



Learning practices and development in yeshivas: historical, social, and cultural perspectives

Baruch B. Schwarz¹ · Zvi Bekerman¹

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Abstract

Although the yeshiva is the housekeeper of the Jewish tradition of learning, it has undergone dramatic changes along history. We describe these changes in historical, sociogenetic, and microgenetic analyses, and particularly focus on the chavruta—dyadic learning around Talmudic texts during successive meetings, and the chabure—a gathering of chavruta dyads, who report to each other on the insights they reached in consecutive chavruta sessions on the same theme. The microgenetic analyses of chavruta point at its collaborative-argumentative character and at the desire to find new methods to understand the Talmudic text. Learners account for the authority of sages, but find strategies to express their own voices. Analyses of the chabure suggest strong volition for autonomy, and point at highly dialectical discussions. We conclude that modern yeshivas establish a society of learners in which deep changes emerge with regard to social order and learning methods. In doing so, we question whether and how these practices contribute to the maintenance of “traditional” discourses and or move in a “transformative” direction and reconsider the modern/tradition binary.

Keywords Collaborative learning · Argumentation and learning · Dialogism · Jewish education

Introduction

The present paper focuses on ultraorthodox Talmudic¹ learning. In our scrutiny over this specific kind of learning, we also elaborate on general educational theory to overcome the

¹The Talmud is the written version of the Jewish oral law and its commentaries. The word “Talmud” derives from the Hebrew verb “to teach,” which can also mean “to learn.” It is made up of the Mishnah, the original written version of the oral law (compiled in the Land of Israel in the third century CE), and the Gemara, the record of the rabbinic discussions on the Mishna (compiled in the sixth century in Babylon).

✉ Baruch B. Schwarz
baruch.schwarz@mail.huji.ac.il

Zvi Bekerman
zvi.bekerman@mail.huji.ac.il

¹ The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel

traditional/modern binary, which considers past traditional practices either in a positive or negative light, yet always stale. The paper also invites readers to consider the potential of so-called traditional educational practices to contribute to the growing call for reform towards progressive pedagogies.

The paper offers a sociohistorical account of the evolution of yeshivas (ultraorthodox houses of learning) and yeshiva talk practices and systematically analyze microgenetic examples of dyadic (chavruta) talk events. Though aware that no educational practice or strategy can set by itself the path to educational change, but that context (place, management of time, stakeholders, etc.) is the essential key for human development, we question whether and how these practices contribute to the maintenance of “traditional” discourses and or move in a “transformative” direction. The practices we will describe were designed to lead to a critical construction of new knowledge, under the strict control of authority. Inculcating monological knowledge should have been expected to comply with strict authority. This expectation is well aligned with Cartesian conceptions that have evolved in the West (and that started back in the twelfth century), centered in mental states hidden inside the heads of solipsistic individuals (Foucault 1977) and that have come to dominate the western imagination in the last two hundred years (Sampson 1993). We will see, however, that the practices we will describe comply with recent developments in anthropology and psychology focusing on the relationship between cultural and psychological processes (Cole 1996; Geertz 1973; Grossen 2010; Lave 1996; Marková 2016; Valsiner 1998) to understand the psyche. The unity of the psyche and its solitude are being replaced by more sociohistorical, contextualized views of human experience. We now are far more likely to think of selves as always being in the making (Schwandt 1998; Shotter 1992), creating meaning, “becoming” in an inter-subjective world by means of dialogue and narrative (Fisher-Rosenthal 1996). These approaches propose a strong relationship between the social interactive modes in any culture and the psychological functions of its members—in short, between culture and cognition. Cultural mediation is achieved mainly through language, and it is to Bakhtin, a contemporary of Vygotsky, that we owe the return of language to its social setting. Bakhtin was concerned with speech activity in its context, stressing the need to account for cultural, historical, institutional, and individual factors in language. For Bakhtin (1981), the word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes one’s own when the speaker “populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intentions... It is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his word but rather it is in other people’s mouth, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions, it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own” (pp. 293–4). The impossibility of attaching final meanings to language (Ortega y Gasset and Parmenter 1959) and the unfeasibility of texts doing any work all by themselves (Eco 1994) always set the stage for potential critical transformation. The issue of the continuity of tradition versus transformative directions is then an intriguing direction.

Progressive pedagogies consider dialogism, collaboration, and argumentation as crucial ingredients for educational change (Schwarz and Baker 2016; Asterhan and Schwarz 2016). Dialogic teaching encompasses methods for inviting students to interact in a constructive and respectful way (Alexander 2005; Linden and Renshaw 2004). *Collaborative argumentation-based learning* (or CABLE) has been recently identified as a new form of learning that spreads out all around the world in classrooms in which progressive pedagogies are implemented (Ben-Chaim et al. 2019). CABLE stresses the predominance

of collaboration over dialectic argumentation—argumentation in which oppositions between arguments are exacerbated. The implementation of argumentative and collaborative practices promotes not only the co-construction of knowledge (Nussbaum 2008; Asterhan and Schwarz 2016) but also ethical values. We will see that these ingredients are omnipresent in yeshiva practices and intensively enacted on a daily basis. Their presence forces us to consider whether, in spite of the “abyss” that separates the yeshiva context from modern schooling, scrutiny over historical developments of interactions in yeshiva practices can provide new insights in progressive pedagogies.

