

Enriching Jewish Leadership: Adaptive Chevruta as a Modern Language for Jewish Learning

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Introduction

The Talmudic story in Tractate Bava Metzia of the relationship between Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan is a tragic and beautiful tale. The Talmud relates how the Rabbi Yochanan turns Reish Lakish away from a life of banditry, leading him to a life as a brilliant and incisive scholar with a mind that rivaled and sometimes even surpassed that of his teacher. The two sparred often and their disagreements are recorded across the pages of both the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmuds. Yet, when after Reish Lakish's death an upstart young student is appointed to be Rabbi Yochanan's new apprentice, Rabbi Yochanan grows upset, for the unwavering affirmations of the student are a poor substitute for the twenty-four challenges that Reish Lakish would raise to each statement of his teacher, which would ultimately lead to twenty-four new

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insights into the Torah. The death of Reish Lakish was not the loss of a sounding board for Rabbi Yochanan's ideas, but the loss of a chevruta, his partner in learning, without whom the depths of the Torah could not be plumbed and the esteemed leader's growth was no longer possible. Chevruta is an ancient Jewish framework for a relationship of intellectual and spiritual partnership. The chevruta dynamic is traditionally undertaken by two peers or colleagues together plumbing the depths of a text, and it can offer a consistent and profound study experience. Learning in chevruta can reveal as much about the individuals involved as it does about the passage being studied.

This one-on-one learning dynamic, the foundation for millennia of Jewish study, has produced a conceptual vocabulary unique among educational experiences in the Western tradition. In chevruta learning, there is no teacher to provide all of the answers, but rather a shared exploration of ideas. But what happens when the structure, language, and content of a chevruta serves as the basis for an ongoing relationship of study not between peers, but between a professional Jewish educator and a lifelong learner?

This essay explores "Adaptive Chevruta," a new learning template rooted in the chevruta model and defined as an ongoing learning relationship between a learner, a professional educator, and a text. Adaptive Chevruta offers a unique pedagogical framework that prioritizes lifelong learning, habit-building, and learner-centered growth for the learners who courageously opt into this framework.

The ethos for this partnership draws its inspiration from the rabbinic tradition as well. In Avot 1:6, Yehoshua ben Perachiah shares his frequently-quoted wisdom: *Aseih l'cha rav, u'kneih l'cha chaveor, vehevei dan l'chol adam l'chaf z'chut*, "Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every person with the scales weighted in their favor." Many of the classic commentators identify three distinct ideas in this text, kernels of advice for finding good teachers, maintaining positive friendships, and interacting with other individuals in the world.

But instead of reading this as three separate ideas, a fresh read is possible, understanding the mishnah as a single three-dimensional directive: find for yourself a teacher who can also be a friend, in a space with no judgment. This is the spirit that animates the pedagogical model of Adaptive Chevruta, a space where individuals can encounter high-level Jewish content in a setting where they

can show up simply as they are, facilitated by a kind and welcoming professional. And when this model, now in its third year of existence, is introduced to the framework of Jewish learning and Torah study, it becomes a powerful means of growing intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

The Value of Adaptive Chevruta

Adaptive Chevruta unlocks lasting value for individual learners who undertake to participate and for the educators who pair with learners, and it also creates concrete changes for the organizations who have offered Adaptive Chevruta learning to their employees and lay leaders through the Jewish Learning Collaborative (JLC), an initiative designed to bring this model to employees and lay leaders of Jewish organizations across North America. Because of these three layers, Adaptive Chevruta can invigorate the very landscape of Jewish communal leadership and infuse a new generation of Jewish professionals, volunteers, and funders with deep access to learning, habits of growth, and connection to the relevance of Judaism in their lives.

Adaptive Chevruta is not a substitute for modern day life or executive coaching, mentoring programs, or therapy. But the recent explosion in these services reveals a deep desire for ongoing and personalized relationships of support where individuals can feel seen and known. Adaptive Chevruta is one way for Jewish leaders to meet that need.

