

On Hevruta Studies in an Inter-Cultural Setting

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In one Talmudic story that already became a “classic” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Bava Metzia* 84a), we are told of one of the most complex studying relations in Rabbinic literature: Rabbi Yochanan, one of the prominent Rabbis of this literature and a very beautiful man, was swimming in the Jordan River when Resh Laqish – a bandit and a head of a group of thugs – noticed him. Seeing his beauty (some Talmudic manuscripts maintain that Resh Laqish thought Rabbi Yochanan to be a woman. Indeed, the Talmud in the same page describes Rabbi Yochanan as lacking a “manly” beard), he jumped into the water after him. Encountered by such manly virility, Rabbi Yochanan told Resh Laqish: “Such strength should be routed towards the study of Torah!” Resh Laqish replied: “Such beauty should be routed towards women”. Rabbi Yochanan then promised Resh Laqish that if he would repent his deeds, Rabbi Yochanan would give him his sister – who is even more beautiful than Rabbi Yochanan - for a wife. Resh Laqish agrees, and eventually becomes one of most central Sages of his time. He and Rabbi Yochanan continued to study together, and the two are often quoted within Rabbinic literature as holding opposed views regarding many interpretive, legal, moral and religious issues.

However, the story does not end at this point. It once occurred that a question aroused regarding the status of a knife in relation to the ritualistic laws of impurity. Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Laqish held different opinions, as they usually did, and Rabbi Yochanan nastily commented that Resh Laqish must know what he’s talking about when he’s discussing knives for “a bandit is familiar with his own trade”. Resh Laqish, offended by this remark about his dark past, gave his own hurt response – to which Rabbi Yochanan harshly retaliated, and the two refused to speak with each other.

Both were immensely distressed by this quarrel, and Resh Laqish even became physically sick. However, when his wife came to ask Rabbi Yochanan – her brother – to reconcile with her husband, the former refused. Resh Laqish died from this illness, and Rabbi Yochanan grieved for him miserably. The other Rabbis, wanting to appease Rabbi Yochanan, introduced

him to a new partner for studies – a serious and erudite scholar. However, Rabbi Yochanan was not content: When the two were learning together, and Rabbi Yochanan pronounced his own view – his partner would give him more proof to support such a view. Rabbi Yochanan replied: “You are not like Resh Laqish. Resh Laqish, when I said something, would have twenty-four problems with what I’ve said, and I would have to find twenty-four solutions for his questions (*the Aramaic literally says: I would find twenty-four ways to dismantle his questions*) – and by this process of questioning and answering, the subject became clear (*the Aramaic literally says: the subject would become more spacious*). And you tell me you have proof for what I’ve said? Don’t I know already that I spoke well?” And Rabbi Yochanan would go, and tear his clothes and cry: “Where are you, Resh Laqish? Where are you, Resh Laqish?” – and he would scream this until he turned mad. The other Rabbis prayed for God to have mercy on him, and Rabbi Yochanan died.

For me, this rich and tragic story seems to serve as the fundamental myth (in a sense of a narrative that encapsulates the underlying ideologies, tensions and complexities of a certain cultural practice) of Hevruta studies – the Jewish traditional method of learning a text in pairs, interpreting it together through dialogue and debating its possible meanings (“*Hevruta*” in Aramaic literally means “friendship” or “togetherness”). Rabbi Yochanan’s words to his new, and unsatisfying partner, are an excellent formulation of the cultural ideology behind the establishment of Hevruta: Studying is not a process to be done individually, but through the dialogue with a partner that can actually challenge your thoughts, deconstruct them, and demand further thought from your own part. Implicit in Rabbi Yochanan’s words – and manifested in the practice of Hevruta studies – is the notion that such a dialogue should take place over a text, with the text serving as a focus of interpretation and a trigger for discussion. Creativity, as the establishment of the Hevruta implies, is not a matter of autonomous originality (as the myth of “the Individual” would like perhaps to maintain) but of an interactive, dynamic process - taking place between person and text, and (even more so) between person and person, over a text. This indeed seems to be the chief characteristic of Midrashic and Talmudic literature in general, which is usually written as a polyphonic dialogue of different voices, arguing with each other on the true interpretation of the text.

