

Jewish-Christian Encounter Through Text: an Interfaith Course for Seminarians, By Melissa Heller

Abstract

What happens when rabbinical students partner with Protestant seminarians and commit to a sustained and in-depth study of biblical text?

A lot.

They seek commonality. They tell stories. They bring their vulnerabilities. They are offered a new lens through which to view their sacred texts. They are challenged to articulate their beliefs and explain aspects of their tradition to their study partners, often helping them to clarify their relationship to their own tradition, to their sacred literature and to God. As a semester progresses and trust develops, they share their challenges. They question their partners. They come to appreciate their differences, and to respect them.

As the interactions deepen between the pairs, and among the group, so too does understanding. What results is a broadening of their definitions of “Jew” and “Christian” to include nuance, narrative and diversity.

Properly training clergy for service in today’s world means giving seminarians opportunities and tools for interfaith engagement. This article describes a course I have developed and continue to co-teach as part of my work in the Department of Multifaith Studies and Initiatives at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC). Titled “*Hevruta: Jewish-Christian Encounter Through Text*,” the course brings together RRC students and Christian seminarians to study in interfaith pairs. Using the *hevruta* model, a beloved and traditional Jewish method of study, the students engage deeply with one another, and with the Hebrew Bible, which serves as a base for their explorations. The course has been offered between RRC and two different seminaries, one mainline and one evangelical.

After providing some background on RRC’s interfaith work, this article will describe the goals and structure of the course, and some of the learnings that resulted for both students and instructors.

This experience has wider implications than for just Protestant and Jewish seminary instructors. It offers a successful methodology that leads to meaningful interfaith learning predicated on relationship-building, that can be tailored for use by other educators and religious leaders.

Introduction

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) has a long history of commitment to inter-religious learning. Stemming from a foundational openness to the beauty and wisdom that other religions may offer, and guided by the practical understanding that to be a rabbi today is to be a leader in a *multifaith* world, the study of others’ religious traditions is an integral part of the RRC curriculum.

Founded in 1968, RRC was the first rabbinical school to require its students to take classes on other religions in preparation for ordination. In the early years of the College, students simultaneously received rabbinical training at RRC and studied at

Temple University's Department of Religion, which offered them the opportunity for deep learning about world religions. Beginning in 1982, when the College relocated to a suburb of Philadelphia and away from the Temple Campus, it began to develop its own Department of Religious Studies. In the last three decades the course offerings within the department have evolved significantly, and include among others, classes in Christianity, Jewish-Christian Dialogue, Islam for Rabbis, Eastern Religions, and Religion and Science.

In 2007, the Department of Religious Studies, under the long-time direction of Rabbi Nancy Fuchs Kreimer PhD, became the Department of Multifaith Studies and Initiatives. Reflected in the name change was a pioneering commitment: to create new models and opportunities for meaningful engagement for students with their peers in other religions. The receipt of a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation that same year and its ongoing funding have supported these efforts in numerous ways. With the stated goal of "infusing interfaith understanding into the culture of RRC," these grants have allowed RRC to greatly expand its program- to include coursework, internships, scholar in residence series, salon programs, retreats for emerging religious leaders and several other co-curricular projects.

In its dedication to this work, RRC is a part of a larger movement to bring interfaith awareness to seminary education. Among rabbinical schools in the United States that also make inter-religious education a part of their mandate, at least two others are also incorporating the *hevruta* model into their programs.

A partnership between Hebrew College (HC) and Andover Newton Seminary (ATS,) which share a campus in Newton, Massachusetts, also places *hevruta* study at the center of their shared initiatives. Like RRC and its partners in Philadelphia, HC and ATS offer semester-long courses co-taught by faculty from each school. Other HC/ATS projects include "interfaith student leader fellowships, peer study groups, and informal learning and ritual observance opportunities."¹

The "Muslim-Jewish Text Study Program", an initiative of Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Los Angeles, in collaboration with the Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation, USC's Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences and NewGround: A Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change, uses *hevruta* study to bring together "peers and professionals" to engage in four months of paired study and discussion, in order to "enable learning about each faith." Similar to the courses mentioned above, it is also co-led by religious instructors from each tradition. In contrast, the HUC program is not a seminary course, but rather includes Jews and Muslims "of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, educational levels and institutional/organizational affiliations."²

The department of Multifaith Studies and Initiatives at RRC also offers Jewish-Muslim courses and programs, and uses *hevruta* study as an integral component in many of them.