The barrier to entry for Adaptive Chevruta is low, creating a welcoming and easy-to-access opportunity for a diverse range of potential learners. No prior knowledge or education is required to begin the program, and the learning style is adaptable to all kinds of individuals. Following the first two-year pilot that introduced Adaptive Chevruta to Jewish leaders at seventeen organizations, organizers identified five main prototypes of learners: (1) individuals wrestling with major life transitions, (2) Jewish leaders experiencing “imposter syndrome” and seeking knowledge and content to build their confidence, (3) diverse Jewish leaders seeking learning to affirm their intersectional identities, (4) Jewish educators craving a deep dive into an area of interest and a chance to enjoy the learner’s seat for a change, and (5) non-Jewish employees of Jewish organizations looking to better understand and belong to their Jewish organization.

Almost every kind of learner can benefit from the individual and customizable learning opportunity offered by Adaptive Chevruta. An individual who grew up with robust access to Jewish sources might discover new approaches they didn't know existed within the canon of Jewish thinking, that can validate and center them as Jewish learners. For example, a queer individual might find that their identity is represented in previously unknown ways in Jewish tradition. And a person who grew up without access to Jewish texts might finally discover a sense of comfort in synagogue by learning the order of the prayers in the Shabbat service and feeling confident in following along in the siddur.

Jewish educators and clergy also benefit from participating in Adaptive Chevruta learning pairs. These Jewish professionals too often experience heavy administrative loads as part of their jobs due to understaffing, budget constraints, and other organizational challenges. As a result, many seek opportunities to return to the kind of meaningful learning engagement they envisioned when they first embarked on their chosen career paths. By matching with an Adaptive Chevruta learner, these practitioners reclaim the love of learning that inspires them.

Only two years into the Adaptive Chevruta pilot program, there are more than 100 freelance Jewish educators and members of clergy working with learners because they value the one-on-one learner-centered and authentic educational experience. Adaptive Chevruta returns the educators to the core of their professional missions—creating enriching learning experiences that have a meaningful impact on the lives of those they are teaching.

Jewish organizations themselves benefit from offering Adaptive Chevruta as a professional development option for employees and board members. Many Jewish organizations rely primarily on secular tools to support staff development and growth. They incorporate Jewish learning as an element of organizational culture by inviting a rabbi to share a *d'var Torah* at the beginning of a board meeting or a guest speaker to address a lunch-and-learn session or retreats. These Jewish learning experiences are enriching, but they do not touch the core development of the professionals and lay leaders guiding and visioning for the organization. Adaptive Chevruta is different in that it creates a sense of shared ownership for an organization's leaders. It empowers the individuals charged with creating and building the future of Jewish communal life to

tap into thousands of years of wisdom that most Jewish leaders are currently not accessing.

Providing ongoing and adaptable Jewish learning allows both Jewish and non-Jewish employees of Jewish organizations to overcome feelings of embarrassment or discomfort about their perceived lack of knowledge or expertise in specific areas of Jewish content, lingo, or practice. Learning in Adaptive Chevruta imbues them with a feeling of full and connected belonging in their roles as leaders within Jewish organizations.

Adaptive Chevruta learning for Jewish leaders is an investment in the continuity of vibrant, dynamic, and thriving Jewish life. It is an investment in the ongoing Jewish tradition of adding to our shared and collective wisdom in each generation. And it is the very practice that will sustain Jewish leadership in the metamodern age.

Principles of Adaptive Chevruta

Four key principles of Adaptive Chevruta create the conditions for successful Jewish learning and meaningful relationships.

A. The Learner-Educator Relationship

Adaptive Chevruta strives to establish the aspirational “non-judgmental teacher-friend” described in Avot 1:6. The named asymmetry of the relationship empowers the learner to ask questions of their partner that they might not raise in a peer setting. Learners feel comfortable posing wide-ranging questions regarding Jewish life and the diversity of Jewish living. Learners and educators in other pedagogical systems may fall naturally into healthy and transparent relationships, but formalizing the structure allows the power dynamics inherent in any learner-teacher or coach relationship to be identified and discussed.

