BOLD NEW VISION
Beyond Continuity, Literacy and Identity: Making a Compelling Case for Jewish Day Schools to 21st Century American Jews

A Bold New Vision: Responses

Beyond Continuity, Literacy and Identity: Making a Compelling Case for Jewish Day Schools to 21st Century American Jews

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Bialik College, Melbourne, Australia • B’nai Israel Community Day School, Gainesville, Florida • Hillel Academy, Tampa, Florida • Bialik Hebrew Day School, Toronto, Ontario • New Community Jewish High School, West Hills, California • Abraham Joshua Heschel Day School, Northridge, California

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The world of Jewish education has been thinking about “the vision thing” for a decade or more. Of course, that phrase reminds us that the concern for vision has a long history. Back in 1987, then-Vice President Bush was criticized for lacking a vision at the outset of his presidential campaign. His unscripted and exasperated use of that memorable phrase—“the vision thing”—at once affirmed the importance of vision while also betraying some confusion as to what the critique was all about.

In my experience with Jewish educators, that confusion about vision is familiar. We are much better at criticizing the absence of vision than we are at articulating exactly what a vision is. Our colleague Danny Lehmann has proposed a set of intriguing, generative ideas. Do these ideas amount to a vision of Jewish education? Do they do the work that a vision is supposed to do?

My purpose here is not to engage with his specific proposals. Instead, I want to work out what we mean by vision, how visions work, and why they’re important. And I will do so by offering a critique of the dominant theory of vision in Jewish education as expressed by my teacher and the teacher of so many of us in this field, Seymour Fox.

Many readers of HaYidion will recall Seymour Fox as the head of the Mandel Foundation-Israel, and before that a leader at the Melton Centre at Hebrew University, the Melton Center at JTS, and Camp Ramah—and for his role in creating the Visions of Jewish Education Project at the Melton Center—published a paper titled “A Prolegomenon to a Philosophy of Jewish Education.” In that paper, he argues that, traditionally, philosophies of education “first developed their principles … [and then] adumbrate[d] the kind of societies [and] men … which would exhibit these principles.” These “embodiments … then served as guides to determine the educational approach.”

In other words, we must start by determining our most foundational commitments. These commitments will then be encompassed or embodied in specific forms as ideal societies or ideal people. Then, once we have those in mind, the rest of our educational decisions will flow from or will be determined by them.

Alas, “Jewish education and Jewish educators have forgotten the problem of ends or goals.” As a result, he says, Jewish education has become, quite literally, “aimless.” The efforts of Jewish educators have no articulated aims. “And when education is aimless then the practical, the means of education … becomes a matter of taste.” Rather than being guided by principles, our educational efforts are instead characterized by idiosyncrasy. “The problem for a philosophy of Jewish education is to disclose the principles that will lead to a coherent structure of ends and means.” Instead of idiosyncrasy, he wants coherence, a fully-worked out system in which the means lead to ends and the ends are embodiments of our principles.

Interestingly, in 1959, Fox uses the language of “aims” and “purposes,” rather than “vision.” But this diagnosis is consistent with his later critique of the absence of vision, in Visions of Jewish Education (p. 8):

Why do we emphasize vision? Without a guiding purpose, an educational system is bound to be scattered and incoherent, incapable of consecutive effort, unable either to grasp the possibilities of effective action or to avoid the obstacles in its path. Lacking a directive guide to the future, the system becomes repetitive and uninspired, prey to past habit, incapable of justifying itself to new generations of our youth in the world they will inhabit.

The last element in particular, the notion that our educational systems must be continually reinvigorated with new ideas appropriate to a new generation, finds an echo in Lehmann’s article as well: “We must think more boldly in response to the needs and aspirations of this generation of Jews.”

But back to the 1959 paper. Fox is not content to offer a critique; he also proposes a solution that should sound strikingly familiar. He writes about the need to cultivate a number of schemes, differing as different scholars give different weights to different sources of Jewish tradition and organize them according to their lights. ... Each scheme will be a valid theory for education and an authentic image of Judaism.