What is *Hevruta*?

Hevruta is a traditional Jewish approach to study, in which partners engage in a sustained relationship over a text. The process itself dates back to the rabbinic period; its roots preserved in the Talmud- a compilation of Jewish oral teachings about law and practice collected in written form in the 6th century CE which takes the form of an ongoing conversation among religious scholars.

The word *hevruta* comes from the Aramaic word for "tie together" which gives us in Hebrew the word *haver/havera* (friend) and *havurah* (friendship circle.) *Hevruta* partners work out loud, studying the text in great detail, and wrestling together over its interpretations and implications.

A rabbinic tale reveals the nature of *hevruta*:

“The story is told that when the great Rabbi Yochanan was mourning the loss of his intellectual rival and beloved study partner, Resh Laqish, he cried out to another rabbi: “You are not like Resh Laqish! Resh Laqish, when I said something, he would have twenty-four problems with what I’d said, and I would have to find twenty-four solutions for his questions – and by this process of questioning and answering, the subject became clear.”³

As the story reflects, a meaningful *hevruta* experience is by no means solely an academic exercise. It is a personal, emotional, and relational experience-with three parties involved, the two learners and the text.

Hevruta study is an integral part of the RRC experience. It is common for rabbinical students to have several *hevruta* partners at a time in support of learning for their courses but also for learning *lishma*-for its own sake. Often *hevruta* pairs will choose to study in the *beit midrash*, literally, a “house of learning” that becomes abuzz with the voices and energy of the gathered learners.

The particular process for study will differ among pairs. As a general approach, students take turns reading the selected text aloud, stopping after each verse to ask questions. As they study, they may ask:

- What is the plain meaning of the text?
- What does the text intend to convey?
- What are its values?
- What are its assumptions?
- What is missing in the text?
- What is troubling about the text?
- What is compelling?

Hevruta study is growing in popularity beyond the walls of seminaries and yeshivas. Many congregations and Jewish organizations are incorporating this approach into their programming. Academic studies analyzing its methodology and effectiveness are growing in number.⁴

RRC’s Interfaith Partners

Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia (LTSP)

RRC and LTSP have enjoyed a long history of collaboration in both formal and informal ways. Over the last decade, students from the two seminaries have taken classes together, participated in community interfaith programs, and for a time, students from each school were coming together on their own to study the Book of Psalms. Building on an already strong relationship, RRC and LTSP jointly offered *Hevruta: Jewish-Christian Encounter Through Text* for the first time in the Spring of 2009. Like RRC, LTSP has a religious studies course requirement that its students must fulfill in order to graduate/become ordained. Participation in this course is one way LTSP students can satisfy that obligation.

Rabbi Fuchs-Kreimer and I approached LTSP with the basic conception of the course in hand and the funding to pay my co-instructor, The Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney, Associate Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament. Dr. Gafney, is an ordained Episcopal

priest, and a member of the historic African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia. She is also a member of the Dorshei Derekh Reconstructionist Minyan of the Germantown Jewish Centre, in Philadelphia. Her interest in “how Jews and Christians interpret the texts they hold in common,”⁵ and her own powerful experiences in interfaith engagement guide her strong commitment to this work.

Palmer Theological Seminary (PTS)

The relationship between RRC and PTS did not exist before our proposing this course to them. This newer partnership speaks to our conviction that our partners must continue to expand beyond those who have historically been seated at the interfaith dialogue table. As far as we knew, no Jewish seminary had before attempted this kind of semester-long engagement with an evangelical school.

At a recent conference I attended on the state of inter-religious education in the American seminary context, Steven Graham of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) reported on the constituency of his institution. He noted that the makeup of ATS Christian seminaries is roughly 40% Mainline Protestant, 40% Evangelical Protestant, and 20% Roman Catholic/Orthodox. But he then went on to point out that 60% of the *total number of students* are enrolled at the Evangelical Protestant schools.⁶ Our collaboration with PTS acknowledges that evangelical seminarians are an important and growing demographic.