In an Adaptive Chevruta setting, the educator partners with the learner to identify the learner’s needs, interests, and questions. Some learners begin their journey knowing what they want to learn, while other learners do not. Rather than relying on a set curriculum, the educator’s expertise and emotional attunement determines how to frame a discussion designed to facilitate personal learning and growth for an individual learner.

Adaptive Chevruta also encourages a dynamic of mentorship, where the pairs can explore ideas and themes that go beyond the

text and prepared content. Learners share issues that are on their minds, and educators use Jewish text and wisdom to address questions and facilitate conversations. Adaptive Chevruta, like many other educational pedagogies, depends on the educator to use their expertise and experience to continually shape the conversation.

Essential to that process is establishing a non-judgmental learning environment. Many learners come to this experience feeling “not Jewish enough.” A non-judgmental attitude from both the educator and the learner creates an inviting space for Jewish wisdom to speak to the learner’s lived experience, no matter their background or previous level of Jewish learning. Many learners report that they not only enjoy the teaching, but also turn to their mentor for guidance and insight.

B. Habit-Building: Ongoing and Regular Sessions

One goal of Adaptive Chevruta is to return meaningful Jewish learning experiences into schedules so overpacked with to-dos and line-items that it’s easy to forget what it’s all for. Most organizations fund some kind of professional development for employees, but few ensure that their professional development programs help employees become lifelong Jewish learners. The Adaptive Chevruta approach offers “learning organizations” the chance to give their staff and boards the gift of establishing Jewish learning as a habit in one’s life.

There are not any behavioral changes expected from the experience, and there is no graduation date. Just as a person’s growth is never completed, so too is this kind of learning designed to be ongoing.

To this end, the learner chooses the frequency of their individual learning sessions (between once a week and once a month) as part of their commitment to begin learning. They do not set an end date. The learning is introduced as an ongoing experience for as long as the learner is in their staff or board position. Of course, they can stop at any time, but the lack of a predetermined end or external assessment establishes that the learning is truly for the learner’s sake, however they want to use it.

C. Learner-Centered

In an Adaptive Chevruta setting, the learner guides the content, depth, and commitment of the learning sessions. A learner and

educator's first session is a mix of the pair getting to know each other and encouraging the learner to share their learning goals and motivations. Placing the learner at the center of the process allows them to control the experience and the outcome.

Today's Jewish learning, particularly for adults, is often undertaken in preparation for an event (such as a wedding or a conversion) or in order for a learner to become more ritually observant. Jewish texts have a lot to offer in service of these lofty goals. But they can also serve as more than just a means to an end—Jewish source texts can be an end unto themselves. With Adaptive Chevruta, Jewish text can be present in our lives as a catapult to growth and self-actualization.

A learning relationship conducted according to the principles of Adaptive Chevruta creates a powerful opportunity for personal growth. Adaptive Chevruta inverts the classic chevruta model's familiar triangular structure of two peer learners working together to explore a text. The new model centers the learner at the top of the triangle as the focus of the exploration, with the educator and the texts working in tandem to guide and mentor the learner. The powerful mentorship experienced in successful Adaptive Chevruta pairings suffuses the learning with intellectual rigor, spiritual depth, emotional sensitivity, and true investment in the learner as a full human being.

At the same time, Adaptive Chevruta prioritizes following the natural flow of the conversation and relationship over conquering a text or mastering a particular set of materials. A great chevruta pair can spend an hour on a single line of Rebbe Nachman's, or they can breeze through an entire chapter of Mishnah in twenty minutes. The text is merely a launch point for exploration and meaning that spark ideas in our own lives. The approach lauds engagement with text, but relationship-building and self-growth are the ultimate ends.

Learners come to this experience with a wide variety of goals and an even wider spectrum of comfort with personal vulnerability. For example, a learner struggling with chronic illness chooses to learn parables about those who have faced illness throughout Jewish tradition. A learner preparing for parenthood opts to study Jewish wisdom about child-raising. A learner who is a non-Jewish staff member at a Jewish organization seeks to learn about sensitive topics in Judaism because they are afraid of asking something

inadvertently offensive. And a Jewish communal professional wants support preparing for a major presentation. In each of these real scenarios, it's not the topic being studied that determines the emotional vulnerability of the session, but the life experience the learner brings to the exploration.

