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Havruta or Death: An Analysis of Havruta Learning in Light of Hegel's Lord and Bondsman Dialectic

By Elisha Pearl | Published: [November 7, 2014](#) | [Comment \(\)](#)

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I

Talmud Torah and its practice in the Beit Midrash may count as the ultimate mitzvah,^[1] but as a means of *avodat Hashem* it focuses on rigorous intellectual activity. The traditional Jewish method for pursuing *talmud Torah* stands in stark contrast to standard academic methods. The western academic ethic conjures up images of a scholar in a library, hunched over a book or notepad, with a pile of books by his side, immersed in awesome silence. At its core, this picture speaks to a solitary endeavor. Conversely, traditional Jewish study is conducted *be-havruta*, in a pair of study partners. A pair of students, or even advanced scholars grapple with and ultimately find meaning in a text. So the library of Jewish tradition, the *Beit Midrash*, filled with tens, or perhaps hundreds of havruta pairs, most often finds itself characterized by cacophony instead of silence.

The classical Jewish sources take the notion of havruta very seriously^[2]. The Gemara in *Masekhet Makkot* records the teaching:

R' Yose bar Hanina said: What is the meaning of the verse 'a sword upon the necks and they shall become fools?' A sword rests on the necks of Torah scholars who study Torah alone [that is solitary study should incur the death penalty]. Furthermore, they become foolish [by studying alone]... and yet further they sin [as a result of this solitary study].^[3]

More famously, *Masekhet Taanit* records the teaching "*O Havruta, o mituta*"^[4] "Either havruta or death!" which has been understood to mean "studying without a havruta is tantamount to academic suicide."^[5] The extremity of these sources imply that this contrast is rooted in something

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deeper than simple preference of learning style—but what precisely is the underlying theory behind havruta learning? What makes it so unique?

While we see real life[6] examples of havruta study acted out on the Gemara's pages through the discussions of famous pairs such as Abaye and Rava, or Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan, the Gemara gives us only a glimpse into the underlying theory of havruta through an occasional *aggadic* story or comment. An unexpected source offers a more fully developed philosophy of havruta, capturing its unique nature, and illustrating its dynamics.

II

In a celebrated passage from his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, titled “Lordship and Bondage”[7] G.W.F. Hegel offers an account of “self-consciousness.” Self-consciousness in the philosophical sense[8] means that an individual becomes aware of himself at a deeper level. Earlier thinkers in the philosophical tradition[9] saw self-consciousness as something one could achieve on one's own.[10] While others might play a role in helping one become self-conscious, their role is purely secondary. Hegel's innovative account suggests that self-consciousness is a fundamentally partnered endeavor. For Hegel, one can achieve self-consciousness *only* through another human being. In this article, I will argue that Hegel's claim constitutes a striking parallel to the institution of havruta, where one can only “know” a particular *sugya*[11] through havruta study. In havruta study, knowledge is a partnered endeavor. One cannot simply decide he has mastered the *sugya* until he has proven it to the satisfaction of his havruta. As we continue our analysis, I will explain and develop Hegel's model and integrate the relevant parallels to the havruta framework.

For Hegel, one only concretizes their innate potential and achieves self-consciousness when *another person* recognizes that he has concretized his potential in the world. One cannot be sure that he has a quality until he tests it in the real world and proves successful in his execution or demonstration of that quality – in the eyes of another person. Similarly, in the *havruta* model, one cannot claim to know a *sugya* until he has shared it, and ideally allowed others to challenge his interpretation. Or as Rav Chaim Brisker put it, “if one cannot explain an idea [to another person] he does not fully understand it.”[12]

Hegel claims that all human relationships are at some level an effort by the one party to achieve self-consciousness through the other. This claim is acutely true in the case of havruta study, where both parties try to grasp difficult concepts through the havruta relationship. To better demonstrate how a havruta involves both partners becoming conscious of what they have learned, we need to examine Hegel's general model for the mechanics of human relationships.