My Christian counterpart at *PTS* was Emmanuel Itapson, PhD, Associate Professor of Old Testament. Professor Itapson received his PhD from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the training institution for the Reform Jewish Movement. Thus, he was himself a great ambassador to Jewish text and tradition and modes of study, and another fitting partner with whom to chart a new course.

RRC and PTS jointly offered *Hevruta: Jewish Christian Encounter Through Text* for the first time in the Spring of 2010, and plan to partner to offer it again next Spring.

Instructor Process and Course Structure

Aside from the role I assumed as administrative coordinator, working with Drs. Gafney and Itapson was, in both cases, truly a collaborative experience. Both professors had extensive personal experience with the process of *hevruta* study and each agreed with enthusiasm to participate. Our shared sensibilities on text study, and the priority that inter-religious engagement takes in our lives and our work, made these partnerships a pleasure. In neither working relationship was there conflict at any point, but rather only openness and energy as we guided the class from week to week. In some ways, our greatest trial each year was administrative, as we sought dates that worked for both schools’ academic calendars on which class sessions could be held.

Dr. Gafney and I met for several planning sessions prior to the Spring of 2009, when the course was first offered with LTSP. We began by drafting the goals, which have remained in place for subsequent offerings of the course:

- To help students to develop **deeper understanding** their partners’ tradition, including an increased familiarity with textual resources within each religion
- To support students’ continued **spiritual formation**, by offering an opportunity to understand their traditions/beliefs contextually
- To support students in **relationship building**, both personal and professional in the local community of emerging religious leaders.

Dr. Gafney and I then went on to determine the course structure and written requirements:

Study partners were randomly assigned and met for a total of nine guided *hevruta* sessions over the course of the semester. Sessions began with an introduction to the texts by one of the instructors (we assigned ourselves to take the lead in facilitating the class sessions on alternating dates). Instructions and specific questions to guide the study sessions were provided. Students then spent the next hour or so studying in pairs. The class would then reconvene at the end for discussion that gave students an expanded context for their explorations, as they learned how the other pairs engaged the text. Class then ended with one of the instructors offering instructions for preparation for the next class session.

Students were responsible for submitting weekly one-page journal entries that were emailed to both instructors, which gave students a chance to process what came up in discussion. These timely submissions were invaluable to the instructors in helping us to facilitate the course, as they allowed us to respond to individual students and/or the group and to address issues and opportunities as they arose.

Students wrote a final paper, in which they responded to a set of questions that prompted them to consider the impact of this work. This lengthier assignment gave them an opportunity to look back on the experience and reflect further on the hopes and anxieties they brought into the class, what they learned about their partners' sacred texts (*and* about their own), challenges and surprises they encountered along the way, and to consider any future commitments they sought to make in the handling of sacred texts.

The goals and overall structure of the course remained primarily the same in the second year. The manner in which I worked with Dr. Itapson, and the way in which we shared leadership of the sessions, was also similar.

Course Content

Two of the most important ingredients to a successful *hevruta* relationship are trust and respect, both of which take time to develop between partners. Acknowledging this, the course is designed to support that developmental process.

Students began by sharing a dinner hosted by RRC. As students arrived for the first session they were encouraged to eat and to begin to get to know their new classmates in a less formal manner. Students were then officially introduced to their partners and then the larger class by way of icebreaker exercises that allowed each person to share briefly a bit about why he/she was sitting in the circle.

A significant amount of time was then devoted to an introduction to the character and process of *hevruta* study. As noted above, this method is familiar to RRC students. Students from LTSP and PTS were equally enthusiastic about this approach to text study, though for most of them it was a new experience. While they certainly had all worked with study partners during their time at seminary, the degree to which a text is analyzed in depth (literally word by word) and the high value placed on posing questions to one another, were novel approaches.

The texts chosen for study throughout each semester varied in length from a few verses, to an entire book, depending on our goals for the session. We sought to expose the students to a range of genres, making sure to include selections from Torah, Writings and Prophets. Changes from semester to semester were motivated by, among other factors, a desire to connect the chosen texts to the calendar and liturgical cycles.