Adaptive Chevruta's focus on the learner's questions about work, life, and Judaism prioritizes the learner's growth over the text itself. The broadly defined Jewish textual canon is a tool to support the learner in personal reflection and evolution—whether the desired areas for reflection and growth are intellectual, spiritual, or emotional. Application of Adaptive Chevruta pedagogy is assessed primarily through the learner's own reflections about their learning, their reports of their own growth, and their assessments about whether they have met their self-defined goals.

D. Dynamic and Flexible Learning

Due to the ongoing and learner-centered nature of Adaptive Chevruta, an open and honest feedback loop is paramount to a successful, long-term learner and educator pairing. In establishing learning pairs, the JLC team guides learners to articulate what they are hoping to gain through the learning experience and what kind of educator might best fit their needs. While some learners are looking for an educator with specific expertise, most learners prioritize being matched with an educator who shares a perspective or background important to their own identity. Through ongoing conversation and reflection, the learner chooses their educator from JLC-presented options who meet the learner's criteria but also have different characteristics (for example, they may be in a different life stage, have different work experience, or be a different gender). This process supports the learner in discovering their learning interests and establishing an intentional connection with their Jewish conversation partner.

In each session, the educator checks in with the learner to confirm that learning is progressing in a way that meets the learner's needs. Together, the pair can change course at any time and as often as they want, or choose to linger deeply for multiple sessions to wrestle with a single idea or text.

When a learner has met one of their goals, significant or modest, or has reached a milestone number of hours or sessions, they mark the moment. They may share a prayer or summary or create

a shared ritual. Then, they turn their attention to deciding what to explore next and why. This cycle can continue for many years.

More than anything, Adaptive Chevruta is open to change. As we grow, our needs and relationships evolve. And just as we change, a text about *Ein Sof* that was once the focal point of a conversation can morph into an exploration of the Book of Samuel or Pirkei Avot. By accommodating organic change and evolving life circumstances, both the educator and the learner create room for dynamic texts to provide greater understanding of their tradition, their chevruta partner, and themselves.

Case Study: Adaptive Chevruta in Action

Many years ago, Moishe House was trying to figure out how to make itself more “Jewish.” The organization hired a rabbi and brought in clergy and educators to run workshops or lead *divrei Torah* and Jewish learning sessions. Yet no matter how talented the facilitators were, there were people who did not feel comfortable participating, worrying that they didn’t know enough to participate fully or concerned they were speaking too much. An undifferentiated learning model seemed to exacerbate differences in staff and board members’ learning backgrounds, rather than bring people together.

After trying multiple approaches to solving this challenge, Moishe House tried something that became the seed of the Jewish Learning Collaborative: staff and board members could choose a Jewish educator and learn with them on a Jewish topic of their choosing, as long as it was text-based, “text” being broadly defined.

Over time, by paying attention to which learner-educator pairs deepened their relationships and dove deeply into learning, the principles of Adaptive Chevruta were born. Ninety-eight percent of learners said their learning affected them personally, and 95% said their learning affected them professionally. The mission of the Jewish Learning Collaborative developed in response to these learnings, with the goal of spreading the experience of Adaptive Chevruta to leaders around the Jewish community.

Since those early days, the Jewish Learning Collaborative has trained more than 100 educators, reached over 400 learners with the pedagogy of Adaptive Chevruta, and enabled over 5,000 hours of Jewish learning. Moreover, not only does Adaptive Chevruta impact individual learners and educators, but it also has had a

deep effect on the Jewish organizations that have invested in the learning model for their staff and board, as over time learners bring the values, content, and experiences of their learning into their organization's broader culture.

To illustrate with another example: Jewish social justice and service organization Repair the World participated in JLC's pilot learning program, which now partners with over twenty organizations. The organization was able to easily implement and integrate Adaptive Chevruta, because of how the program is personalized to staff members based on their jobs, stage in life, identity, needs, and interests.