Historically, Jews developed their tradition not in unison but nevertheless on an agreed corpus around which to learn: The Talmud as a text is polyphonic *à la* Bakhtin for whom textual polyphony points at “...a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses...a plurality of consciousnesses with equal rights and each with its own world combined but are not merged in the unity of the event” (Emerson and Holquist 1984, pp. 6–7). The additional texts that students learn in yeshivas are commentaries of the Talmud and decisions made by adjudicators along the centuries, based on the Talmudic text. Multiple voices and a variety of arguments and justifications are present in the issues discussed and discussions reported in the texts, and stories told about these discussions safeguard a, at times, disruptive or scornful spirit and/or carry the seeds for transformation (Stone 1993).

There are two historical backgrounds to yeshiva practices. The first, internal to the Jewish world, will be sketched in the next section. The second concerns general philosophical and ideological trends that influenced the Western world during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries with the advancement of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. These processes were populated by diverse characters reflecting disparate geographies and chronologies, which never produced an isomorphic doctrine (Barnett 2004). Yet, it seems possible to capture this multiplicity under some common goals expressed in Kant’s motto “*Sapere aude,*” or in Peter Gay’s characterization of the Enlightenment as an ambitious program towards *freedom in its many forms—freedom from arbitrary power, freedom of speech, freedom of trade, freedom to realize one’s talents, freedom of aesthetic response, freedom, in a word, of moral man to make his way in the world* (Gay 1966, p. 3). It is from this perspective that we can see the enlightenment clashing with institutionalized beliefs, while justifying itself based on the authority of ancient philosophers (Kitromilides 2010), seeking to supplant organized faith with reason while helping uproot the authority of kings and bishops, and leading to revolutions. All in all, enlightened secularism, rationalism, and a newly born universal humanity organized in a novel political regime contrasted with the romantic rootedness of place, the call of kinship, and the recognition of natural hierarchical political arrangements setting the stage for the binary opposition modern/traditional which lives with us until today (Shoham 2011).

The success of rationalism and humanism in certain spheres of human activity (e.g., the political) though contested is undeniable, as it led to huge progresses such as relative democratization of education, and human rights. In the Jewish world, it led to emancipation. However, there is a fly in this ointment. Modernity led to rampant ethnocentrism. Not all traditional knowledge is anachronistic nor all new wisdom is modern. From the perspective of the traditional Jewish world, the alluring ideas of humanism and rationalism led to processes of assimilation of large parts of the Jewish society into a modern/modernizing western society (Katz 1998). While this assimilation led to the abandonment of traditions among secular Jews, we will see that it led to the evolution of a sophisticated culture of learning in devout Jewry.

The traditional settings for learning in *Houses of Study*: a short historical and cultural overview

The culture of learning in the Jewish tradition

In the Jewish tradition, the culture of learning is intertwined with revelation: the Torah was given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai; it includes the written law, and the oral law—the way to interpret the written law in order to act properly in the world. The oral law is now compiled in a written text, the Talmud. The Talmud includes the Mishna and the Gemara. The Mishna is a very concise text edited in the third century (CE) in the Land of Israel and registers the oral legal tradition in a written form, seemingly hoping to overcome the perils of exile, which endangered the Jewish tradition. The Gemara was written in the Babylonian Exile to explain the Mishna. In spite of its written modality, the text in the Gemara resonates the oral tradition: It mainly includes protocols of deliberations conducted among sages on the Mishna text. The Talmudic text includes questions, clarifications, agreements, concessions, challenges, refutations, and even humorous interjections that characterize informal conversations. The protocols of the discussions were edited by Babylonian Academies to serve a legislative goal offering decisions about proper conducts in Jewish life, and an educational one while providing a model of learning the scriptures.

The Talmudic texts are complex. While the content of these discussions seems very often obsolete to the modern reader, their form is polyphonic and uncovers seeds of transformation and even of anarchy. A vast literature was developed to help the study of the Talmud, both by exegetes and by adjudicators. This literature added coherence to the Talmudic text but also considerable complexity. This is the case of the Tosafoth,² whose *dialectical-critical* methods (Urbach 1980) overwhelm learners with subtle intricacies.

The yeshiva from early adolescence to adulthood

The meaning of the term yeshiva (“sitting” in Hebrew, pl. yeshivot) points at a learning session. The change in meaning of the term from a learning session to the institution itself appears by the time of the great Talmudic Academies during the Geonic period (third–thirteenth century) in Babylonia. The Geonim acted as the heads of their individual yeshivot, and as spiritual leaders and high judges for the wider communities tied to them. Throughout the Geonic Period, there were three yeshivot, one in Jerusalem (later relocated to Cairo), and the yeshivot of Sura and Pumbedita (later relocated to Baghdad). The yeshiva wielded immense power as the principal body for interpreting Jewish law. The yeshiva also served as an administrative authority, in conjunction with local communities, by appointing members to serve as the head of local congregations. These local leaders would also submit questions to the yeshiva to obtain final rulings on issues of dogma, ritual, or law. After the dispersion of the Geonic yeshivot in the thirteenth century, education in Jewish studies became the responsibility of synagogues all around the world. Jews established yeshiva academies, in Europe and in Northern Africa, usually adjacent to the synagogue, and every town rabbi had the right to

² The Tosafoth are medieval sages (mainly from Northern France and Germany) who commentated the Talmud. They are also considered as adjudicators. They adopt a critical-dialectic approach in their commentaries and decisions (Urbach 1980). Lifschitz (2008) identified extremely complex argumentative structures in their (written) deliberations.

maintain a number of full-time or part-time pupils in them. After a number of years, the students who received rabbinical ordination would either take up a vacant rabbinical position elsewhere or join the workforce. Beyond these elite students, for most of the young observant Jews, learning occurred in the Heder (or Talmud Torah) from the age of 2–3 to the age of 13, and consisted in reading sacred texts, learning some of them by heart, especially prayers, and commenting the Pentateuch.

