, וקא בכי ואמר: היכא את בר לקישא, היכא את בר לקישא, והוה קא צוח עד דשף דעתיה [מיניה]. בעו רבנן רחמי עליה ונח נפשיה.



*One day R. Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan, when Resh Lakish saw him and leapt into the Jordan after him. Said R. Yochanan to him, 'Your strength should be for the Torah.' 'Your beauty,' he replied, 'should be for women.' 'If you will repent,' said he, 'I will give you my sister [in marriage], who is more beautiful than I.' He undertook [to repent]; then*

*he wished to return and collect his weapons, but could not. Subsequently, [R. Yochanan] taught him Chumash and Mishnah, and made him into a great man.*

*Now, one day there was a dispute in the Beit Midrash with respect to the following; a sword, knife, dagger, spear, hand-saw and a scythe — at what stage [of their manufacture] can they become unclean? When their manufacture is finished. And when is their manufacture finished? — R. Yochanan ruled: When they are tempered in a furnace. Resh Lakish maintained: When they have been furbished in water. Said he to him: 'A robber understands his trade. Said he to him, 'And wherewith have you benefited me: there [as a robber] I was called Master, and here I am called Master. 'By bringing you under the wings of the Shechinah,' he retorted. R. Yochanan therefore felt himself deeply hurt, [as a result of which] Resh Lakish fell ill. His sister came and wept before him: 'Forgive him for the sake of my son,' she pleaded. He replied: 'Leave thy fatherless children. I will preserve them alive. 'For the sake of my widowhood then!' 'And let thy widows trust in me, he assured her.*

*Resh Lakish died, and R. Johanan was plunged into deep grief. Said the Rabbis, 'Who shall go to ease his mind? Let R. Eleazar b. Peda go, whose disquisitions are very subtle.' So he went and sat before him; and on every dictum uttered by R. Yochanan he observed: 'There is a Baraitha which Supports you.' 'Are you like Reis Lakisha? he complained: 'when I stated a law, Reish Lakisha used to raise twenty-four objections, to which I gave twenty-four answers, which consequently led to a fuller comprehension of the law; while you say, "A Baraitha has been taught which supports you:" do I not know myself that my rulings are right?' Thus he went on rending his garments and weeping, 'Where are you, O son of Lakisha, where are you, O son of Lakisha;' and he cried thus until his mind was turned. Thereupon the Rabbis prayed for him, and he died.*

### **Reflections:**

Rav Yochanan offers us a window in the psychology of friendship and collegiality. In telling the story of Choni HaMaagal in tragic fashion Rav Yochanan highlights the power of social bonds and the importance of connection. In the Gemara's recounting of his personal story, we see it was more than friendship that Rav Yochanan sought. Reish Lakish, was his friend, his brother-in-law but also his greatest challengers. For him, Chavruta was an amalgamation of all these relationships. In its purest form, Chavruta made Rav Yochanan into the sage he became.

## Section 2: Healthy Competition

*Chazal encourage us to compete hard for that which is most precious. But they also expect that we know where to draw the line...*

### תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא בתרא דף כא עמוד ב

אמר רב יוסף: ומודי רב הונא במקרי דרדקי דלא מצי מעכב, דאמר מר: עזרא תיקן להן לישראל שיהו מושיבין סופר בצד סופר. וניחוש דילמא אתי לאיתרשולי. א"ל קנאת סופרים תרבה חכמה. אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: ומודה רב הונא בריה דרב יהושע ברוכלין המחזירין בעיירות דלא מצי מעכב, דאמר מר: עזרא תקן להן לישראל שיהו רוכלין מחזירין בעיירות, כדי שיהו תכשיטין מצויין לבנות ישראל. והני מילי לאהדורי, אבל לאקבועי לא.

**Rav Yosef said: And Rav Huna, who said that a resident of an alleyway can prevent another from setting up an additional mill, concedes with regard to those who teach children that one cannot prevent, as the Master said: Ezra instituted for the Jewish people that they establish one teacher alongside another teacher, to raise the standard of teaching. And let us be concerned lest they thereby come to be negligent. Rav Yosef said to them: Jealousy among teachers increases wisdom.**

### תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף כד עמוד א

אמר רבי אושעיא: מאי דכתיב "ואקח לי שני מקלות לאחד קראתי נועם ולאחד קראתי חובלים", נועם - אלו תלמידי חכמים שבארץ ישראל, שמנעימין זה לזה בהלכה. חובלים - אלו תלמידי חכמים שבבבל, שמחבלים זה לזה בהלכה. "ויאמר אלה שני בני היצהר העמדים וגו' גושנים זיתים עליה." יצהר אמר רבי יצחק: אלו תלמידי חכמים שבארץ ישראל, שנוחזין זה לזה בהלכה כשמן זית, ושנים זיתים עליה - אלו תלמידי חכמים שבבבל שמרוורין זה לזה בהלכה כזית.



"Quit worrying about corroborating your sources -- it's not as if anyone's going to take all this literally."

*Rabbi Oshaya says: What is written: "And I took for myself two staves; the one I called Graciousness, and the other I called Binders" (Zechariah 11:7)? "Graciousness"; these are the Torah scholars in Eretz Yisrael, who are gracious to one another in halakha. "Binders [hovelim]"; these are the Torah scholars in Bavel, who injure [shemehabbelim] each other in halakha, i.e., they speak harshly to each other when they disagree.*



מהרש"א הידושי אגדות מסכת בבא בתרא דף כא עמוד א

דקנאת סופרים תרבה כו'. לא אמר קנאת חכמים תרבה חכמה כי המגיע כבר למעלת החכם לא יתקנא בחבירו והחכמה נוספת בו ממילא כמ"ש ישמע חכם ויוסיף לקח אבל הסופרים דנקט הם שעדיין לא הגיעו למעלת החכמים כמו המקרי דרדקי קנאתם בחבריהם תרבה להם החכמה להגיען למעלת חכם וק"ל:

*The Talmud does not say that the jealousy of "sages" enhances wisdom because one who reaches the level of a Chacham will not be jealous of his fellow. Moreover, his wisdom will continue to flourish as it states: "The wise one will listen and add possessions." Scribes [Sofarim] that are referred to here have not yet reached the level of wisdom. They are simple teachers of children that are jealous of one another. In such a case their jealousy of one another propels them to reach the level of the sage.*

### Conclusions:

The way in which Torah has been studied throughout the ages impacted the individuals who studied it as well as the way Torah was accepted and disseminated. There is little doubt that Chazal's decision to highlight Machloket rather than deny it emerges from a celebration of dispute and discussion in the first place. Our love of Machloket is not only an instinct but a marker of how rigorous Torah debate has produced the ideas we benefit from to this day. Orit Kent conducted research for Brandeis University about the learning benefits of studying with a Chavruta. To close, I share the final the paragraph of her thesis:

*It is through a deliberate learning relationship such as a havruta that participants can create the space to notice and respond to another. Carini seems to suggest that it is in such responsive space that we begin to see not only others better but also ourselves and our own ideas, and that through this process of seeing and relating, we create meaning. Perhaps it is the power of this responsive space to which the Talmud alludes when it tell us that when two people listen to each other when studying halakhah, the Shekhinah--God's essence on earth--listens to them.*