Students began by sharing texts that were easier to pursue in common and gradually worked toward studying more challenging texts. Early in each semester students were asked to bring a favorite text from Hebrew Scripture, and a related or supporting text that offered commentary from their respective traditions.

Student journal entries reflected an appreciation of beginning from a place of comfort:

“I found it extremely helpful that we each were assigned to bring a piece of text that speaks to us personally. It was much easier for me to talk about a text that I have spent some time with and explored prior to this class, and I got the impression that [my partner] felt the same way. The natural awkwardness that permeated our first meeting dissipated greatly as we were able to connect over our mutual passion for study. In fact, being able to see our shared passion made me feel more open and curious.” RRC Student (first cohort)

For the final discussion for the “bring a favorite text” session, students were asked to consider how the conversation with their partner had informed their understanding of the text each had brought. In her journal, a student commented on the value she found in this charge:

“By insisting that we address the texts that each of us had brought (as opposed to the texts our partners brought) the instructors forced us to face whether we had really invited our partners to challenge us or teach us about our own texts.” RRC Student (second cohort)

Keeping in mind the shared identity among students as emerging clergy, texts were assigned each year that prompted discussion on some of the biblical models of leadership. Around the time of Passover, the first cohort looked at Moses and Miriam in the Exodus narrative. The following spring, a text from Amos was presented, and students had the opportunity to discuss how their emerging ministries and rabbinate might come to incorporate social justice work.

A session on biblical poetry and the shared allegorical interpretation of The Song of Songs highlighted points of convergence between the traditions while at the same time presenting lessons about the subjectivity of translations, genres within the canon and about the joint history of suppression of female power and sensuality.

Towards the middle of both semesters, texts were assigned to highlight places where our traditions diverge significantly. For example, a study of the Servant Songs in Isaiah offered students the opportunity to look at texts with a strong tradition of Christological interpretation. This was an opportunity not only to bring Jesus more pointedly into the conversation, but also to elicit a discussion of the process by which texts become canon or apocrypha for each religion.

The final session included dinner hosted by our respective Christian partners, a bookend to the hospitality offered at the beginning of the semester. Students also participated in a closing ritual that allowed them an opportunity to offer gratitude and blessings to one another.

Accessibility

It is infrequent in this country for Jews to have the “home court advantage,” but such is the case for the RRC students in regard to accessibility of the biblical text in its original form. Students at RRC must demonstrate a high level of proficiency with the

Hebrew language prior to being accepted into the rabbinical program, and then study Hebrew for several additional years.

The degree of knowledge of Hebrew has varied among the Christian seminarians who have taken the course. LTSP does have a requirement that their students take one semester of Hebrew, and many of the LTSP students had completed the introduction to biblical Hebrew. During the that course, the students learn the Hebrew *aleph-bet*, the fundamentals of the grammar and work on translation of text, all in support of building exegesis skills. In contrast, *PTS* does not have a Hebrew requirement, though it is available as an elective course to interested students.

It is purposeful that there are no prerequisites for students to enroll in the *Hevruta* course, based on the belief that all of the students are literally *amateurs*, lovers of text, who have an authentic relationship with the text and meaningful insights to offer to their partners-working from both Hebrew and English. Nevertheless, “unequal access” to Hebrew text is a reality that presents challenges. We have found that it need not be a permanent obstacle to meaningful dialogue between partners, but this requires work on the part of both members of each pair. Students are charged to be mindful of the roles they are taking on in the relationship, and to make themselves responsible for helping their partner find entry into the text.