We do not describe here the historical development of the yeshiva from the Geonic period to its ramifications (the Sephardic, Hassidic, conservative, etc.), but focus on what is called the Lithuanian yeshiva, since they have influenced most of the modern yeshivot. Its beginning points at a revolution in organized Torah study among elites. Rabbi Haim from Volozhin, an influential eighteenth–nineteenth century Lithuanian rabbi, was concerned by the new social and religious changes of the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment) that often opposed traditional Judaism. His anxiety that elite students would be attracted by rationalism and scientific inquiry led him to conceive of a new kind of yeshiva, in the town of Volozhin (Stampfer 1995).

From the age of 13 to the age of 18, adolescents learn in a yeshiva ketana (lit. “small Yeshiva”). From the age of 18, until they get married, students learn in a yeshiva gedola (lit. “big Yeshiva”). The provision of such a full curriculum from early adolescence to adulthood without incorporation of secular studies in the education of the traditional elite Jew is, as mentioned before, a reaction to modern trends outside (e.g., rationalism, schooling). The Lithuanian yeshiva was a clear expression of the separation of ultraorthodoxy from modernizing Jewish groups (Friedman 2006).

World War II brought the yeshivot of Eastern and Central Europe to an end—however, many scholars and rabbinic students who were able to escape and survive the war established yeshivot in a number of Western countries. In the mid-twentieth century, a controversial agreement between secular and religious leaders in the young State of Israel led to the establishment of yeshivas for all ultraorthodox Jews. The elite of the traditional yeshivas was replaced by a large *society of learners* in the ultraorthodox society (Friedman 2006). The democratization of yeshiva practices served the preservation of the ultraorthodox minority in a secular world in which education became a right for all. A significant proportion of young men remain in yeshiva until their marriage; after marriage, many continue their Torah studies in a kollel and spend there on average 10 more years.

The curriculum in yeshivas

The main emphasis is on Talmud study. Generally, two parallel Talmud streams are covered during a zman (trimester). The first is *iyyun* (in-depth study), often confined to selected legally focused tractates with an emphasis on analytical skills and close reference to the classical commentators; the second, *beki'ut*, seeks to cover ground more speedily in order to build general knowledge of the Talmud. Advanced students link the Talmudic discussion to codified law, by studying Halakha (i.e., legal focused commentaries). Students in Rabbinic ordination programs, and often those in kollel, devote the largest portion of their study to Halakha.

The learning practices in the yeshiva

The overall characteristic of the learning practices in yeshivot is their repetitiveness. Students learn six days a week with the same schedule, and participating in the same activities. The

name “seder” (order) given to the different study session in the daily study conveys an immutable structure. From the age of 13, the young learner in the yeshiva ketana begins his day with the Morning Prayer, then, after breakfast, the Ram (the teaching Rabbi) gives an introductory lecture on the theme (Sugya) to be learned. Then, the students arrange themselves in dyads (chavruta) to learn the theme by consulting and discussing Talmudic sources. The morning *in-depth learning* of the Talmudic text (*limud beiyun*) in dyadic session is very challenging. After the lunch, the Ram delivers a lecture that conveys a *limud bekiut*—*breadth learning* of Talmudic texts, through which he skims quickly over contents in order to familiarize the learners with them. After the afternoon prayer, students come back to chavruta study of Talmudic text. The chavruta learning is bonded to the shiur and its role is to reconstitute what the Ram delivered during the lesson through the texts under the guidance of the Mashgiah (the supervisor).

From the age of 17, the learning daily schedule in the yeshiva gedola (the big yeshiva) is almost the same every day except for the Shabbat (Spitzer 1989; Etkes and Tikochinski 2004). There are notable differences between such a schedule and the schedule of younger students. First, the in-depth chavruta dyadic learning, precedes the shiur of the Ram for it serves to prepare the dyads to follow the shiur delivered. Once every two weeks, the shiur is replaced by a setting called *chabure*, in which different chavruta dyads present to each other the insights they reached while studying the theme proposed by the Head of the Yeshiva. At the end of the day, the chavrutas reflect on the theme they studied, this time autonomously, without the help of a supervisor. In most yeshivot, the year is divided into three periods (terms) called zmanim (lit. times; sing. zman), separated by short periods of vacation.

The kollel, in which the learners enter after their marriage (generally between the age of 19 and 22), is a thriving institution in Israel: 80,000 students learn in kollelim, 84% of all ultraorthodox Jews between the ages of 20 and 35 (Kahaner et al. 2017). The kollel provides a structured daily schedule of study mostly aimed at drawing conclusions in Jewish law from the Talmudic texts. The Talmudic texts are debated in light of the legal decisions drawn by Talmudic adjudicators. Lectures by the Rabbi (shiurim) are not offered daily and learners often do not attend them. Finally, although the most frequent practice is chavruta learning (mostly in-depth learning), the chabure becomes a very important setting in kollelim.

The repetitiveness of the daily schedule instills distinctive norms and values about Torah learning, and confers to it a ritual character. The path from ritual to memory, and from memory to tradition, leads to continuation and not to transformation. Yet, the description of the historical development of the three practices in the Lithuanian yeshivas will uncover substantial changes.

The shiur

The shiur (lesson pl. shiurim) delivered by a rabbinical authority has been held since the Geonic period in the tenth century (Breuer 2003). Traditionally, the method is dialectic as the Rabbi delivering it asks students difficult questions and challenges their arguments; students challenge the rabbi’s arguments too (Stampfer 1995). In the first Lithuanian yeshiva, the Etkes and Tikochinski 2004 Volozhin yeshiva, the shiur became a major daily event. It was called the “perpetual offering” (). Today, in the yeshiva ketana, the shiur introduces learners to the theme to be studied in dyads. In the first years of the yeshiva gedola, learners are provided with pre-specified sources, with which they prepare themselves for the shiur. Later on, the shiur loses its central place; students are not given any pre-specified sources, and are left alone in

their inquiry. Nowadays, with the profusion of resources available to learners, the spiritual importance of the shiur of the Head of the Yeshiva has diminished in comparison with the shiur in the nineteenth century (Brown, personal communication).