Repair the World professionals and lay leaders began learning with Adaptive Chevruta in the spring of 2021. When the organization first offered the opportunity to its staff and board, fifteen individuals chose to participate. Included in these early participants were members of the executive leadership team and the board. Over time, the number of people who opted in more than doubled. Repair the World Senior Director of Education Rabbi Jessy Dressin reflected that it can take time for the value of a program to spread by word of mouth, and for people who didn't previously think of themselves as ongoing Jewish learners to decide to try Adaptive Chevruta. But just two years after introducing the program, 56 learners from Repair the World and 40 educators had spent 673 hours learning together—the equivalent of over 28 full days of Jewish learning.

By evaluating how Adaptive Chevruta affects staff, board members, and organizations themselves, we see the impact and culture changes that occur when an organization offers Adaptive Chevruta to its leadership. Nearly a year into the experience, Repair the World CEO Cindy Greenberg heard four staff members give testimonials about how meaningful the experience had been. She said, "I'm blown away. It has made a significant shift in the lives of our staff and also in our organizational culture. I am so grateful."

Adaptive Chevruta's focus on the learner's curiosity led Repair the World learners to explore topics as diverse as Jewish perspectives on self-care and mental health, midrash, using mindfulness to relieve stress, feminist perspectives on the High Holy Days, introduction to Jewish history, lessons from Jewish tradition on how to create relationships with others who hold differing opinions, and more.

One Repair the World staff member said, “It’s been a blessing . . . to learn with my teacher and to explore different areas of interest based on my current work and other interests that pop up along the way.” Another reflected, “I’m so grateful to [my educator] for being not only a mentor but such a great support in learning life lessons and Jewish values for parenting.”

After nine months of supporting Adaptive Chevruta learning, Repair the World added a new category to their staff self-evaluations: *Jewish learning*. Staff members are not required to engage in Jewish learning, but the addition of the category to staff evaluations emphasized that ongoing Jewish learning is highly valued by the organization as a component of staff members’ growth. Even for staff members choosing not to opt in to Jewish learning, the inclusion of Jewish learning as a category in staff evaluations makes a statement that being a lifelong Jewish learner is part of what makes a well-rounded staff member.

Why This Matters

Adaptive Chevruta is fundamentally different from many models of Jewish education. It is rooted in a relationship between individual learners and educators, ongoing and habit-forming, centered on the individual learner and their growth, and committed to open communication and dynamic feedback. It is not cohort-based and seeks no defined behavioral changes beyond a love for habitual Jewish learning. In most cases, Adaptive Chevruta is not intended to be an individual’s only experience of Jewish education; rather, it complements the deep community-building goals of the Jewish education structures that educate most Jews today—including religious after-school programs and day schools, yeshivot, summer camps, and Hillels.

Learners are empowered by Adaptive Chevruta. One participant said, “[JLC’s] willingness to pair me with the right Jewish learning partner for me based on what I personally am seeking to gain was amazing.” Another said, “I love my educator and get so much inspiration and fulfillment from learning together.” A third said, “This is Jewish spiritual therapy, and I love it.”

Learners report deep satisfaction with the access they gain through Adaptive Chevruta—both to the ongoing corpus of Jewish textual tradition and to one-on-one sessions with pastorally trained and learned clergy and educators they wouldn’t otherwise

encounter. Approximately 15% of current Adaptive Chevruta learners are non-Jewish staff members at Jewish organizations. For them, as well as for many Jewish staff and board members, learning is about access to thousands of years of Jewish tradition and perspectives.

The pedagogy of Adaptive Chevruta is the fulfillment of our modern interpretation of Yehoshua ben Perachiah's vision of making for oneself a teacher, acquiring for oneself a friend, and judging every person with the scales weighted in their favor. As one learner stated: "Learning with [my educator] has become my favorite part of the week. I've learned a ton and gotten to explore subjects and topics I didn't even know I was interested in. I feel like I've gained not just a teacher, but a mentor and a friend. I have renewed energy for my work and feel more fulfilled as a learner and a professional." When we center the learner in the Jewish learning process, we foster fulfillment and growth as the centerpiece of being a Jewish leader.