The following sketch forms the core of Hegel's account. At each step, we will note how the model finds expression in the instance of a havruta relationship:
[13]

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- 7.4 Freedom (Text)
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- 7.3 Mashiah (Text | PDF)
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1. "Self-consciousness exists... only when being acknowledged"[14]. Meaning, a person (whom we will designate S_1) only can only achieve self-consciousness when another person (whom we will designate S_2) recognizes him as conscious.

Havruta: One member of the *havruta* (H_1) only understands a given *sugya* when his partner (H_2) recognizes his understanding (as discussed above).

2. When S_1 interacts with S_2 , S_1 becomes self-conscious. This means that we only become real to ourselves when interacting with another person.

At first glance, this claim appears a bit overdone. For after all, we are apparently real to ourselves just by thinking. Yet, on further reflection, we are only convinced of a thing's existence when that thing is a feature of our external reality. Something is no longer "just in our mind," but exists "out in the real world," when other people can confirm it, when we can see it outside of ourselves, and when we, or others, can manipulate it. Only then is it real to us in a robust sense. In sum, something is only real to us when it takes on concrete form in the world that lies outside of our minds.

If we accept the notion that we only consider things real when they have taken concrete form in the external world, then we have to wonder, what makes us real to ourselves? Hegel's account claims that when we interact with another person, we can see ourselves as external objects in the "real world." S_1 becomes real to himself when he sees S_2 , a person who is an object in S_1 's external world, being affected by S_1 's actions. In this way S_1 's actions become part of the external world. While it is true that S_1 can make himself part of the objective external world by engaging with an inanimate object – say writing his thoughts on paper or collecting them in a voice recorder, – interacting with another person grants S_1 the feeling of reality at a much deeper level. This is true because S_2 doesn't only make a raw recording of S_1 's human expression. S_2 responds to S_1 intellectually, physically, or emotionally, and grapples with S_1 's in a uniquely human way, which thereby gives S_1 's reality in the external world a new layer of depth.

Havruta: When H_1 studies a *sugya*, and comes to conclusions regarding it, he becomes most fully conscious of those conclusions when sharing them with another person. True, H_1 can independently commit his thoughts to a notebook, but his thoughts come alive most fully when H_2 engages with him, critiques him and forces H_1 to better articulate them. And ultimately, H_1 's thoughts become concretely "real" when H_2 accepts them.

3. In any interaction or relationship, both individuals will struggle to assert their own self-consciousness. The struggle emerges because S_1 is not the only person involved in the relationship. S_2 is also an individual with his own needs, and own quest for self-consciousness (recognition by the other person). S_2 will resist simply acting as the object for S_1 's arrival at recognition. Furthermore, S_2 will push back and attempt to use S_1 to achieve S_2 's recognition.

Havruta: A successful havruta is rarely one-sided. In practice however, the havruta relationship can begin in a frustrating struggle where H_1 tries to use the havruta relationship strictly as a forum to refine and clarify his own ideas.

[15]

4. Hegel refers to this struggle (see step 3) as a “life-and-death struggle.” The struggle is to the death because ultimately S_1 may overwhelmingly overpower S_2 such that S_2 literally dies (for example, if S_1 and S_2 are soldiers in mortal combat.) Notably, however, Hegel does not necessarily understand the “death” in question as physical death. In broader application, it is a struggle to the death because S_2 feels so overpowered by S_1 that he withdraws from the relationship. This constitutes death for both parties, since now, neither party can properly achieve self-consciousness within the relationship, and in that case, they cannot live fully.

Havruta: If H_1 overwhelms H_2 by studying the *sugya* too quickly or sharply such that H_2 cannot follow, H_2 will gain nothing from the havruta and will just act as a human sounding board for H_1 to express his superior insights. H_2 is effectively “dead” as a havruta. H_1 will also be frustrated as he has no one to engage with and thereby reach a higher level of understanding.