The chavruta

The paired-study called *chavruta* is by far the most common practice in yeshivot, especially but not only in Lithuanian yeshivot. The fact that chavruta learning has always been the preferred setting for studying the Talmud has been refuted by scholars that relied on reports of learners who learned in yeshivas; Stampfer (1995), who studied the Lithuanian yeshivot in the nineteenth century, noticed that in the renowned Volozhin yeshiva students generally learned individually. This reality conflicts with what rabbinic sources stipulate concerning good Torah learning (Breuer 2003). The revived popularity of chavruta learning is owed to the changes that took place starting in the middle of the twentieth century when the elite of the traditional yeshivas was replaced by a large *society of learners* (Friedman 2006). Following this societal change, average and weak students were incorporated into Talmudic studies. Yeshiva learning practices evolved, the main change being the massive implementation of chavruta learning, a dyadic setting that had been quite marginal until then. More than 125,000 ultraorthodox students in Israel learn in these institutions today. Today students mainly learn in chavruta settings at least 6 h per day, 6 days a week. From the age of 18, they hardly attend any lesson given by their rabbis. Chavruta settings have an inclusive function: strong students are encouraged to interact with weak students, and this function is crucial for the constitution of a society of learners: The chavruta setting has then become an indispensable tool for constituting a community of learners.

Chavruta settings fulfill other functions. In the yeshiva ketana, students reconstitute insights alluded to in the shiur (lecture), and prepare for and review the shiur with their chavruta during a seder session in the yeshiva. Chavruta settings have another function when the chavruta learners have a similar level: chavruta-style learning *may* help learners to analyze and explain the material, to point out the errors in partner's reasoning, and to question and sharpen each other's ideas, often arriving at entirely new insights of the meaning of the text. The Rabbinical literature is full of such claims³ about how the learning of Talmudic texts should look like. However, empirical research is necessary to evaluate what happens when students enact dyadic practices in yeshivas.

The chabure

Like for chavruta learning, chabure learning has historical roots. Its original definition (that appears in the Talmud) is a group of sages who engage in the elucidation of a "sugya" (Talmudic theme) (Behr 1982). Breuer (2003) pointed out that in the days of the Geonim, the nickname "Chabura" describes a "yeshiva" in Israel, Egypt, and Italy. With the emergence of the Lithuanian yeshiva, the meaning of Chabura changed considerably. The leaders of yeshivot encouraged the creation of the chabure as a new kind of organization aimed at fostering intellectual autonomy among young gifted learners, and at preparing them to serve as Rabbis in communities or in yeshivot. For Rabbi Shimon Skop, the leader of the Grodna Yeshiva in

³ For example, in the Talmud, R. Yosi b. R. Hanina is quoted as saying that "scholars who sit alone to study the Torah ... become stupid" (*Berakhot* 63b).

the first quarter of the twentieth century, the chabure served as a framework for 10–15 students for presenting/listening to novelties in Talmudic studies. Klabinsky (2009) argues that the chabure had an additional function in the first Lithuanian yeshivot—the guidance of young students in order to introduce them to the complex themes of Talmudic deliberations. At the head of the chabure was a magid, an experienced student that led the learning of the chabure. As aforementioned, nowadays, the chabure meetings turn around the clarification of Talmudic themes: once every two weeks, the shiur is replaced by the chabure, in which different chavruta dyads present to each other the insights they reached autonomously. The fact that the chabure meetings are the only ones where different (groups of) learners can compare and evaluate insights reached autonomously naturally bestows to these meetings a strong social character: the status of learners and their excellence is recognized there.

We have described the historical evolution of the yeshiva towards its Lithuanian version, and have shown that important historical events and societal changes impinged on the practices and methods of the study of Talmudic texts. The kind of learners who attend yeshivot, nowadays, is very different from what it was 80 years ago. A small elite of learners who generally stopped learning in yeshivot at the beginning of their adulthood and began making their living was replaced by a community of learners who study from their early adolescence, generally, to their thirties, leave the burden of their livelihood to their wives and in Israel to political coalition agreements (Berman 2000). The practices enacted in the yeshivas followed this social change, and the widespread of chavruta settings incorporated students who cannot handle studying highly complex Talmudic texts, unless brighter learners tutor them or unless they collaborate with each other. However, this intensive study of Talmudic texts in chavruta settings brings to the fore issues that rabbinical authorities did not consider enough. First is the very issue of authority, as most of the massive learning done in the yeshiva today is done with minimal supervision of rabbinical authority. A related issue is the engagement in the study of the Talmudic texts, again in a context of minimal supervision. Another issue is the content of the learning of the Talmudic texts: Although the Talmudic literature is vast, during their studies in the yeshiva, which often lasts more than two decades, students read the same canonical texts several times, as well as their exegeses that provide explanations to many of their queries. In this situation, the question is what is being learned, especially by experienced learners. The study of interactions between students at a microgenetic level is then susceptible to provide answers to these issues and to uncover general characteristics about the development of ultraorthodox yeshiva learners.

