Blog Post: What Should a Vision of Jewish Education Do For Us?

By Jon Levisohn
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My colleague Danny Lehmann has shared some constructive, generative ideas for Jewish education in the 21st century in his recent article in HaYidion, in which he argues for creativity, hybridity, transformative spirituality, and more. Do these ideas constitute a vision? Well, that depends.

According to the standard view of vision in Jewish education, the answer would be no. That view was developed by Seymour Fox z”l over the course of his career, and came to expression in the Visions of Jewish Education Project in the 1990s and then in the book, Visions of Jewish Education (2003). For Fox, a vision of Jewish education should be a comprehensive articulation of the ideal product of a Jewish educational system, the image of an “educated Jew.”

But as admirable as that conception of vision may be, I believe that it suffers from a very significant weakness. All too often, that effort to provide a comprehensive vision, a Vision-with-a-capital-V, operates at too high a level of abstraction. As a result, the Vision is incapable of providing guidance to educational practice.

A vision-with-a-lower-case-v, on the other hand, is composed of a set of animating ideas that do provide guidance for practice. This kind of vision may not look like a grand, seamless, comprehensive picture. But what it lacks in comprehensiveness, it makes up in practicality. Lehmann’s ideas, I believe, are precisely this kind of vision. Once we get inside of the idea of what he calls “textured particularity,” for example, we can proceed to ask my favorite question about animating ideas: What would it look like if we took this idea seriously in our educational setting?

And when we do that, we will begin to see how this idea, or others, can provide a rationale for teaching certain things in certain ways, or for enacting certain educational policies, or for making certain choices. In other words, the ideas will provide guidance for practice. That, I believe, is what a vision ought to do.
Rabbi Lehmann’s article, Prof. Levisohn’s full response, and the responses of others are available in a special Hayidion edition on “Mission and Vision.”