

Facilitator Script: Taanit 23a

7–10 minutes open | 12 minutes chavruta | 8 minutes share-back

0:00 • Welcome (1 min)

“We are sitting in a beit midrash in Poland, about to learn a page of Talmud together. For many of you, this is the first time. For some of you, it is one of many. Both are exactly the right way to be here. In the next thirty minutes, you are going to do something Jews have been doing for two thousand years, and you are going to do it here, in this beit midrash, on this soil.”

1:00 • What is the Talmud? (2 min)

“The Talmud is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism. It is the record of how our tradition interpreted Torah and built a way of life.

- It has two layers. The first is the Mishnah, the Oral Torah written down around the year 200 CE in the Land of Israel by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. The Mishnah is short, terse, and arranged by topic.
- The second is the Gemara: centuries of rabbis, in the Land of Israel and in Babylonia, arguing about what the Mishnah means. The Babylonian Gemara was edited around the year 500 CE.
- Mishnah plus Gemara together is what we call the Talmud.
- It is not a law code. It is not a rulebook. It is a record of argument. Majority and minority opinions are preserved side by side. Disagreement is not a failure; it is the form the tradition takes.
- The Talmud has sixty-three tractates and roughly 2,700 two-sided pages. For about fifteen hundred years, Jews have been opening these pages and arguing back. When you open one today, you are not reading about the conversation. You are joining it.

If asked: The Hebrew you see on the page is actually a mix. Hebrew is used for the Mishnah. Aramaic is used for the Gemara. The page we are learning today is Gemara — so what you see is mostly Aramaic.

4:00 • What is chavruta? (1 min)

We are going to learn in pairs, in Chavruta. Chavruta comes from the Aramaic word *chaver*, which means friend or companion.

A chavruta is a study partner. Traditional Jewish learning is almost never solitary. You learn in pairs, out loud, together.

A beit midrash is a house of study, and it is meant to be loud. When fifty women are learning in chavruta, you will hear it. That is the sound of Torah.

6:00 • Your Handout, and the Man You Are About to Meet (2 min)

Hold up the handout and walk them through it:

- “On the front of your handout you’ll see a short passage from one page, one daf, of Talmud — Masechet Ta’anit, daf 23a.”
- “This page tells a story about a man named Honi HaMe’agel, Honi the Circle-Maker. The part we are learning today is the story of a day Honi was walking along a road and met a stranger planting a tree.”
- “You’ll see three short sections. First, the verse that troubled Honi all his life. Second, his encounter with the carob planter. Third, what Honi found when he woke up, seventy years later.”
- “Honi lived in the late first century BCE, during the Second Temple period. He is remembered in the Mishnah and the Gemara as a man who spoke to God like a son speaks to a father.”

9:00 • Launch Chavruta (1 min)

“Here’s how this will go: Turn to the person next to you. Introduce yourselves. Then read the passage aloud to each other on pages 3. Take turns. One of you reads Section 1, the other reads Section 2, switch again for Section 3. You have the English and the Hebrew. Read whatever is most comfortable for you. After you read, pick a question from Page 2 to ask each other or just start talking about what came up for you!

You have twelve minutes. I will give you a warning at ten. After 12 minutes, we will come back together and a few groups can share what they discussed.

Now — BEGIN!”

Part 2: Chavruta (10:00 to 22:00)

What to do

- Circulate quietly. Listen for one or two insights you can surface in the share-back.
- If a pair is stuck, offer one light prompt: “What stood out in what the planter said?”
- If a pair is deep, leave them alone. Mark them in your head to call on later.

Time cues

- At 20:00 (10 minutes in): “Two more minutes.”
- At 22:00: call them back. Wait for the room to quiet.

Part 3: Share-back, Inspire, and Close (22:00 to 30:00)

22:00 • Surface insights (5 min)

Call on two or three pairs. Use names you noted while circulating. Prompts if the room is shy:

- “Which question did your chavruta land on?”
- “What did your partner say that surprised you?”
- “Where in your life are you the carob planter? Where are you the one benefiting from someone else’s fruit?”

No need to reply to every answer. Nod, repeat a phrase, “thank you”. Let their words hold the room.

NOTE TO SELF: If you get a hard question you cannot answer: “That is a real question. Let’s hold it and keep learning.” You do not need every answer.

27:00 • Tie it together (2 min)

“In closing, I want to draw your attention to Page 3. To the planter’s answer to Honi’s question, in bold on your handout: **Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.**”

This is a story about a tree, but of course, it isn’t *really* about trees.

Look at where we are. We are standing in Poland. On soil where Jewish women planted things they did not live to harvest. Schools, families, books they wrote for children they never got to meet. Much of that was destroyed. Some of it survived. And what survived, survived because somebody, somewhere, had been planting. Not because they were sure it would grow, but because their ancestors had planted for them.

Honi asks a fair question: how can you plant what you will never see? The planter does not argue. He answers with his hands already in the dirt. “I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.”

You are on this trip because someone planted for you. Grandmothers who did not survive. Grandmothers who did. Mothers, teachers, strangers whose names you will never know. Fifty Jewish women walked into this beit midrash today. And that, itself, is the fruit of somebody’s carob tree.

And now the question turns around. What are you planting?”

PAUSE

“Fifty Jewish women, from different places, different backgrounds, just learned a page of Talmud together in chavruta, in Poland. Our ancestors argued over this exact page for fifteen hundred years. Now you have too. You are not an audience to this tradition. YOU are part of it.”

“You learned a daf of Gemara in chavruta. Mazel tov!”