In her journal, an RRC student acknowledges the need to navigate a more balanced relationship:

“I may have jumped too intensely into teaching mode, which I often tend to do especially in Bible and especially in texts that I may have taught before. I look forward to learning, exploring and listening to different and unfamiliar texts and points of view.” RRC Student (first cohort)

Goal #1 Deepening Understanding

In the first couple of weeks, the students’ journal entries reflected a collective mix of emotions and intentions. Across the board and across the semesters students articulated their excitement, their hope for gaining deeper understanding and of developing a relationship with a peer. Their experiences were characterized by what Samir Selmanovic has termed “holy awkwardness” as they sought to navigate a new relationship.⁷

One student reflected:

“I think we were all a bit tentative in our challenges of one another. I hope we will continue to be respectful, but not to a fault. Hevruta is likened to swords sharpening one another. Though I don’t tend to think of myself as an implement of violence, I like the metaphor of constructive, productive, respectful challenge.” RRC Student (first cohort)

A few RRC students acknowledged a “defensive posture” coming into the class as a result of some prior experiences. Others admitted having preconceived notions about how Christians do or do not hold the Hebrew Bible as sacred. And, in the course held with *PTS*, some RRC students admitted to some anxiety that they might be “witnessed to” by their evangelical peers.

Some of the Christian students noted their lack of clarity over the extent to and manner by which they should be bringing Jesus into the conversation. As one *PTS* students explained, “it was my fear that he would think that I wanted to ‘preach the Gospel’ to him/her in a non-honoring way.”

For many, the initial unease gave way to comfort and excitement about the possibilities for exploration and new revelation, as reflected here:

“At first, it was slightly awkward for me, because in a sense I felt as if I were trying to defend and/or give credibility to what I thought the text was saying. In the back of mind, as I was sharing, I made up [my mind] that my theological opinion would surely be different from [my partner’s.] Through our conversation, however, I felt liberated to put my theological reasoning aside and focus more specifically on the splendor of God in both of our texts. As we both reflected on the question and shared our stories of how God was with us and gave us hope, inspiration, and assurance through the various texts, I could see more clearly that what we had in common was far greater than what we did not.” –LTSP Student

“Each study session with [my partner] takes us deeper into the text, into our curiosity about one another and each other’s faith tradition, and into the spaces where we differ, which is where the energy and excitement (and fear of what we will encounter) lie. When we first met, we were a bit shy and polite, almost like a first date when you are excited and want to make a good first impression, and most of all do not want to get off on the wrong foot. Now we jump right into our dialogue, not wanting to waste a second and I feel slightly annoyed when someone comes to the door of “our space” and says we have to stop!...Anyway, the conversations now are beyond intellectually stimulating – they are soul stirring!” RRC Student (second cohort)

Quickly, preconceived notions began to be challenged. Of the two cohorts, the RRC/PTS group had the steeper learning curve. Among the lessons learned for the RRC students: that some evangelicals are open to non-fundamentalist interpretations of biblical text. Among the PTS students: that not all Jews consider themselves “chosen.”

Students also expanded the depth and breadth of their knowledge of textual resources within each tradition. Though the course centered on studying the Hebrew Bible, RRC students were often introduced to New Testament passages that their partners would bring in to serve as commentary. Similarly, the Christian seminarians were exposed range of rabbinic texts also providing interpretation to the biblical texts.

Student journals began to convey a profound new learning and a drive to have the wisdom of the other tradition inform their own religious paths.

“This experience has impacted me in several different ways. The first is realizing that my dialogue partners need to be bigger than just Christian books and writers. I need to consider reading other canonical sources so that I have a bigger view of the Bible. I think so much of what I learned in seminary was to learn how to use the Christian resources for exegetical work. Which is helpful in the beginning of the journey of learning how to deal with text. However, for me my desire is to take the Bible out of the small box that I have put [it] in. When I limit the study of the text, I think it also puts unfair limits on God.” PTS Student

Most powerful for students were the occasions when the chosen text would serve as a springboard to offering students glimpses of the “lived traditions” of their partners. Understanding the particular ritual or liturgical context in which a text sits creates a grounding effect. Over the course of the semesters this took many forms: a description of the clearing of the altar on Maundy Thursday, the chanting of piece of Torah, an invitation to attend a worship service. Through sharing of the significant

events/occasions in their own lives, students further offered insight to their partners. For example, the death of a relative of an RRC student led to individual and communal conversations about Jewish and Christian practices of mourning.