The dialectic-dialogic character of practices in yeshivas: a microgenetic perspective

Research on the talk of learners as they participate in practices in ultraorthodox yeshivas in the three settings we aforementioned—chavruta, chabure learning, and shiur—is scarce. The focus on the microgenetic level, in which learners interact with each other, with Talmudic texts, or with rabbinical figures, depends on the willingness of the learners and of the heads of the yeshivas. Until several years ago, ultraorthodox institutions have been reluctant to open their doors to universities. Largely, universities have been considered as a threat to Jewish education in the orthodox world since the beginning of the nineteenth century. This reluctance has even been more pronounced in the state of Israel, where the temptation to suck from the surrounding culture is bigger. However, our research group has developed strategies that skirt institutional

obstacles. Among those strategies, we do not turn directly to the Head of the Yeshiva to obtain an official permission to enter the yeshiva (we did try this approach in the past, but our attempts led to a refusal); rather, we turn directly to students and express our interest in Talmudic studies. We ask for their permission to audio-record their learning, and they usually agree upon our commitment to showing them the transcripts and our interpretations for their approbation before publication. In some cases, the students prefer us not to be present, and they record their learning by themselves, and bring us their audio-records. Finally, trust between yeshiva learners and researchers has considerably increased as we incessantly asked for their help in order to understand some of their learning moves. Our growing success to access learning processes in ultraorthodox yeshivas also reflects the relative openness of certain circles in the ultraorthodox society in Israel (Brown 2017). In addition to our analyses of recorded interactions among students studying Talmudic texts, we interviewed students about their motivations, and about the organization of their life in and out of the yeshiva. We should say, however, that our success to analyze learning processes has been only partial: So far, no direct observation of lectures/shiurim has been done. We have been able to trace chavruta interactions for more than a decade, and we could recently follow interactions in a chabure setting. We report here about what these observations tell us about learning in the Lithuanian yeshiva.

The nature of interactions in chavruta settings: first research findings

The smallest activity within which social interactions can be identified and analyzed is the “*sugya*”—the general theme discussed. The general themes are chosen by the Head of the Yeshiva. After the choice of theme is made, students meet several days in a row (generally from one to two weeks) to comprehend the theme. We conducted a series of *case studies* in which we followed dyads while they discussed a general theme during several weeks. We concentrated on *in-depth learning*, which is considered as the most important part of the daily schedule. A first insight that we drew from our observations is that although students study the same Talmudic texts several times from early adolescence to adulthood, the reiterated learning of the texts enables a rediscovery of ideas that were already known, which is much more than the reconstitution of previously constructed ideas (Schwarz 2011). Chavruta students always consider texts in relation to other texts. The Talmudic sources (Mishna as well as Gemara) are subject to divergent interpretations drawn by exegetes/adjudicators. However, what is omnipresent is the collaborative atmosphere, which reigns in the chavruta. This collaboration is mediated by texts, which bring forward divergent perspectives presented in a quite blunt way. In the chavruta setting, *collaborative argumentation* affords learners coping with the web of arguments, counterarguments, challenges, and refutations provided by the Talmudic text and its commentators (Schwarz 2014, 2015). This type of process, labeled collaborative argumentation-based learning (or CABLE), has already been mentioned as characterizing progressive pedagogies. CABLE, which stresses the predominance of collaboration over dialectic argumentation, is ubiquitous in chavruta learning.

Schwarz et al. (2019) showed that the case of chavruta learning provides distinct CABLE processes: *Argumentative collaborative (re-)reading*, *co-construction*, *collaborative inquiry*, attempts to *argue with each other under the constraints of authoritative sources*, and *the identification with commentators who argue with each other*. The *argumentative collective re-reading* conveys an interlocutory dimension. The two learners argue with each other through the reading of passages of respected adjudicators. The *argumentative collective re-reading* of

texts enables to strengthen or weaken positions expressed in a critical discussion. It is made possible in the context of its primary reading in previous periods of the education of the learners. Chavruta learners are familiar with the texts, and they have even read many of its exegetes, but now, as the focus is to draw rules of conduct from the Talmudic text, the (re-)reading is fresh. Argumentative collective re-reading means that the students rediscover the text by revitalizing it in the context of a discussion: For the text to become alive, interlocutors need to engage with it. Engaging with a text confronts them with the indeterminacy of meaning which is always on its way somewhere.

Among the CABLE mechanisms identified, the attempts to *argue with each other under the constraints of authoritative sources*, and *the identification with commentators who argue with each other* convey the progressive identification with authoritative figures—exegetes/adjudicators. The arguments found in canonical texts are a priori constraints, but they serve as resources in the hesitations of chavruta learners. However, they progressively become successful at arguing by playing the roles of these exegetes. Their awareness that they reflect the rationale held by both exegetes is not immediate. When reached, this awareness leads to a vivid argumentation, as if it were an anachronistic debate between the two exegetes. Schwarz et al. (2019) showed that chavruta learners often identify themselves with some sages who are protagonists in the Talmudic text, to oppose standpoints held by other sages. Alternatively, they present a distinctive exegesis, without explicitly telling that they disagree with some of these same sages. In contrast with their identification with sages in the Talmud, chavruta learners are not always accountable to the authorities in the yeshiva—at least from the age of 18 onwards, as this raises from interviews with several chavruta learners (Schwarz 2011). The ideas elaborated in chavrutas generally rely on early sources (sages of the Talmud, early adjudicators, and commentators) rather than on contemporary sources. These findings suggest that, to a large extent, the chavruta students handle their autonomy towards authorities in sophisticated ways.

In a case study focusing on the succession of daily dyadic meetings, Ben-Chaim et al. (2019) investigated whether and how these practices contribute to the maintenance of traditional legal discourses and or move in a transformative direction. They showed that the chavruta learners are constantly seeking to find *methods of their own* while discussing legal texts. They do not neglect the arguments and methods of the various protagonists in Talmudic studies (sages in the Talmud, commentators, adjudicators), but they incorporate the methods of their ancestors with innovative methods of their own. Ben-Chaim et al. (2019) concluded that like for the way the learners handle rabbinical authority, the striving for innovative methods is a sign of social change in the ultraorthodox society.