We need to call on our best scholars to develop “schemes,” informed by their own deeply informed interpretations of the Jewish tradition. There will be multiple schemes—Fox was a pluralist long before anybody used the language of pluralism—but each one will be “authentic,” and each one will be an “image of Judaism.” A bit later on in the paper, he lays out a comprehensive map of the fundamental, existential questions that a philosophy of Jewish education should consider. And then he says, “When we answer such questions as these ... then I believe we will [CONTINUED ON PAGE 32]
discover the image of the ideal or educated Jew.

Thus, a philosophy of Jewish education ought to pursue the question of purposes or goals. And it must be comprehensive and systematic, encompassing the answers to all of life’s important questions. But what is especially striking is his proposal about the systematic, encompassing the answers to goals. And it must be comprehensive and and engage a broader spectrum of the Jewish community.

But there’s a problem with this proposal. It’s not a problem to call for greater attention to purposes. It’s not a problem to expect that the Jewish tradition will yield the images of the ideal educated Jew that you’re seeking. What is problematic, however, is to expect that images, visions, will do that work systematically and comprehensively. This notion, it seems to me, is unjustified.

And indeed, when the reader of Visions of Jewish Education encounters Greenberg’s essay, or Twersky’s, she finds moments of insight and some genuinely powerful ideas. But she does not encounter a comprehensive system of Jewish educational purposes.

Turning to Lehmann, we can say the same about his vision as well. The difference, however, is that Lehmann does not aspire to comprehensiveness. In his introduction, he explains that his task is “to suggest a number of conceptual categories and terms that may help Jewish day schools connect to and engage a broader spectrum of the Jewish community.”

All he wants to do is to “suggest a number of [concepts] and terms.” That’s it. He’s not trying to put forward a comprehensive vision of the ideal educated Jew that embodies answers to all of important questions. And indeed, his specific proposals—creativity, hybridity, and the rest of his lexicon—are generative concepts that may well help us to think in new ways.

Let us call Fox’s theory of vision, the theory that focuses on the development of a comprehensive image of the ideal educated Jew, “Vision-with-a-capital-V.” Why, we might wonder, does Fox expect a Vision to be comprehensive? What’s wrong with just offering a few good ideas to guide practice? The answer is that, when it comes to the pursuit of purposes, Fox was as scared of superficial and incoherent ideas as he was of the absence of ideas. He often denounced “slogans,” meaningless phrases or phrases in conflict with each other. When we offer slogans, we believe that we are operating with a compelling Vision when in fact we are doing nothing of the kind. In order to avoid adopting slogans, we need serious and sustained deliberation.

Deliberation is not simply thinking. By the 1990s, Fox develops a hierarchical conception of the relationship of theory to practice, according to which questions about practice are nested within (what he calls) “theories of practice,” and theories of practice are nested within bigger questions about “philosophy of education,” which are in turn nested within the biggest and broadest existential and religious questions (“philosophy”). To link back to the 1959 essay, these are the kinds of questions the answers to which are embodied or embedded in images of the ideal educated Jew. And this comprehensive and coherent image, with all of its nested answers, is an educational Vision.

There is something right about this. What Fox’s hierarchy captures, I think, is our sense that our practices ought to be grounded in something bigger, something more fundamental. We share Fox’s worry about aimless practice. We worry about idiosyncrasy and lack of coherence. We do believe that big ideas are important. We do not want educators to be satisfied with doing things simply because this is how they’ve always been done. We want them to ask why, and we want them to keep asking why.

We do not want educators to be satisfied with doing things simply because this is how they’ve always been done. We want them to ask why and keep asking why.

Consider, for example, the case of Hebrew language instruction, which Fox himself uses as an example in a paper titled “Towards a General Theory of Jewish Education” in 1973 (p. 264). He notes that the results of Hebrew instruction have been “disappointing, and consequently the study of Hebrew is usually a source of tension among parents, rabbis, and educators.” Indeed, what was true forty years ago remains largely true today. Fox argues that the problem seems to arise from a confusion about the purpose of Hebrew instruction. “We have here,” he writes, “a striking example of a major school subject whose purpose for inclusion in the curriculum is unclear; the result is a series of inappropriate and dated compromises.”