But let us return to Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Laqish. It is exactly the vast difference between the two protagonists of the story, in fact, that renders them a fertile Hevruta – at least for a while. From the outset, Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Laqish are modeled as an “opposites

attract” pair. The contrast is quite clear: one is a beautiful, seemingly delicate, intellectual scholar – while the other is a physically strong outlaw, passionate and violent (although one may wonder whether his violence is even a match to Rabbi Yochanan’s verbal, more subtle one). It seems that it is precisely these passion and violence that contribute to the fertility of their Hevruta: the questioning and answering process that is at the core of their studies is indeed a passionate and violent one (the violence of Resh Laqish’s studying process is also described in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 24a: “When one saw Resh Laqish in the study hall, he would appear to him as if he was uprooting mountains and grinding them against each other”). It is striking to note that the Talmud uses “dismantle” as the verb to describe the stage of *answering*, and not – as one would have presumed – the stage of questioning. It seems that although answers are supposed to have a “harmonic”, reconciling effect – they are presented here as a “violent” act of deconstruction, not very different than the questions. The Hevruta dynamics here are those of mutual intimate “dismantling” of ideas and perceptions – not one of finding one harmonic, conclusive truth. In other words, while the difference between the two would eventually prove as their undoing – it is also the basis of a dynamic, vital dialogue.

Indeed, this short story seems to suggest that it is exactly *difference* that is necessary for a lively, fruitful Hevruta. In fact, the whole notion of studying with a Hevruta from the first place will have any deep meaning at all only if the studying experience would be conducted through a dialogue with someone who is other than yourself – or, in other words, if your partner’s “otherness” will somehow touch you and open up new dimensions of thought and reading. The story also traces the immense fragility of such intimacy with an other. Difference can easily turn into a downfall, into a feud – but then the powerful vitality it does bring, a vitality that can encompass both passion and violence within it, would be lost. The question of how gentle should one’s touch with the other be – while still being able to maintain deep, intimate dialogue, dismantling the other’s and your own presuppositions (not always a gentle act) – is hardly an easy one.

“Violence and passion” may indeed be somewhat of too Romantic a term when one comes to describe reality. However, something truly interesting is taking place in Paideia. The traditional Hevruta studies - being at the core of the curriculum (many of the courses are constructed as partly frontal lectures, and partly Hevruta studies; the fellows practice in leading their own Hevruta sessions as well, with the other fellows learning in Hevruta the

texts they prepared for them; the fellows are also initiating their own Hevruta discussion on various texts – “Jewish” and “non-Jewish”; and it is always an extremely pleasurable moment to see one person thanking his or her Hevruta after a fruitful session) – are relocated in a setting that has “difference” as a major (if not *the* major) characteristic. The Paideia fellows are hardly a homogenous group, to say the least. Coming from thirteen different countries from all over Europe (and beyond), these students – men and women; Jews and non-Jews; atheists and people of faith (of many different faiths); ranging in age from 18 to 65 – form a diverse, fascinating and dynamic group. In their Hevruta studies, differences - of culture, of gender, of faith, of age, of personality – are an inherent part of the dialogue. Through these studies, each and every one of them actively participates in the hermeneutic process – while all of them together form an interpretive polyphonic community, rather than function as “recipients” of a monolithic culture. They bring themselves into the study, and by bringing themselves and engaging in a dialogue with others and with the texts – none of the participants stay exactly the same.

Not even the texts themselves. For these dialogues open up new interpretations and new readings that can perhaps manifest themselves *only* through this particular dialogue, only through the unique interaction of these specific people with this specific text. Difference is crucial for vital Hevruta studies, it seems, and Paideia provides a setting where Hevruta studies open up for new differences that were not (and are not) part of traditional studies. By relocating this traditional dialogic method into a new intercultural setting, new possibilities of reading are discovered in the texts. The texts reveal themselves as containing more. If we were to paraphrase Rabbi Yochanan – the text grows more spacious.