Goal #2 Spiritual Formation

Our narratives about our own religious identity, practice, and belief are often firmly rooted. We can better understand what it is we do and think when we are asked to explain it to someone outside of “the tribe.” Interfaith *hevruta* gives students a chance become aware of the stories they tell:

“We arrived with our own assumptions that were typical for our own faith traditions, we had one story to tell. But, because of the way the class was set up we were open to exploring those assumptions and perhaps even giving them up so that we could learn a new story.” PTS Student

and to analyze them:

“The thing I love about having conversations like this one is that it forces me to reevaluate that which I take for granted. When “everyone” believes as you do, it’s easy to stop thinking critically about your own ideas. It was nice to talk about such things with someone who was coming from a different place. I suppose this is the whole point of Hevruta.” PTS Student

As students’ relationships with certain texts began to be informed by their partners’ questions and insights, they began to write about what it is like to see an old and familiar text through a new lens. Not only were they asked to explain what they believe, but they were also asked to entertain alternate interpretations.

“In our first class I have already found appreciation for the hevruta text study process. Two students engaging the text with sincerity, respect, patience and an appreciation for interpretation differences created an atmosphere for challenging our preconceived notions of the text and a chance to carefully pay attention to every word of the text. I have read Exodus 33:12-23 many times, even so with my “haver,” I uncovered a new understanding about the relationship between God and Moses”. PTS Student

Students were also presented with new models for engaging with text:

“As Christians most of us do not argue with a text very well, let alone find fault with one. If I have come to appreciate anything about the Jewish relationship to the biblical text, it is the willingness to hold it as a dialogue partner and at the same time, very holy.” PTS Student

“I also noticed some differences between the ways in which we approached our respective texts. I am beginning to realize just how much I have been trained to approach text by looking for “problems” that can be leveraged to generate new meanings. I do this reflexively, even when I have to create the “problems” myself. [My partner] seemed to approach the text in a different, perhaps more direct way. Rather than trying to gain a foothold in the text by actively problematizing it, [she] seemed to be more able to immerse herself in the flow of the story and ask her questions from inside. I look forward to learning more about hers process and the tools that she has

available to her from her tradition.” RRC student (first cohort)

This work offers new language through which to conceive of a relationship with the Divine. Despite initial anxieties about working partially in Hebrew, many of the Christian students began to describe a growing awareness of the role translations play in their understanding of texts.

“My experience with hevruta, although very brief, gave me one valuable insight; I want to be the best student of the Bible that this life will afford me. I was amazed at how my partner could read the Hebrew text in its original language and uncover what seemed to be unlimited possibilities of translation and revelation.” LTSP Student

Jewish students were also influenced by their partners’ vernacular. For example, some Jewish students began trying out the words “grace” and “calling,” bringing another dimension to their theological explorations. Some RRC students wrote about experiencing “holy envy,” particularly regarding the extent to which their Christian peers relate an intimate relationship with God.

To be sure, envy is part of the experience, but so is joy:

“I’ve discovered my pleasure in working with Christian colleagues whose understanding of God’s workings are much more interpersonal than mine. Perhaps they are giving voice to something I hold deep inside, but to which I give no ear. Perhaps I vicariously enjoy their vivacious partnerships with God. I’ve reflected quite a bit on this anomaly and find no envy of their form of faith. Only joy in experiencing it with them.” RRC Student (second cohort)

Some of the shifts experienced by the students were subtle. In the case of one student with a strong evangelical identity, it was gaining the consciousness halfway through the semester to frame the ideas she was sharing with her partner by saying “the way I understand this is…” as opposed to offering a declarative statement of the truth.

Other were more profound. For an RRC student who converted to Judaism as an adult and who had grown up with a father who was “quite rigid in his Christian practice and dogma,” the opportunity for engagement with an evangelical peer who was securely rooted in faith but open minded proved to be a cathartic experience. She wrote:

“[My hevruta] has been exactly the right study partner to enable me to re-encounter Christianity and Christian text in a way that has been both informative and healing for me. She is deeply rooted in her tradition and able to share it in a straightforward way about how it informs her life, but with no judgment that this is the correct path for everyone. I have experienced only deep respect and genuine curiosity from her in our exchanges.” RRC student (second cohort)

As reflected in the words below, these alterations are not without their struggle. There can be a lot at stake: one’s entire belief system. It takes courage to really, truly show up.