Now, insofar as Hebrew language instruction would benefit from greater coherence, Fox was correct then and remains correct.
today. There may be a dearth of trained teachers, appropriate curricula, and well-developed methodologies, but underneath all that is a confusion about the purposes of teaching Hebrew. If we could get clear about what we want students to know and be able to do, we would be well on our way to improving the situation.

So when it comes to Hebrew, we may well agree with Fox’s diagnosis. But notice: there’s nothing here about ultimate questions of human existence. You do not need to have a grand conception of human flourishing to fix the problem with Hebrew. You don’t need a Vision. You just need to get clear about your goals in this subject area.

I do not mean to suggest that the question of the goals of Hebrew language instruction are entirely disconnected with bigger questions. One person might understand Hebrew as a vital link between generations. Another person might articulate a conception of human flourishing in which the connection to one’s contemporary ethnic and religious community plays a central role, and would argue for immersion in modern spoken Hebrew for that purpose. A third person might focus on the spiritual resources that are present to the individual when she becomes fluent in Hebrew. If we are probing each of these conceptions, we might well find ourselves asking “why,” pushing on each conception to uncover a more fundamental sets of commitments. The presence of these questions are what makes Fox’s hierarchical conception of vision initially attractive and even plausible.

But as a solution to the problem of Hebrew language instruction, we do not need to operate at the level of philosophy. We do not need to put our planning on hold while we come up with a comprehensive Vision. We just need to get clear about our subject-specific goals. That’s what will make a difference in our practice. That’s what will alleviate the problem of aimlessness.

So I am suggesting that we do not need Vision-with-a-capital-V. But we do need “vision-with-a-lower-case-v.” We do need to ask questions about our practice and its purposes, relentlessly questioning why we do what we do and whether there are other ways of doing things. If we want to solve the problem of aimless or uninspired practice, we need to think about a variety of different kinds of ideas about a variety of different aspects of practice.

My preferred term for these elements of vision-with-a-lower-case-v is “animating ideas.” The modifier “animating” indicates that these ideas provide the motivation and guidance for practice. And the plural “ideas” indicates that there are several of these operating at the same time, not in a hierarchical nested fashion, where the “low-level” ideas are governed or determined by the more abstract and more philosophical “higher-level” ideas, but in a non-hierarchical fashion.

After all, when I am trying to figure out what to do in my classroom, I am not only asking about what kind of person I am trying to produce, but also asking about what kind of community I am trying to build in this space, and what I believe about how students learn, and (as in the example of Hebrew instruction) what the purposes of this particular subject area are, and more. All of these questions about practice are on the table. Ideally, each of these animating ideas contributes to my practice.

These reflections lead me to an alternative way of displaying the relationship of theory and practice, or equally, an alternative theory of vision.

The virtues of this new theory, then, are that it maintains a focus on ideas and purposes without narrowing that focus to only the biggest ideas; that it appreciates the range of ideas that do and should animate practice; that it captures the way in which Jewish ideas play, in any practice, because practice is inevitably complex. There are always multiple reasons for what we say and do, even when we are at our most reflective. But notice that the arrows go both ways, because ideas are also embodied in practice and are sometimes worked out in practice. We actually refine our ideas through practice. We get smarter, not just smarter about implementing or translating ideas, but actually smarter about the ideas themselves. So practice—intentional practice, thoughtful practice—affects the sphere of ideas as well.

When we are trying to promote vision in education—when we are trying to solve the problem of either overly habitual or overly idiosyncratic teaching—we want to promote greater curiosity about and attention to all of these. What we want is maximum intentionality. So we do not want to get stuck on the biggest ideas about human flourishing, as powerful as those ideas might be. As I’ve tried to emphasize, the biggest ideas can be both powerful in one sense and, when it comes to practice, surprisingly inert.