We may find echoes of such a concept in the words of a prolific, 19th-century, Hassidic writer – Reb Zaddok HaCohen of Lublin (1823-1920). In his sermons on the Torah and on holidays, the *Pri Tzaddik*, we find a rather radical historiography sketched by Reb Zaddok regarding the development of the Oral Torah – the ongoing, dynamic process of interpretation that is to complement the Written Torah (basically, the Pentateuch – or the Bible in general). I would like to discuss here two passages written by him in relation to the Festival of *Shavuot* – the festival linked to, according to tradition, the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

In one such paragraph, Reb Zaddok discusses a Zoharic comment regarding the Mount Sinai event, claiming that “Israel wore seventy crowns during that night”. For Reb Zaddok, these seventy crowns correspond to the notion that the Torah has seventy sides (*or, more literally:*

faces) – i.e. that the Torah can be interpreted in seventy different ways; that the text does not contain one true meaning, but actually seventy possible and legitimate readings. According to him, this is also the reason that the *Sanhedrin* – the Great Academy, or the judicial and religious Supreme Court in Palestine of the early Roman period – held seventy sages: so there could indeed be seventy different opinions voiced during the interpretive discussion about the law of the Torah. The *Sanhedrin* has to have the inherent possibility to expose – again, through dialogue and discussion - all of the text’s differing and various implicit interpretations.

However, Reb Zaddok continues in an even more surprising path. He then mentions that these seventy crowns, representing the seventy sides of Torah, are actually also parallel to the seventy nations of the world, and their seventy tongues. In fact, says Reb Zaddok, it is in these seventy nations and seventy tongues that “one can find the sparks of the Oral Torah, that one needs to get from them during the Diaspora”.

This enigmatic statement is further clarified in yet another passage of Reb Zaddok, also relating to the festival of *Shavuot*. Here, Reb Zaddok interprets the Talmudic saying that God sent Israel into exile only in order that proselytes will join them (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Pesakhim* 87b) not as a literal conversion of flesh-and-blood people – but as the “uplifting” of holy sparks from these nations and incorporating them into the Oral Torah. Reb Zaddok reads the event of Diaspora through the Kabbalistic model that maintains that holy sparks fell down during the mythic “breaking of the vessels” and are now scattered around the material world. The model, much developed in the Lurianic school of Kabbalah, thus maintains that there is a need to uplift these sparks back to their holy source. According to Reb Zaddok’s reading, then, the only reason that the Jews were sent to exile, is to be dispersed among the nations and receive from them holy sparks that fell amongst them. These sparks, claims Reb Zaddok, are crucial for the development of the Oral Torah. Later on, in a passage regarding the festival of *Rosh HaShannah*, Reb Zaddok discusses two of the major *Tannaim* (sages of the Mishnaic period), which he considers as the embodiment of the concept of the Oral Torah – Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Meir – and who are both indeed considered by tradition to be descendants of converts (Rabbi Akiva of the Biblical enemy, Sisera, and Rabbi Meir of no less than Nero Caesar), thus exemplifying the pivotal role that “other nations” play in the development of the Oral Torah.

How are we to read this model, suggested by Reb Zaddok? First, it is crucial to point out that Diaspora here seems to be constructed in different terms than we usually may find in Jewish culture. While the common traditional narrative regarding the Exile maintains that it is a punishment for the sins of Israel, and that the Jews should yearn for its quick end – for Reb Zaddok, the exile is a process of cultural and spiritual growth. The Oral Torah – the most central and prestigious of cultural activities in Jewish societies – couldn't have developed anywhere else. Since the ongoing development of the Oral Torah is usually perceived as an endless process, one may wonder whether – for Reb Zaddok - the yearnings for the end of exile are indeed that simple.