Our present research points then at chavruta talk, being as polyphonic as the Talmudic text, mirroring in its interactions the distinct perspectives and ideologies born by the multiple past, present, and future characters partaking in the dialogue.

The nature of talk in chabure: critical and animated on-topic discussions

Ben-Chaim et al. (2020) reported on chabure practices in yeshivot; they observed one dyad, which typically studied a general theme (a section of the Talmud regarding some laws about Shabbat) in a chavruta setting during two weeks. They then observed how the dyad wrote a summary page and used it in a chabure meeting—when presenting their insights to three other dyads. Authors showed that the presenting dyad led the chabure discussion, by using various rhetorical devices to persuade the other chavruta dyads that their conclusions on the issues

discussed were accurate. For example, they did not capitalize on arguments they raised during the chavruta learning that were not explicitly rooted in rabbinical literature. Since the conclusions of the leading chavruta in the chabure were in accordance with an adjudicator from the fifteenth century, they organized their presentation in a way that would naturally lead to the deliberations and conclusions of this adjudicator.

Authors showed that the nature of the dialogue in the chabure setting is different from the nature of the dialogue in the chavruta setting. The first difference relates to the presence of the text on which the leading chavruta relies in the discussion. The summary page written by them after days of study in a chavruta is a resource that the dyad uses as a plan for the presentation to convince the other participating dyads that their insights are correct. Authors showed that although many of the insights were agreed upon by the other participants, still, there remained a distance between the summary page and the moves in the group discussion: The members of the leading chavruta faced counter arguments that forced them to consider a variety of ways to continue moving in the path they had chosen.

A second difference with chavruta learning is that chabure participants do not engage in new knowledge building or shared learning of the sources—a key feature of chavruta learning (Author 2014). Discussions in the chabure are interrupted, and the chabure members often repeat their arguments. This style indicates great emotional involvement. Under the purpose of building common agreement on the issues raised, the work done is rhetorical: the chabure is the place in which arguments developed in the respective participating chavruta dyads are revealed. These revelations are used to sharpen already produced knowledge and not for building any new common knowledge.

Another difference between the chavruta and the chabure context is that the collaborative-argumentative mode, which characterizes the chavruta context, is replaced by a very dialectical mode in the chabure: the number of objections is high, the protagonists base their claims on contradicting sources, the tone of the conversation raises, and firm differing arguments are presented by the other participating dyads.

Despite the rather tense debate, the study showed that the discourse in the chabure meeting remains focused on understanding the issues at hand and not on the possible winning of the perspectives of any participating dyad over the other. The objections raised were all directed towards the collaborative goal of explaining issues related to the theme at stake: Despite the objections and attempts at rebuttal, the rhetorical moves of the chabure were all “ad rem” and never “ad hominem.” As one of the members of the chabure analyzed stated in an interview, “we are only concerned with the search for truth, and for that reason all means - including disagreements within other Chavruta dyads and discussions among members of various Chavruta dyads are necessary and legitimate.” Such findings turn Rosenfeld’s argument (Rosenfeld 1991) according to which there is inherent competitiveness among members of various chavruta dyads even when they are in disagreement, to a more nuanced argument: Emulation—a kind of positive competitiveness—motivates students who are adamant to reach what they see as the true argument. This emulation was more pronounced in chabure than in chavruta.

Conclusions

The ultraorthodox society, which has progressively emerged as a new society since the beginning of the nineteenth century, is highly literate, as its learning practices are based on

reciting, reading, and commenting canonical texts and arguing around them. The syntax of these texts is complex and their character is highly dialectical. In this paper, we concentrated on the educational cursus from early adolescence to adulthood, and showed that practices of the study of the Torah underwent deep changes along the centuries. From a societal point of view, since the middle of the twentieth century, the yeshiva that had traditionally hosted elite students only, began to host all young learners that identified with the nascent ultraorthodox idea to form a *society of learners*. From a practice point of view, group practices (chavruta and chabure) became quite dominant at the expense of the shiur—the lesson delivered by a rabbinical authority. We have shown that these modifications echoed deep changes in Western culture, and were made to protect the ultraorthodox society from it.

The list of practices enacted in the yeshivot shows the overwhelming social character of this learning. Most practices are conducted among peers, rather than between mentors and their students. The practices are enacted daily and repetitively, with chavruta learning occurring at least twice a day.

The learning practices uncovered resonate with Bakhtin's main philosophy of language and social theory—*dialogism* (Bakhtin 1981). Dialogue from this perspective is not just about dyads (as in our case chavrutas) interacting in and through language. Dialogue is that through which meaning comes into being, not as individual accomplishment but always as a product of contextual and historical evolution (Holquist 2002). The notion of voice is *central to an understanding of dialogue; two exactly similar utterances might not share* (usually will not) the same meaning if voiced by two different people who might or might not be in agreement. Both members of the chavruta voice indeed the same Talmudic text but their ongoing argumentative moves show the text to be open to multiple meanings.