The virtues of this new theory, then, are that it maintains a focus on ideas and purposes without narrowing that focus to only the biggest ideas; that it appreciates the range of ideas that do and should animate practice; that it captures the way in which Jewish ideas comfortably coexist alongside other ideas in vision-guided practice; and most importantly, that it may help practitioners understand the way in which animating ideas are inevitably abstract (because they are ideas) but also

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remain grounded in and relevant for practice.

So when we are concerned about the intentionality of our practice, we should not start with our most fundamental commitments. We should ask, about any particular practice, “What are the ideas that animate this practice?” And as we’re thinking about those animating ideas, we should ask ourselves, “What are these ideas about?” Is this an idea about learning? About community? About Judaism? These are the kinds of questions that will help us become more clear about the ideas and more intentional in our practice. Conversely, when we encounter a compelling idea, we should again ask, “What is this idea about?” And then we should ask further, “What would it look like if we took this idea seriously in practice?” If we have trouble answering that question, it may well be that the idea under consideration, while elegant in its abstraction, is not actually as important as we initially supposed.

So what, then, of Lehmann’s vision? As mentioned above, Lehmann fails to live up to Fox’s criterion for an educational Vision. But that should not concern us. What Lehmann does offer, on the other hand, is a set of rich ideas that might—if we find them sufficiently compelling—animate our practice. As we evaluate these proposals, I suggest that we think about how they fit within the “Sphere of Animating Ideas.” This means that we need to consider not merely how “creativity” or “hybridity” operate as philosophical abstractions. Nor do we need to focus on how each of Lehmann’s ideas can be synthesized into one image of the ideal educated Jew. Instead, we should think through what these ideas are about, and what it would look like to take these ideas seriously in practice.

Establishing an Integrated Community and School in Israel

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affiliation as well as encouragement of social and communal involvement. In addition, it includes a commitment to promote academic achievement among all students, based on the assumption that a successful school is one which provides quality pedagogy and strives for continuous improvement.

The implementation of the Keshet School vision was led by staff members together with the parents. The challenge now was to translate the vision into a practical program for all ages. For example, the meeting group (secular) discussed the definition of secular identity that is a mix of Jewish, Israeli and universal components. If so, what is the ratio we expect between those components? To what cultural legacy do we want to expose our children? To what extent will the school focus on Jewish laws and customs? What principles will guide the teaching and learning in this group? During the discussion diverse voices emerged, some focusing on social values, others putting emphasis on experiential learning, some emphasizing critical thinking, learning through asking questions, and examining dilemmas.

Who will teach the complex subjects? It became necessary to find teachers who are familiar with the material, whose worldview is pluralistic, who consider the two identity groups as equals, who are able to accept feelings, attitudes and behaviors different from their own, and who will protect every child’s right to express his or her opinion, even if it contradicts the worldview of another.

Again, the discussions were charged and heated. The pattern of splitting into subgroups when an inner group conflict emerged repeated itself within each identity group. The attempt to establish a common ideological basis, at least within the identity group, dissolved. We were divided into those who were traditionalists, those who were secular with a tendency to emphasize the universality, those who preferred strengthening the Israeli-Zionist aspects, and those who wanted to strengthen traditional Jewish aspects. The need to listen and show tolerance became relevant to the parents as much as it was relevant to the children.

As mentioned, this is an ongoing process and not all dilemmas can be solved. Among the remaining topics is the issue of the management of the school. Should it be led by a single figure or two figures having different identities? Other questions that remained open include, how can the school best respect the interests of the two identity groups? What about the needs of those who believe that the current definitions do not meet their own identities—for example, couples who consider themselves “traditional” and “mixed”? After eight years of community-educational development, one cannot ignore the fact that the encounter between the two groups leads to a frequent engagement—assertion, questioning, negotiation—of personal and group identity, the boundaries between the personal and the collective, and the relationship among subgroups within the whole. My starting wish that the integration would manifest itself in a balanced and harmonious system has given way to the understanding that this is an ongoing process of discontent and self-challenge, one that enables personal growth, expansion of awareness about the identities, lifestyles and interests of others, and an introduction to many interesting people who, despite their differences, all care deeply about Jewish-Israeli society and identity in this country.