While Hegel's usage of the term death appears hyperbolic in this context, he appears to concur with Hazal here. Firstly, this account may make sense of the statement “either Havruta or death.” But moreover, it may shed light on the story of Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan's demise:

In *Masekhet Bava Metzia*, the Talmud relates the following story:

[A scholarly disputation between R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish, two of the most prominent *Amoraim* in Israel who were known for their havruta relationship, devolved into a personal argument.] R. Yohanan therefore felt himself deeply hurt, [as a result of which] Resh Lakish fell ill.... Resh Lakish died, and R. Yohanan fell into deep depression. The Rabbis said, “Who shall go to ease his mind? Let R. Eleazar b. Pedath go [and study with him] because he can argue very sharply.” So he went and sat before him; and when R. Yohanan recite a teaching, he [R. Eleazar] observed: “There is a Baraita that supports you.” “Are you as the son of Lakisha[16]?” he [R. Yohanan] complained: “when I stated a law, the son of Lakisha used to raise twenty-four objections, to which I gave twenty-four answers, which consequently led to a fuller comprehension of the law; while you say, ‘A Baraita has been taught which supports you.’ Do I not know myself that my teachings are right?” Thus he went on rending his garments and weeping, “Where are you, O son of Lakisha, where are you, O son of Lakisha;” and he cried like this until he went insane. When that happened, the Rabbis prayed for him, and he died.[17]

This tragic story illustrates the life-and-death struggle inherent in the havruta relationship, and how the absence of a havruta can lead to literal death for Torah scholars who cannot bear to live without the heights of study that a proper havruta affords.

5. The two subjects thus must be in a relationship if they are to become self-conscious. However, if the relationship persists, the struggle most often resolves itself into an unequal relationship, with S_1 achieving full self-consciousness (recognition). S_2 will play the role of recognizing S_1 without achieving any recognition himself. S_1 is thus the superior partner in the relationship, the “lord” in Hegel's terminology, and S_2 is the inferior partner, whom Hegel terms “bondsman.”

Havruta: The Gemara in *Masekhet Taanit*[18] teaches:

Just as a small piece of wood can ignite a large one, a minor scholar sharpens an advanced scholar. This explains Rabbi Hanina's statement "I have learnt much from my teachers (*Rabbotai*), even more from my colleagues (*haverei*) and most of all from my students (*talmidai*)."[19]

Hegel's analysis here elucidates all the elements of this statement. First, we can translate Hegel's terms of lord and bondsman into the Jewish categories of *rav* and *talmid*. [20] A *rav* and *talmid* relationship can play out both in the context of a traditional lecture, and in the case of an unbalanced havruta. In either case, the relationship serves to highlight the unique nature of a balanced havruta. With this background, we can return to the Gemara's teaching. One learns most from his students, because when one occupies the position of *Rav* (teacher, master, lord) he is given the fullest opportunity for the expression and refinement of his own learning. In a sense, the *shiur* (lecture) is all about the *Rav* articulating his knowledge of the *sugya* and thereby becoming self-conscious of his knowledge. The student role is simply to absorb and react to the *Rav*'s lecture. Notably, the *Gemara* frames its discussion strictly in terms of the advantage offered to the *Rav*. The minor scholars play the role of enhancing the advanced scholars, and students enable the teacher to learn the most. The statement's implication, that all of all the possible scholarly relationships, the student gains the least seems counterintuitive, yet in light of the Hegelian analysis, it rings true. The student passively absorbs what the teacher has to offer, and rarely if ever has the opportunity to concretize their grasp of the material, thus they never become fully conscious of their grasp of the material or lack thereof. Their understanding never enters the "real world."

6. While the lord has seemingly achieved self-consciousness by turning the bondsman into an object for the recognition of his self-consciousness, in fact, the lord can never achieve full self-consciousness through the bondsman. As the inferior partner, the bondsman is unable to fully reflect the lord and grant him recognition. Only an equal can recognize the lord, or as the popular saying goes, "it takes one to know one."

Havruta: While occupying the position of *Rav* apparently allows one to fully concretize their understanding of the subject matter, this concretization is incomplete. It takes minimal struggle; the *Rav* presents the material, but given his mastery, his students essentially accept what he has to say. They may offer occasional challenges, but on the whole, they are dwarfed by the *Rav*'s brilliance. Furthermore, the student cannot fully appreciate the magnitude of the *Rav*'s brilliance as he has not yet reached the level of the *Rav*'s comprehension. So the *Rav* cannot concretize his deepest levels of understanding, and the students cannot grasp it, nor can they elicit it. If he has no one to discourse with on his level, one who occupies the position of *Rav* will find himself a lonely man of learning. In a *havruta* relationship, a similar dynamic can take place, although usually on a more minor scale. For example a case where H_1 is vastly more capable than H_2 , but H_2 is still able to grasp H_1 's thoughts and respond to them.