We are aware that Bakhtin's theory of dialogism is used (and some may say overused) to describe how people communicate meanings in any context. Our appeal to Bakhtin, according to this view, to describe the specifics of meaning making in chavruta may appear then redundant to say the least. We would dare to suggest that like writers, our chavruta learners capitalized on ancient texts to give birth to their own voices and intentionally add their voices to the chorus of the revived voices of their ancestors. For Bakhtin dialogue has no finite limits, not in the past nor in the future, for meaning is open ended. When considering our chavruta argumentative process, it would be difficult to deny that even if the intention of the chavruta participants is to hold to past unchanging meanings the dialogic nature of human language will always keep open a door for transformation. This door might not be taken, but not taking it implies an active effort to create and sustain monologic relations/meaning managed through the control and power (the rabbis/sages and the texts power). Yet, Talmud and Talmud learning are not monologic, though in their polyphony they seem to try to sustain a monologic character (so as to prevent transformation, though as said transformation stays always as an open option). Given that the production of meaning is fundamentally indeterminate and unfinalizable (Bakhtin 1984), chavruta and chavruta argumentation in the yeshiva could be conceptualized as an imagined (intentional) monologism (the static language of the powerful) dialogically implemented. No one can foresee the direction dialogue will take. Dialogue can go in the direction of recreating and sustaining a past as well as in the direction of transforming/reforming it. The ultraorthodox challenge influenced by a modern monologic West (based on the presumption of solipsistic individuals involved in relations of power originating meaning in their minds or in language as a finalized code) is how to sustain a tradition based on a dialogic (Talmudic) text. Something like sustaining a dialogical base and a monological superstructure.

Our chavruta subjects have been scripted within a long historical tradition. In a sense, they ventriloquize the utterances of others, through reporting them as they appear in the Talmudic text or by assimilating them into their own speech. Ventriloquation, in this sense, points at the fact that they both speak their individual voice and a collective one for they have no other choice but to speak through the words of others (Cooren and Sandler 2014).

Humans generally do not consciously think of their words as if they ventriloque others; our chavruta Talmud students seem to consciously do so, and when so doing they not only rent the words of past sages but they also appropriate an identity (Wortham 2003), that of ultraorthodox Jews. Yet, even when consciously appropriating meanings and identity, they stay unfinished and open to the infinitude of new possible meanings. Moreover, the fact that they ventriloque early sages rather than their direct or contemporary rabbis may suggest that they attempt to balance between their willingness to continue tradition and to enfranchise themselves from authority in the yeshiva.

The repetitiveness of chavruta and chabure practices seems strongly related to ritual and ritual to memory and in this sense with tradition as continuation and not transformation. Yet classical sources point already at possible contradicting understandings of mimesis; Plato in the Republic associates mimesis with imitation and copying, while Aristotle asserts mimesis as the principal source for the world creation (Lorenz 2014). The chavruta and chabure students that we reported on had learned in the past the same Talmudic texts and learned them in the same settings in consecutive sessions. However, we saw that in their performances, these students strove to reproduce the source, but knew that at each turn, unexpected exegetical possibilities opened.

From this perspective, the bifurcation between modernity and tradition is more a strawman than a helpful analytical approach. When dealing with Talmudic learning, we are not dealing with tensions between modernity and tradition but with iterative performances, which by their very nature cannot but produce difference, change, and transformation. What we might be witnessing are repetitive performances (reading of canonical texts, voicing of old arguments, etc.) conducted so as to, in spite of the change they produce, safeguard the legitimacy of past authority. The question if the performers, in our case chavruta members, have or not the intention or are conscious or not of the results of their activity is of no much importance, for the results are clear—the evolution of an old tradition under the guise of no change. Our performers manipulate canonical texts and voices to express their own voices and to consolidate their own opinions. Their practices serve to sustain the illusion of fixity and when being undertaken build their identities as the (new) guardians of canonical law.

In this sense, not only tradition is a fabrication (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) but also modernity is. Tradition is never immutable for it is performed by individuals and is not the result of any binding record of texts or events. Tradition is the continuous adaptation to the present; if it were not for the political ideological challenge set by its competing concept modernity (which we might want to read as accelerated change for the benefit of identifiable powers), tradition would not be discussed nor known other than by the name of change, transformation, or adaptability.

In the studies mentioned in this paper, all learners observed were considered as excellent students in their yeshivot or kollels. This is an important precision on the findings reported. Indeed, the high level of argumentative discourse of chavruta learners around very dialectical texts observed in several studies (Schwarz 2011, 2015) is unquestionable. Yet, the belief that chavruta learning is mainly dialectical-critical should be replaced, in light of the case studies by a combination of the argumentative and the collaborative, which can also be termed as an integration of the dialogic and the dialectic.

We have listed different forms of collaborative argumentation-based learning phenomena (Baker et al. 2019) that occur in chavruta learning and have stressed that the protagonists capitalized on authorities to express their own voice. They played the role of an adjudicator or of an exegete to oppose a viewpoint raised by an authority—a viewpoint they may think is wrong. And when, among members of the same chavruta, a disagreement arises, this disagreement takes the form of a debate between sages whose commentaries are at hand to feed their debate.

Playing such roles does not necessarily mean the duplication of ideas already developed in the rabbinical literature. We have mentioned that Ben-Chaim et al. (2019; Schwarz 2019) showed that chavruta learners are adamant to find *methods* to comprehend a Talmudic theme. Some of these methods were well-known methods but others were new. The fact that many of them disappeared along the successive meetings of the chavruta dyad towards their understanding of the general theme suggests some freedom in their debates (Ben-Chaim et al. 2020). Scrutiny over these ephemeral methods shows that some disappeared because they were refuted by rabbinical texts that the learners discovered. In the passage from the chavruta to the chabure setting, the summary page they wrote in order to prepare themselves for the chabure did not include new ideas or methods, which were not backed by rabbinical authorities. This discarding of new ideas suggests that while the chavruta setting, with its intimacy allows for exegetical experimentation, when presenting and defending their ideas in the chabure context, the need to safeguard their legitimacy forces them to adjust to more purist standards. This strategy suits well one of the foundational rules of yeshiva learning: theorize and play as much as you can when juggling with legal and books written by adjudicators, but when aiming at practice conform to Halakhic decisions held by rabbinical authorities. Yet, the processes we reveled in our work show that the system though tight can also leak.