Furthermore, it seems as if Reb Zaddok is actually articulating his own historiography around the fact that indeed the major part of Oral Torah was developed in Diaspora. The Babylonian Talmud – being the central pillar of Rabbinic Judaism and of the Oral Torah – may well serve us as an emblem to this notion. If we are to read the Babylonian Talmud's prominence over the Palestinian one (a prominence that stemmed, to be sure, from its own concrete historical context) with Reb Zaddok, then we may observe that this is precisely the same Babylonia – or Babel – where the nations indeed dispersed into their seventy tongues (Genesis 11:1-9). Thus, the polyphony of the Tower of Babel's seventy tongues may be perceived as somehow linked to the emergence of the Oral Torah. In another passage, Reb Zaddok indeed refers to Babylonia as “the root of Oral Torah”. The Talmud itself may be aware of such a possible connection, when (albeit in a self-critical moment) it interprets the name “Babel” as meaning that this area is “mixed up” (in Hebrew: *belulah*) with Scripture, Mishnah and Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 24a). Thus, instead of relying on the etymology that the Bible itself gives to the name “Babel” (“... because there the Lord confounded [in Hebrew: *balal*] the speech of the whole earth ...”) – the Talmud sees Babylonia as the space where layers of texts intermingle with each other, even to point of confusion. In fact, if we are to follow Reb Zaddok's model, we might read this Talmudic passage as actually implying that these two moments – the *balal* of the Tower of Babel and the *belulah* of the Babylonian Torah studies (both deriving from the exact same root in Hebrew) – are interlinked. The polyphony of the Tower of Babel and the dialogic Babylonian Talmud – by itself a polyphony of voices, ideas and texts – are somehow the manifestation of the same concept. A concept that Reb Zaddok would regard as the seventy faces of Torah, deriving from the seventy tongues of humanity.

In order to deepen our discussion of this, I would like to focus on yet another Zoharic description of the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, mentioned by Reb Zaddok in his passages about *Shavuot*: According to the Zohar, quotes Reb Zaddok, the Israelites took gifts and presents from all other nations at Mount Sinai while receiving the Torah. For Reb Zaddok, these gifts and presents are the powers of Oral Torah found in all nations. In other words, it seems that while the Written Torah was given directly to Israel – the Oral one was actually given to all other nations (or, if to use the Kabbalistic – and quite different – formulation: its sparks were fallen among them). The Oral Torah is thus given to Israel *as a gift* from all other nations. Here, Reb Zaddok actually reverses a concept that may be found in the Midrash: The *Midrash Tankhuma* (on Parashat *VaYera*) tells that God denied Moses' request to write down the Oral Torah as well exactly because He feared that it would be translated into other tongues and abused. Thus, only the Written Torah – being a written object that may be transferred to other cultures – has the possibility to be used by other nations, but the Oral Torah (referred to by the Midrash as “God’s mystery”) should not be objectified through the act of writing, and remain Israel’s private secret. Another passage in the Midrash (the Old *Tankhuma* on Parashat *Ki-Tissa*) maintains that by keeping the Oral Torah in an unwritten form, God guarantee that it would not be taken away from Israel – thus insuring the cultural distinction. Surely, oral heritages are more resistant to becoming a transferable commodity than written objects.

Reb Zaddok claims the exact opposite: It is *only* the Written Torah that was given to Israel, while the Oral Torah, in fact, can be found only among other nations. There to be “uplifted” by the Jews as they engage in Diaspora.

But how does this process – of “uplifting” the sparks from the seventy tongues and making them into the seventy faces of Oral Torah – take place? Taking into consideration that Reb Zaddok is basing his structure upon a Kabbalistic model – one may conclude that this process is to happen “by itself”, in a mystical manner that doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with “mundane” real life. But if this is the case, why can it happen only in exile? Apparently, we should also consider a different, more down-to-earth interpretation: It is exactly by the very dialogue with other cultures - a dialogue, whether conscious or unconscious, that is made possible through Diaspora - that the ongoing development and change of Jewish culture is occurring. In other words, the process of interpreting the Written Torah in new and vigorous ways is made possible through the application of “other” cultural constructs into one’s own.