7. Therefore, the two parties can only achieve self-consciousness when they arrive at an equilibrium in the relationship. Both S_1 and S_2 must play the role of subject who achieves self-consciousness, and the object who allows the

other to become self-conscious.[21] In Hegel's words: "they recognize themselves as mutually recognizing the other.[22]" Hegel sees this stage as the ultimate goal of any human relationship, he describes it as "the pure Notion of recognition." [23] Hegel doesn't elucidate exactly how this relationship works, but most likely it entails a dynamic equilibrium, meaning S_1 and S_2 do not constantly occupy both the role of subject and object [24], but rather they equitably share the roles between one another.

Havruta: H_1 would offer his opinion on the *sugya*, and while H_1 is doing so, H_2 would act completely receptively, recognizing H_1 's opinion and thereby achieving self-consciousness. Then H_2 pushes back with equal force and expressing his opinion, or critically engaging with H_1 's opinion. Now H_1 plays the role of patient receiver, recognizing H_2 .

In this sort of relationship, H_1 and H_2 have never left the struggle, but the struggle nonetheless stabilizes and becomes mutually beneficial for both parties. This differs from previous archetypes where the struggle absolutely ends to the detriment of either parties, or where it resolves into an unequal relationship. This relationship represents the ideal sort of *havruta*, the one that R' Yohanan could not bear to live without. R' Yohanan and Resh Lakish began as teacher and student, but they evolved into an equal *havruta* pair. R' Yohanan thrived on the dynamic nature of his relationship with Resh Lakish who would constantly challenge him (and occasionally overpower him).[25] Resh Lakish proved himself R. Yohanan's equal, and thus was able to grant him full self-consciousness. His challenges revealed the depths of R. Yohanan's statements and that allowed both of them to achieve a "fuller comprehension of the law." Resh Lakish's replacement could not provide that dynamic relationship, and having experienced the ideal *havruta*, R. Yohanan could accept nothing less.

Hegel's analysis is intriguing, yet philosophically, it is impossible to evaluate its validity using Aristotelian logic or modern logical systems. This is because Hegel's argument is a phenomenology, a description of the way things appear. Therefore the only way to test the validity of Hegel's account is to apply it to concrete paradigms provided by human experience, and see if it matches. Here we have seen Hegel's analysis of human relationships neatly mapping onto the relationship of *havruta* study, an academic relationship that can become a deeply intimate, spiritual relationship. And in supporting Hegel's claims, we have gained insight into the abstract framework behind the *havruta* relationship that articulates its rich dynamics.

A final quote from *Masekhet Kiddushin* [26] encapsulates the process that a healthy *havruta* goes through, from life and death struggle to an egalitarian relationship:

Who are the "enemies at the gate" (Psalms 127:5)? Rabbi Hiyya Bar Abba said, even when a son and father, or a master (*Rav*) and student (*talmid*) study a Torah topic together, they become enemies. But they do not budge from there [the topic of shared study] until they come to love one another.[27]

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[1] *V-Talmud Torah K-Neged Kulam (Pe'ah 1:1)*

[2] The precise nature of havruta in the times of Hazal is subject to controversy. The sources have very much to say about group study, and it is abundantly clear that Hazal placed a very serious emphasis on group study, even if the contemporary model of the havruta pair is of more recent vintage. (See Aliza Segal, *Havruta Study: History, Benefits, and Enhancements* (Jerusalem, Israel: ATID, 2004), 7-9). See also *Mishneh Halakhot* 13:174 where he suggests that havruta study may be halakhically obligatory.

[3] *Makkot* 10a: Translation mine. In his responsa *Teshuvot V'Hanhagot* 1:542, Rav Moshe Sternbuch (b. 1926), a contemporary scholar, entertains the question of the obligation to study b-havruta and cites this Gemara as a source for the obligation.