We have mentioned that the chabure discourse is animate and of a dialectic nature. We have also noticed that participants do not use personal attacks (ad hominem strategies) but rather, stick to the issue at stake. We should say, however, that this focus on the topic conceals social goals: We have already mentioned that the chabure is the place where the status of learners is established. It functions by stratifying students into outstanding or mediocre and carries deep consequences for the life of the learner (to whom he can marry, whether he can serve as a Rabbi, etc.).

What can liberal education learn from yeshivas? Of course, from the perspective of liberal educators, the yeshiva embodies major defects such as the indoctrination of students to a narrow, closed worldview. However, several aspects of yeshiva learning are highly relevant to modern pedagogies. First, chavruta learning is based on a collaborative setting in dyads. Progressive pedagogies are committed to reducing both teacher-led discussions and individual work, in favor of small-group work. Schools often implement collaboration among students—but far less comprehensively than in yeshivas. Beyond this dyadic structure, the learning task in the yeshiva is organized around texts that present different and often conflicting viewpoints, whereas school learning has traditionally been organized around canonical, monological texts. This situation is changing. For example, in history classes, activities may be designed around the comparison of texts representing different narratives (van Drie and van Boxtel 2008). In science education, socioscientific dilemmas presented through texts that convey divergences of opinion become popular (Sadler and Zeidler 2005). The pedagogy to be adopted, to lead students into consideration of conflicting views, has been recognized as argumentative. However, this pedagogy is still embryonic, and the preliminary free questioning which is so common in yeshiva learning is an important practice to be considered. Let us consider, next,

the question of motivation. The interviews we performed (2006) confirmed what Nisan and Shalif (2006) found—the overwhelming motivation of learners in yeshivas generated by a *sense of the worthy*. Yeshiva students are products of an authoritative society. Toddlers in that society learn unequivocally what is good and bad; they recite by heart prayers and psalms, and are taught to fulfill commandments as ways to obey their Creator. Yeshivas are total institutions that isolate students from outside influences. However, during the arduous chavruta learning that lasts ten or twelve hours a day, the motivation expressed as a sense of worthy remains steady, and authoritative voices are not perceivable. This is a remarkable achievement from which liberal education can learn. The normative motivation in the yeshiva does indeed act in the direction of cultural conservatism, but there is no reason to believe that this direction—which stems from the yeshiva's educational purpose—is a necessary aspect of all forms of normative motivation. The sense of the worthy in one's studies can be realized in different ways. It is thus worth investigating whether there can be normative motivation that leaves room for negotiation between the teachers and the students about the sense of the worthy itself, the justifications for it, and the ways of realizing it. Several researchers have developed pedagogies involving different forms of argumentative talk to enact four commitments—pluralism, dialogism, collaboration, and dialecticity. Notably, *Accountable Talk* instigated by Michaels et al. (2008) fosters accountability (1) to the learning community, in which participants listen to and build their contributions in response to those of others; (2) to accepted standards of reasoning; and (3) to knowledge. *Accountable Talk* has been enacted in hundreds of schools in the USA. One of the reasons of this success, we propose, is the clarity and the assertiveness of its proponents. Like our colleagues in yeshivas, they communicate their own *sense of the worthy*.

Let us summarize the findings of the studies reported. The different case studies we reported on suggest a strong tendency to collaborate and to help each other when facing complex dialectical texts, a relative freedom in chavruta learning, and an ambivalent relation to authority. In chavruta settings, learners find ways to express their own voices not in spite of but through rabbinical authorities. At the same time, they recognize the limits of their autonomy, and do not make public ideas that are not solidly rooted in the rabbinic literature. In the realm of behavior, they fully comply with the decisions of the Halakha leaders recognized in the ultraorthodox society. Learners handle the issue of novelty in the context of recurrent study of the same texts by seeking new methods rather than seeking new conclusions. The emergence of these new methods is often evanescent as their presentation in the public space might endanger their position in the community of learners. Again, in accordance with Bakhtin's dialogism theory (Bakhtin 1990), voice can live within one speaker who can voice to himself or to other interlocutors an utterance while considering which of the known historical possible meanings is the one he/she prefers or when hoping to get cues from the interlocutor as to which possible meaning is preferable to the present interaction. The insights, observed at a microgenetic level, suggest the advent of a new social order in the ultraorthodox society and of new ways to apprehend Talmudic texts: the importance of the shiur (by rabbinical authorities) decreases, at the expense of more egalitarian practices. Yeshiva learners submit to the halachic decisions of their rabbis but seldom, if at all, refer to them in their halachic discussions expressing a strong preference to hang their arguments on more historically recognized sages. In chabure meetings, many ideas expressed in the chavruta setting vanish, but their vanishing does not reflect ideological needs; rather, they reflect social needs. The emergence of a new social order in the Lithuanian ultraorthodox society is slow, and latent, but is happening.

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Baruch B. Schwarz. The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel. E-mail: baruch.schwarz@mail.huji.ac.il
Current themes of research

Educational psychology to the development of reasoning in several domains (mathematics, science, history, civic education). Argumentation in learning and development. R&D European projects on the use of technologies to boost deliberative argumentation, productive discourse, collaborative learning, mathematical problem solving, and “Learning to Learn” skills. Research on the moderation of collaborative learning. The study of ultra-orthodox learning in yeshivas. Special Interest Group on Dialogue, Reasoning and Argumentation (SIG 26) at the European Association of Research in Learning and Instruction.

Most relevant publications in the field of Psychology of Education:

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