

A Letter to Our Readers

The new magazine you are holding in your hands (or perhaps discovering on the Internet) arose from a desire to make a *shidduch*, a productive match. The Shalom Hartman Institute has long taken great pride in its Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, whose scholars, many of them leaders in their fields at Israeli universities, publish prolifically in academic journals that most readers in the wider world never see. *Havruta: A Journal of Jewish Conversation* is designed to bridge that gap.

Havruta is an Aramaic word similar to the Hebrew *haver*, friend. It refers to the study of traditional Jewish texts in pairs or groups, whether in the beit midrash study hall, after the Shabbat meal, or even over lunch at a deli. It's a marvelous way to read, as many readers know.

Our *Havruta* is an experiment in translation and adaptation. Some of the articles in this first issue were written especially for us, in Hebrew or in English. Others were originally written for publication in scholarly books and journals. All of them, we think, merit wide reading and further discussion.

Sometimes our topics can seem a bit esoteric. Why, for example, are we running a piece that focuses on the mystical Biblical exegesis of Rabbi Elijah, the 18th century Gaon of Vilna? Does anyone care about the nuances of Jewish conversion law at the time of Ezra the Scribe, or in medieval Ashkenaz? How interesting can an article be, if it opens with a convoluted Talmudic argument about fasting on Hanukkah? The answers, we believe, are very interesting indeed.

If *Havruta* has an ideology, it is this: Judaism is endlessly surprising and uncannily relevant. The articles we offer here, and those we plan to publish in the future, are selected on the basis not only of their pure intellectual value, but also of their potential meaning for the contemporary reader. And if, as we hope and expect, you'd like to know more about an intriguing passage that you encounter on these pages from Maimonides or *midrash* - or the American poet Emma Lazarus (see p. 78) - you might want to re-read them with a friend, in *havruta*.

In this issue's special section on Membership, prominent thinkers from diverse corners of the Jewish world offer their thoughts on varieties of Jewish identity and their implications for Jewish peoplehood. We could not ask for a better means of illustrating this theme than the stunning photographs from Frederic Brenner's acclaimed *Diaspora* series that appear, with his generous permission, throughout the magazine.

The editors of *Havruta* would like also to thank all the authors of our first issue for allowing us to publish and adapt the fruits of their labor. Thanks are due as well to many colleagues at the Shalom Hartman Institute who have encouraged our efforts and offered valuable guidance. And thanks in advance to our readers, for taking the time to enjoy our magazine. By all means, let us know what you think.



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