



HOW JEWISH VALUES AND THE CHAVRUTA, STUDENT LEARNING GROUPS, SUPPORT COOPERATIVE LEARNING

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To cite this article:

Solomon, R. D., Greene, W. & Davidson, N. (2023). How Jewish Values and The Chavruta, Student Learning Groups, Support Cooperative Learning. *Autonomy and Responsibility Journal of Educational Sciences* 8(2). 69-74. DOI: [10.15170/AR.2023.8.2.5](https://doi.org/10.15170/AR.2023.8.2.5).

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.15170/AR.2023.8.2.5>.

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How Jewish Values and The Chavruta, Student Learning Groups, Support Cooperative Learning

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While cooperation in education may seem to be a twentieth-century development, it has long-standing origins in many societies. For example, an ancient Jewish tradition of having a learning partner (Chavruta) with whom to study the Talmud is referenced as early as the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 63a). Cooperative learning is a specific type of active learning in which students work together on academic tasks in small teams to help themselves and their teammates learn together. The research on cooperative learning is extensive and compelling. When compared with other instructional approaches, such as individualized instruction and the lecture method, cooperative learning is positively correlated with a number of significant learning variables. Cooperative learning is supported by the Jewish middot (values or virtues) including derech eretz (thoughtful behavior and common decency), areyvut (mutual responsibility and accountability), kavod (honor and respect) and the inclusion of all students in both religious and public life.

Keywords: cooperative learning, chavruta (learning partner), middot (Jewish values or virtues)

Introduction

While cooperation in education may seem to be a twentieth-century development, it has long-standing origins in many societies. For example, an ancient Jewish tradition of having

a learning partner (*Chavruta*) with whom to study the Talmud is referenced as early as the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 63a). Cooperative learning (CL) has developed in secular education over a period of more than fifty years. Eventually, some of us realized that the core values of cooperative learning are compatible with the values of the world's religions. In this paper, we examine the relationship between cooperative learning and selected values within Judaism.

What is cooperative learning?

The field of cooperative and collaborative learning is not monolithic. Indeed, there are many methods of cooperative and collaborative learning in small groups. For an elaboration on the various approaches to implementing cooperative learning see the *Handbook of Cooperative Learning Methods* by Shlomo Sharan (1994) and the volume *Pioneering Perspectives in Cooperative Learning* by Neil Davidson (2021). What all these approaches share is that students work together cooperatively in small groups of 2-5 members in order to accomplish a common goal or academic task in a positive and mutually supportive manner.

In a theoretical synthesis of varied cooperative and collaborative learning approaches, Arató (2023) has identified eight attributes that are common to all the approaches. These are:

1. Personally inclusive parallel interactions
2. Encouraging and constructive interdependence
3. Personal responsibility and individual accountability
4. Equal access and participation
5. Critical friendly and reflective transparency
6. Conscious improvement of personal and social competences
7. Conscious improvement of cognitive and learning competences
8. Open and flexible structures

In addition to these common attributes, there are other attributes which vary among the approaches to cooperative and collaborative learning. Examples of these are how groups are formed, how or whether to teach interpersonal skills, the structure of the group, and the role of the teacher. For further details, see Davidson (1994, 2002).

For syntheses of the research on cooperative learning, see the extensive reviews by Johnson and Johnson (1989), Slavin (1990), Sharan (1980, 1990), and Newmann and Thompson (1987) at the high school level. Additional reviews have focused on conditions for productive group work (Cohen, 1994), task-related group interaction in mathematics groups (Webb, 1991), and cooperative learning with post-secondary students in science, mathematics, engineering, and technology (Springer et al, 1999). In addition, see the more recent cooperative learning research reviews of Gillies (2014), Kyndt et.al (2013) and the Johnsons (2017).

Research conducted in many different subject areas and various age groups of students has shown positive effects favoring cooperative learning in academic achievement, development of higher order thinking skills (both critical and creative), self-esteem and self-confidence as learners. In addition, CL has shown to promote intergroup relations including friendship across racial and ethical boundaries, inclusion, social acceptance of mainstreamed students labeled as handicapped or disabled, developing empathy, the ability to take the perspective of another person, and the development of interpersonal

pro-social skills. When pro-social interpersonal skills are applied in a CL structure or method, they foster the inclusion of everyone in the group, encourage all group members to give their ideas, and enable participants to listen respectfully to all points of view.

What Jewish Values or Virtues, *Middot*, Support Cooperative Learning?

A *middah* is a Jewish value or virtue; it is a righteous way to conduct one's life. *Middot*, the plural of *middah*, are thus Jewish values or virtues. Although *middot* are Jewish values or virtues based on Jewish traditions, any person, Jewish or not, can aspire to live according to these universal values.

Three Universal Jewish Values or *Middot* that Support Cooperative Learning

There are at least three universal Jewish *middot* that support cooperative learning and they are:

- *Derech erez*, literally meaning the way of the world or thoughtful and appropriate conduct and common decency toward others
- *Areyyut*, mutual responsibility and accountability and
- *Kavod*, honor and respect.

Now let's elaborate on the meaning of these *middot*.

What is *Derech erez*?

Derech erez, the way of the world, represents the core principles of human behavior including common decency, civility, civic virtue and social responsibility. These acts of common decency, **Derech erez**, are the core *middot* that are the basis of the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, and in fact, these core moral principles predate the giving of the Torah from The Divine to Moses.

Rabbi Yishma'el said, "**Derech erez** preceded the Torah by twenty-six generations." (Vayikra Rabbah 9;3) Therefore, the values of **derech erez** describe how all people especially students and teachers should behave toward each other in general and especially while studying the Torah and the Talmud, the commentaries on the Torah.