“Accordingly, I will more lightly hold my “ownership” of the biblical texts knowing that they belong to both our traditions and that things I take for granted in reading the Hebrew Bible (e.g., the concept of original sin) are not universally assumed. This still murky insight is paradigm shifting for me. At present, I remain in the somewhat uncomfortable liminal space between certain old paradigms and (through the grace of

God) coming to new ones.” PTS student

“In our discussion I began to feel an unexpected shift within me, an opening. I didn’t suddenly change my views on abortion, but I became more open to seeing the “pro-life” position as understandable and, dare I say, valid. The “take away” for me was again the power of hevruta to cause us to look at things differently, through our partner’s eyes.” RRC Student (second cohort)

A session toward the end of the semester was reserved for students to bring in a text they found personally challenging. Some students brought texts that elicited conversations about the difficulties of working to hold on to tradition while at the same time making it relevant and meaningful for our day.

“For me there is always this constant struggle between doing things the way we have always done them or should we modernize our ideas. It begs the question how does one determine what things should be changed?” PTS Student

Other texts highlighted personal challenges with theodicy. Though the conversations that ensued were difficult ones, students found comfort in learning that their counterparts shared in the struggle.

“In the end, we are both humans struggling with the same big questions, and finding that we come up short in the answers department. Our salvation is asking the questions together. This is where I find God, in the space where we are sharing our struggles with the text and the unanswered questions. I guess if I had to choose, I would choose to ‘not know’ together, than to have absolute certainty alone.” RRC Student (second cohort)

Still many other texts highlighted the spiritual challenges faced by emerging clergy: humans responding to a Divine call to leadership.

“I think...that if I had had a discussion about this prior to seminary, I would have been really uncomfortable and would have worried about questioning what I always had thought about God... And while I still think of God as a loving God, I realize that it’s okay to question my assumptions about what I had always thought about the Bible and what it says. Especially now, as one who will be going into leadership within the church, knowing that it seems that even God was still finding the way to be an effective leader, makes me feel better about knowing that I am still learning, and will still be figuring out how to be a faithful leader.”-LTSP student

The goal of this particular session was not to mitigate the ache students feel when engaging these texts. Just as during the “bring a favorite text” session, students are asked to consider how their relationship to and understanding of the challenging text is informed by the learning they did with their partners, but that is not the same as liking the text more. In their explorations students were not working to salvage the texts, though that did happen in some cases.

Goal #3 Relationship building

“That was the most important strength of the class, for me: that I cultivated a soul relationship with another human being, with a different perspective, that we became

important to each other, and that encountering the other allowed both of our souls to expand. “RRC Student (second cohort)

Students participating in the *hevruta* course were committing to more than a class for which they received credit, they were committing to a person for whom they had to show up—literally and figuratively—week after week. Quickly, students cultivated a sense of responsibility for one another.

Over the two semesters a total of thirty-six students participated in the course, each with his/her own set of personal narratives, sensibilities and belief systems. While this paper focuses on some major tropes of the class, the experience of each *hevruta* pair was informed by the countless factors that made each person—and thus the pair—unique.

Each of the pairs was successful to the extent that they realized the stated goals for the course. But that is not to say they all accomplished the same things. The beauty and complexity of the *hevruta* relationship is that learning happens on many levels and the distribution is different for each pair. Some stuck close to the texts. Others digressed, using the text as a catalyst, often to spur sharing of their individual stories. Some invested time in the relationship outside of the *hevruta* sessions, welcoming a partner to a Shabbat dinner, to services, to meet their families. Some were far apart theologically, and worked hard to make space for their partner’s beliefs. Others were very close theologically, and worked hard to identify issues on which there might be tension. For some, the association lasted only as long as the class. For most pairs, however, it has endured.

Even as they anticipated no longer being able to meet face to face, many students wrote about the ways that they would continue to bring their partner along with them. More than one Christian student revealed that they now ask: “WWMPD-What Would My Partner Do?” Practically speaking, as students move into their ministries/rabbinates they will have a resource on whom they can call as they engage in interfaith work within the communities they serve.