[4] *Taanit* 23a: Translation mine. See *Magen Avot* by the Rashbetz where he applies this statement to havruta study.

[5] This formulation is a paraphrase of Rav Ezra Bick's discussion of the Gemara in a talk at Yeshivat Har Etzion, summer 2012

[6] Scholarly opinion holds that the give and take (*shakla ve-tarya*) represented in sugyot accurately depicts the discussion in the Beit Midrash, and is not simply a later reconstruction. L. H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*. (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1991) p. 224

[7] [7] G.W.F. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1977), tr. A.V. Miller. Sections 178-196

[8] See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-consciousness> which provides a good discussion of self-consciousness of the non-philosophical variety.

[9] See section 4.1 in <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/> See also <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness/> for a broader discussion of philosophical self-consciousness.

[10] Or a capacity that one had innately.

[11] A *sugya* is a conceptual unit, usually of Talmud. For example, the *sugya* of carrying on Shabbat.

[12] This saying is a popular proverb in the yeshiva world.

[13] Note to the reader: In order to get a clearer picture of Hegel's account, it may be helpful to read through the parts of each step that discuss Hegel's abstract model first, and then re-read it with the sections that discuss the applications to Havruta study.

[14] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Section 178.

[15] While one might object that not all havrutas begin with this struggle, there are two points to keep in mind. First, Hegel's account is mapping an

abstract account of the normal evolution of a human relationship. One can disagree with Hegel's account, but hopefully, the full account will strike the reader as intuitively plausible. Secondly, Hegel would claim that *all* relationships have this aggressive subtext, only that it is covert in some cases. On a sociological note, havrutas in the world of the yeshiva often tend to have a more aggressive overtone, given that a good havruta provides the key to success in yeshiva. In some cases yeshiva students even rank their fellow students by academic ability, and challenge their peers to prove their prowess in learning before being considered as a havruta candidate. (The reader is invited to research this phenomenon by visiting their local competitive yeshiva and inquiring about "shotzing up" – a yeshivish term of art.) Furthermore, even in the most amicable havruta relationships, the beginning of the havruta will involve an adjustment period (struggle) where both parties try to assess their partner's skillset and thereby set a tone for the havruta.

[16] An affectionate term for Resh Lakish

[17] *Bava Metzia* 84a: translation based on the Soncino Talmud, with alterations.

[18] 9a: See also *Makkot* 10a for the more famous attribution of the statement to *Rebbi* (Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi)

[19] Translation mine.

[20] The transition from discussing a havruta pair to a "Rav and Talmid" might be confusing. Really, no transition has taken place. We are still discussing the same havruta pair. Just, that as a result of the struggle, one member of the pair has taken on a superior position, and the other an inferior one. Given the shift in the relationship, we can call the havrutot "Rav and Talmid." And now, given these new categories in an unbalanced havruta, we can examine a classic Rav Talmid relationship to illuminate the havruta relationship. This discussion will ultimately lead us to understand the unique quality of a balanced havruta.

[21] One might object that the entire struggle was unnecessary in the first place. Why couldn't the relationship have reached a point of egalitarian harmony from the outset? Three responses seem appropriate here. First, Hegel sees things from an evolutionary standpoint, meaning, things don't begin perfectly, they only reach perfection and refinement through a lot of struggle. Furthermore, people are naturally selfish, so it takes time for them to morally evolve to the extent that their willing that gives both parties maximal benefit. Finally, the dialectic explores the expanded progression a theoretical relationship, from setting up what a relationship is supposed to achieve, to showing how the relationship can become dysfunctional, to how it can ultimately resolve itself the best way.

Hegel is exploring the theory – not saying that every relationship will necessarily conform to this outline.

[22] *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Section 184

[23] *ibid.* 185

[24] In this context, "subject" refers to the person who acting – say the havruta who is talking, and the object is the person who facilitates the subject's self-consciousness – for example the listening havruta.

[25] See the Jewish Encyclopedia's article on Simeon b. Lakish for a fuller exploration of R. Yohanan and R. Lakish's complex relationship and its evolution. Available at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13706-simeon-b-lakish>

[26] 30b

[27] Translation mine.

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