What is *Areyyut*?

The *middah* of **Areyyut** means mutual responsibility and accountability. Where is **Areyyut** derived? It is derived from Leviticus 19:16 which states "You shall not stand idly by the blood of another." This *middah* informs us that each member of the cooperative group or team has the individual and shared responsibility for helping others accomplish their learning objectives. In addition, in Mishnah Sanhedrin it says: "All Israel is responsible for one another."

What is *Kavod*?

Kavod is a *middah* that tells us that each person is entitled to be honored and respected. The **Kavod** *middah* informs us that all people by virtue of being human deserve to be treated

with honor, respect and dignity regardless of their role, level of education, or economic privilege. Why is everyone entitled to **Kavod**? Because we are made in the image of G-d, '**Betzelem Elohim**'; And G-d said, "Let us make the human being in our image and likeness. (Genesis 1:26)

Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua of the 2nd Century CE said: "Let the honor of your student be as dear to you as your own; the honor of your colleague as the reverence for your teacher; and the reverence for your teacher as the reverence of heaven." "Ben Zoma said who is honorable? One who honors all others." – Pirkei Avot 4:1.

Summary of the universal middot

In sum, the universal *middot* of **Derech erez** (to act with common decency), **Aveyvut** (to demonstrate mutual responsibility for others) and **Kavod** (to show respect and dignity toward others) are three foundational Jewish principles, values and associated behaviors which support all types of cooperation in general and all methods for implementing cooperative learning in particular. In addition to the three universal *middot* of **Derech erez**, **Aveyvut** and **Kavod**, the Talmud teaches us to include all persons in both religious and public life. For example, in Pirkei Avot, 2:5 it says: "Do not separate yourself from the community" (Pirkei Avot 2:5); accordingly, we must prevent anyone from being separated or isolated from the community against their will.

Furthermore, in Leviticus 19:14 we are commanded, "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind." Stumbling blocks come in many forms, from less-than-accessible buildings, Shabbat services, prayer books and web pages to health care that is harder to access or isn't sufficient for people with disabilities to be excluded from serious study. We are obligated to remove these stumbling blocks; this is why Judaism cares so deeply for the rights of people with disabilities.

Additional Jewish Texts that Inspire Inclusive Practices

- "Do not curse a person who is deaf and do not place a stumbling block in front of a person who is blind." (Leviticus 19:14)
- "Teach a child according to their way." (Proverbs 22:6) (according to their needs and abilities).
- "Rabbi Yochanan said: " "Rabbi Yochanan said: 'Each of the 40 days that Moses was on Mount Sinai, G-d taught him entire Torah. And each night, Moses forgot what he had learned. Finally, G-d gave it to him as a gift. If so, why did G-d not give the Torah to him as a gift on the first day? In order to encourage the teachers of those who learn in a non-traditional manner.'" (Horayot, Jerusalem Talmud)
- "**Rachmana leib'a ba'ee.**" – "G-d wants only the heart." Talmud, Sanhedrin 106b
- "The Torah was given to us via Moshe as the heritage of all Israel" Deut.33:4.
"Whoever prevents any individual from learning Torah has stolen his legacy." (Pesachim 91b)

In sum, the three *middot* of **Derech erez**, **Areyvut** and **Kavod** are examples of Jewish values that support cooperative behavior and attitudes in general and cooperative learning in particular. Now let's explore how the concept and practice of *chavruta*, paired or grouped student learning, is a basic method for implementing cooperative learning.

How Does The *Chavruta*, Paired Learning, Support Cooperative Learning?

The *Chavruta*, a group of Jewish study partners, is an early form of cooperative learning. After the destruction of Solomon's Temple 586 BCE. the importance of studying in pairs (*chavruta*) was referenced in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 63a) by R. Abba who said in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: "When two disciples form an assembly in *halakhah*, [Jewish Laws of Observance], the Holy One, blessed be He, loves them". In addition, Rabbi Yochanan said about his study partner, Bar Lakisha, "With (my study partner)... whenever I would say something, he would pose 24 difficulties and I would give him 24 solutions, and as a result [of the give-and-take] the subject would become broadened and clarified." (Bava Metzia 84a).

Some of the earliest references to learning in groups, and particularly in pairs, occur in the *Talmud*, where it says: "Two scholars (studying together) sharpen one another" (BT -Ta'anit 7a)

The significance of forming groups to study Torah is also reinforced by R. Yosi b. R. Hanina who is quoted as saying "scholars who sit alone to study the Torah...become fools" (Berakhot 63b). He also strongly asserted: "Form groups and study Torah, for the Torah is only acquired through study in a group."

Chavruta or paired learning is very different from traditional learning where the teacher pontificates on a Talmudic topic and students are expected to replicate what the teacher had stated orally or via a comprehension test. On the other hand, with *chavruta*-style learning each student has the responsibility to (a) analyze the text, (b) organize his or her thoughts into logical arguments and (c) explain his reasoning to his partner or partners. His learning partner is expected to respectfully listen to his reasoning and pose clarifying and insightful questions and by this process each learner's ideas are sharpened and may produce new insights into the meaning of the sacred text.

Summary

It is striking that Jewish educational methods predate cooperative learning by centuries. CL is a specific type of active learning in which students work together on academic tasks in small teams to help themselves and their teammates learn together. The research on cooperative learning is extensive and compelling. When compared with other instructional approaches, such as individualized instruction and the lecture method, cooperative learning is positively correlated with a number of significant learning variables.

Cooperative learning is supported by the Jewish *middot* (values or virtues) including *derech erez* (thoughtful behavior and common decency), *areyvut* (mutual responsibility and accountability), *kavod* , (honor and respect) and the inclusion of all students in both religious and public life.

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