Future Directions

Students have had not only an impact on each other, but on the direction the course has taken. While the overall structure and requirements of the course have stayed the same, insights and suggestions gleaned from the students have led to some innovations.

One example was the inclusion of a short prayer or blessing offered by a student at both the beginning and end of each session, after an LTSP student expressed in her journal the want to set apart the space and time as sacred. This addition has become a fixture in the class. Student feedback has also, to some extent, influenced texts chosen for study for subsequent offerings of the course.

Another development has been the participation of ordained clergy and other religious professionals as auditors. Our courses have included a rabbi, a minister, a PhD student at the seminary and the editor of a religious journal. Their voices have added an additional layer of richness to our conversations.

This course works so well for seminarians, in part because the participants share both a love of sacred text and a path to religious leadership. Nevertheless, this experience has implications wider than the seminary context. The process, predicated on relationship building can be tailored for use by educators in a variety of settings, to include community adult education programs, and college campus interfaith initiatives.

Indeed, the contents of the Hebrew Bible have held the interest of a lot of people (beyond seminarians) for thousands of years. In my experience as an educator in other

settings (congregational, chaplaincy, and undergraduate courses) individuals have found meaningful, instructive and at times provocative, the chance to explore these texts and be in conversation about them across religious traditions, whether they have formal study experience or not.

“Make for yourself a teacher, and also acquire for yourself a study partner.”

***Pirke Avot 1:6*⁸**

My collaborations with both co-instructors were also *hevruta* partnerships, where the main text was the course itself. Our time together while students were off studying was spent in various ways: fine-tuning the next week’s session as we responded to what was coming up in journal entries, sharing our own personal stories, and wrestling over text ourselves.

For both partnerships energy arose around navigating the boundaries of this work. For example, Dr. Gafney and I explored the role of ritual in interfaith engagement as we together crafted our final class session. We chose water as the medium, aware of the important symbolism attached to it in both traditions. We sought to create a new ritual that evoked the spirit of each tradition but belonged to neither of them. At the final class session students washed each other’s hands in the spirit of hospitality but also to symbolize renewal, marking the end of the course also as a of commitment to continued deep engagement with persons of other faiths.

To be sure, the rabbis of the period during which the Mishna was compiled (2nd-3rd centuries CE.) would not have conceived of a ritual in which Jews and Christians washed one another’s hands. Nor, did they have Christians in mind when they directed that one should “make for oneself a teacher, and also acquire for oneself a study partner.” Nonetheless, I have learned it is my strong belief that Jewish-Christian learning has the potential to push one beyond learned narratives and beyond fixed frameworks, offering insights that may not be accessible by simply studying with those within the “tribe.”

In closing, I turn to the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who has written of his belief in a “divinely created diversity.” He sees truth as “multiple, partial, reflecting different perspectives on reality.”⁹ In seeking to find out what other truths people had to offer about God and humanity, the students and instructors who participated in these *hevruta* courses came to find that moments of revelation are available to us across our traditions- in both the universal, and the particular.

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¹<http://www.hebrewcollege.edu/home-page-features#share-texts-build-trust> (cited 11/29/2010)

² <http://www.huc.edu/newspubs/pressroom/article.php?pressroomid=468%22> (cited 11/29/2010)

³ Translation by Yair Lipshitz, Paideia Scholar in Residence 2006-2007, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, Bava Metzia 84a).

⁴ Orit Kent, *Interactive Text Study and the Co-Construction of Meaning: Havruta in the DeLeT Beit Midrash*, PhD Dissertation, 2008. Elie Holzer, 75:2, 130-149. "Either a Hevruta Partner or Death: A Critical view on the Interpersonal Dimensions of *Hevruta* Learning," *The Journal of Jewish Education*.

⁵ (LTSP bio)

⁶ The source of the numbers is the ATS database which compiles information from the Annual Report Forms from the member schools.

⁷ Samir Selmanovic is the founder of Faith House New York.

⁸ *Pirke Avot*, literally *Chapters of the Fathers*, is a collection of ethical teachings that comprises the first section of the Mishna, a codification of Jewish oral tradition and law, compiled in the 2nd-3rd centuries.

⁹ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002.