The example for such a process would be, naturally, medieval Spain. There, through the intercultural encounters of Jews with Muslim and Classic cultures – Jewish culture was vastly developed in various fields such as philosophy, linguistics, mysticism, Biblical commentary and poetry. However, intercultural dialogue was not the domain of “idyllic” al-Andalus (or Renaissance Italy, if we are to mention another, less known, example) alone. Even within cultures where relationships between Jews and non-Jews were more strained, one may find many traces of such a dialogue – even if usually it was hardly a friendly one. It seems that for Reb Zaddok, this intercultural dialogue is crucial in order to have a dynamic interpretive process. If the Jews did not disperse into Diaspora – they would not have been able to apply new hermeneutic mindsets on their own texts. The stable, dormant text of the Written Torah – the property of the Jews as they are by themselves - would remain what the Midrash refers to as “wheat that was not grinded and flax that was not woven” (*Tana DeVei Eliyahu Zutta*, Chapter 2): useless ingredients, irrelevant for the living experience.

For Reb Zaddok, there isn't a nation in the world – historical animosities notwithstanding - that doesn't have something to contribute to the development of the Oral Torah. The fact that these two Sages mentioned above – Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Meir - are considered descendants of historical enemies of the Jews (Sisera and the Romans) seems only to strengthen this point. Reb Zaddok draws attention to the fact that even Amalek – the mythical archenemy of the Jews, from which none should remain alive (let alone convert) – is no exception to the rule. The Babylonian Talmud (Tractate *Gittin* 57b) tells us that the great descendants of Haman (himself traditionally considered a descendent of Amalek) studied Torah in Bnei-Brak.

So, Reb Zaddok may pave a way for us to reconsider the positive role of Diaspora – as well as of intercultural dialogue - on the cultural growth of Jewish textual culture. However, there might be an element in Reb Zaddok's writing that may leave the reader uncomfortable when such a path is put into practice: while radically rethinking fundamental concepts such as “Diaspora” and “Oral Torah” – as well as the role of other nations in the process of the development of Jewish culture – one might still locate in Reb Zaddok's structure some sort of ethnocentric “parasitism”: it is still “the Jews” who are to take something from “the Others” in order to develop their own culture. One may wonder how much dialogue is indeed taking place in what may seem as a one-way-transaction model.

It should be noted that when one compare Reb Zaddok's model to other, similar models – his ethnocentrism seems quite mild indeed. Consider, for example, the words of an earlier Hassidic writer – Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl (1730-1797) - which reads the holy sparks, dispersed among the nations as real, flesh-and-blood people that would indeed convert into Judaism. Then, when all these lost soul will be gathered, the Messiah would come and all the nations – having no holy sparks left in them to sustain them - would be abolished (*Meor Einayim* on Parashat *Toledot*). Compared to this, Reb Zaddok's new reading of the converts not as biological entities, but as intellectual and cultural ones (thus not positing the ethnic nation of Israel as the center that should benefit from the Others – as the *Meor Einayim* suggests – but the cultural entity of the Torah instead), as well as the fact that he does not portray any Messianic/Apocalyptic end to the Diasporic process, nor any nullification of other nations whatsoever – all these may well assist a reading of Reb Zaddok as moving away from this sort of ethnocentric parasitism. We may also wish to notice that Reb Zaddok gives another metaphor to accompany the more “parasitic”-sounding “uplifting of the sparks”: Reb Zaddok also speaks about “giving gifts” – a much more dialogic, and intimate, metaphor (although one should note that in other passages, Reb Zaddok himself elaborates the sparks image in rather harsh terms as well).

But the issue here is not about apologizing for Reb Zaddok – whose set of discourse should be read in its own terms – but to wonder whether we can move further on the road he paved for us, and even away from a world-picture where there is a clear center that benefits from the others surrounding it? I would like to think about this option with another moment from the story I have started with – that of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Laqish – which I only skimmed through earlier.

After Rabbi Yochanan insulted Resh Laqish, the latter's hurt reply was: “And how have you benefited me? I was considered a leader among the thieves, and I am considered a leader here – among a sages”. To this remark, that actually Resh Laqish benefited nothing from the move into the world of Torah studies – for he was regarded with the same reverence among the bandits – Rabbi Yochanan rather nastily replies: “I benefited you in that I brought you under the wings of the divine presence!” These were the last words to be spoken between the two. One may read this dialogue as if although Rabbi Yochanan is unnecessarily cruel and insensitive in his rejoinder, he is still essentially correct content-wise: the difference between the life of a bandit and that of a Rabbinic sage should not be measured by social ranks – but

by the proximity to the holy “center”, the Divine Presence, which is a benefit by and of itself, with no need of other “exterior” benefits. Resh Laqish’s claim, according to this reading, is the wrong one – and Rabbi Yochanan’s “only” sin is that of offending a friend (a grave enough issue by itself).

However, we may wish to note that it is Rabbi Yochanan – and not Resh Laqish – that is left by this narrative to “learn the lesson” through agony and loss. There might be, therefore, something essentially wrong in Rabbi Yochanan’s claim as well – or, perhaps, in the whole infrastructure of their dialogue.

The main issue discussed by the two in this dialogue is “benefit” – this is the core of both Resh Laqish’s complaint and that of Rabbi Yochanan’s answer. But it seems that the discourse of benefit serves here as a marker of *alienation*. It was present in their first dialogue, in the Jordan River, when they hardly knew each other (“Your beauty/strength should be routed like this or that”, “I will give you this or that”) – and erupts again only after the moment of insult. In the moments of intimate Hevruta, the concept of benefit was not even in the discourse. In fact, it seems that this is exactly what Resh Laqish is trying to tell Rabbi Yochanan: “If our intimacy is broken, then what have I got left? Only the calculating games of gain-and-loss – and, according to these games, I have benefited nothing”. “Without *you*,” I think Resh Laqish is saying, “none of this is worth it”. By answering the way he did, Rabbi Yochanan simply reinforces a discourse *that shouldn’t have been there to begin with*. This is exactly what he learns after Resh Laqish’s death: His clear world-picture of an illuminated center – the Divine Presence (and the world of Torah scholarship) – towards which the periphery should aspire to come closer, is shattered and replaced by the understanding of what he truly lost: the intimate interaction of two, very different, people. In this lost world-picture, there is no center and periphery – just an interactive moment of dialogue between two friends, dismantling each other’s boundaries. It is striking to note that the discourse of benefit also seems to be suddenly minimized: In his lament of his lost Hevruta partner, Rabbi Yochanan regards the benefit of their studies even to the Torah (the clarification as the subject learned) almost as the by-product of their discussions: the Aramaic word used that was translated above as “by this process of questioning and answering” is *mi’meila* – which has a nuance of something that happens “by the way”, as an adjunct to the process. What is truly missed, what is truly lost, is the dialogue itself. Without *him*, Rabbi Yochanan realized, none of this is worth it.

The story may point out, therefore, that it is the discourse of benefit itself – as well as the world-picture of center and periphery – that is the product of alienation. In the intimate moments of the meeting of two - when difference is crucial for a vital dialogue, yet boundaries are constantly rethought of – this alienated discourse may simply find itself irrelevant. In the interpretive community based upon Hevruta studies, dichotomies such as “Self/Other” and “Insider/Outsider” have the potential of being continuously deconstructed. Whatever may bother us as ethnocentric parasitism in Reb Zaddok’s model may disappear just through the act of two friends interpreting texts together in a particular moment. The tale of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Laqish hardly downplays this process’s fragility – and, to be sure, injuries and alienations may occur in even more subtle, complex ways than those inflicted upon each other by this tragic Talmudic duo – but still. For myself, here lies the great prospect of relocating Hevruta studies in a setting like Paideia.