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Teaching Vision: Cultivating a Philosophical Disposition About Jewish Educational Practice

JON A. LEVISOHN

We are sometimes told that practitioners have a hard time with theory. But those who are committed to nurturing a certain kind of intellectual capacity among Jewish educational practitioners—the capacity to identify and critically engage with vision in Jewish education, a capacity that we can call a “philosophical disposition”—must accept the challenge to develop ideas, questions, resources, and learning activities appropriate to that goal. In this article, Levisohn presents a study of his own teaching of novice educators in order to contribute to a conversation about how we might contribute to the development of practical intellectuals in Jewish education in various ways and in various settings.

INTRODUCTION: DO PRACTITIONERS NEED THEORY?

We are sometimes told that practitioners—teachers in Jewish day schools, informal educators in camps or on Israel experiences, just like their colleagues in general education—have a hard time with theory. Practitioners are conditioned to think concretely rather than abstractly; or they are ill equipped to explore hypothetical alternatives to what they’ve experienced firsthand; or they are temperamentally indisposed to linger over ideas and...
generally impatient with material the relevance of which is not immediately apparent. Construed more positively, practitioners develop a “wisdom of practice” (Shulman, 2004) or a “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi, 1958)—ideas about practice that, while essential to successful practice, are not easily or straightforwardly articulated in theoretical terms. No doubt there is a kernel of truth in all this.

But on the other hand, for those who are committed to nurturing a certain kind of intellectual capacity among Jewish educational practitioners, these excuses will not do. These excuses will not do, whether we are engaged in the preparation of novice educators or in professional development programs for experienced ones. They will not do, whether we are constructing a semester-long university-based course or a single day of professional development, or even if we are chairing a department or learning with a group of colleagues. If we believe in teaching as an intellectual practice and that sophisticated educators ought to be practical intellectuals, if we believe that the quality of Jewish education is dependent upon the insight and intentionality of Jewish educators and that educators need conceptual frameworks as much as they need curricular materials, then we cannot be complacent about a theory-practice divide. We must accept, as our own intellectual-practical challenge, the need to develop the ideas, questions, resources, and learning activities appropriate to the topic and to the audience.

The present inquiry is an effort to understand that challenge more deeply—the challenge of promoting a certain kind of intellectual capacity in educators—by focusing on and exploring moments of my own teaching of a course in Philosophy of Jewish Education, a course that focuses in particular on the idea of vision in Jewish education. The article does not promote a pedagogic model to emulate and makes no claims about the best or most effective way to teach the subject. It proceeds through an exploration of my teaching, but it does not focus primarily on why I adopt particular pedagogic strategies or how they succeeded or failed. It inevitably incorporates some moments of my own philosophizing about vision—what vision is and how it relates to practice—but that too is not the primary focus. Instead, the article employs my course as a particular, specific location of inquiry, an opportunity to listen to students or even more generally to listen to practice, in order to contribute to an ongoing conversation—a conversation about teaching vision, and about the development of practical intellectuals in Jewish education in various ways and in various settings.2

2That conversation includes not just the work of Pekarsky (1997, 2006, 2007, 2008) and Fox, Scheffler, and Marom (2003) but also, more recently and more specifically, Schein (2009), who likewise writes on the teaching of vision. Schein, however, is focused on the facilitation of the process of what he calls “educational visioning,” the creation of vision in an institution through a process that engages key leaders in serious and substantive learning. As will become clear, I am focused on quite a different goal.
THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Over the past several years, I have been teaching a course at Brandeis University that focuses on visions of Jewish education: NEJS 235b, Philosophy of Jewish Education. I have taught versions of this course 10 times (as of this writing), to three different audiences: to undergraduates with an interest in Jewish education, to graduate students with an interest in Jewish education, and to novice teachers completing a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree. This article will focus primarily on the latter experience. The course number signifies that it is officially a graduate-level course, but it is open to undergraduates. The departmental affiliation of the course (NEJS is the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies) signifies that it adopts a liberal arts stance, engaging in the study of the topic for its inherent interest rather than for a narrower pre-professional purpose. In one sense, therefore, the course plays a role for the Master’s students that is played elsewhere by educational foundations courses. However, it is conceptualized specifically in terms of the idea of vision, setting aside much else that educational foundations courses aspire to teach.

While I have varied the course in certain ways—moving one topic or text earlier or later, swapping out certain texts or activities for others—the basic contour and intellectual commitments of the course have remained stable. Using a set of texts about vision in Jewish education and other materials, as well as site visits to local educational institutions, the course exposes the students to a set of ideas (Jewish and non-Jewish) that have the potential to animate educational practice, and arguments about those animating ideas. I emphasize that existential visions may be found in institutions, not
just abstract essays;\(^6\) that they may articulate ideals about community (and other things), not just the ideal educated Jew or the ideal graduate;\(^7\) and that they may be expressed by institutional leaders and other practitioners, not just by theorists or scholars. I intentionally use the phrase “animating ideas” interchangeably with the term “vision,” and I tell the students that I am doing so.\(^8\)

\(^{6}\)I introduce students to Daniel Pekarsky’s (1997) distinction between institutional vision, on the one hand (“an image or conception of what an educational institution as its best should look like”), and existential vision, on the other (“an image or conception of the kind of human being and/or community that the educational process is to bring into being”). For Pekarsky (1997), there is a clear hierarchy; when we are talking about vision, we really ought to be concerned with existential vision, not institutional. “Though having an institutional vision is no doubt important, the worthwhileness of any institutional vision ultimately depends on its being anchored in an adequate existential vision” (p. 32). My own view is less hierarchical; see note 8 below.

\(^{7}\)I explore the notion of a vision of an ideal community as an animating idea for Jewish education, as opposed to a vision of an ideal individual (the ideal graduate or the “educated Jew”), in Levisohn (2009). I mention there, and it is worth emphasizing, that Pekarsky (1997) himself is careful to describe a vision as “an image or conception of the kind of human being and/or community that the educational process is to bring into being” (p. 32). More recently, he has dropped the “and/or” and adopted a simple conjunction of individual and community: “visions have at their core a set of ideas concerning the kind of person and community that is the object of the educational endeavor—a conception of an educated person and a flourishing community” (Pekarsky, 2008, p. 20).

\(^{8}\)I use the phrase “animating ideas” for a number of reasons. First, my sense is that it demystifies “vision.” Second, it implicitly acknowledges that a vision is made up of a plural number of ideas, about many different things, not just one big idea and not just an idea about the ultimate purpose of education, as in the vision of the educated Jew. (We might say that we want to avoid the implication that a vision serves as a foundation for practice, and instead imagine, with Shulman [1990], the ways that animating ideas serve as a scaffolding for practice.) In fact, I propose that there are at least seven different kinds of animating ideas, based on what they are ideas about: some ideas are about teaching, some are about learning, some are about the specific subject, some are about the Transcendent, etc. There is no hierarchy among these different kinds of ideas; all of them contribute to thoughtful, intentional, maximally vision-guided practice. Third, the locution of “animating ideas” incorporates a point made by Fox et al. (2003), namely, that a central aspect of vision is not just clarity but motivation and energy: under the right circumstances, vision animates practice. Note, however, that defining vision in this way stands in tension both with the way that Fox (1997) has defined vision and the way that Hammerness (2003, 2006, 2008) has done so. Fox articulates a five-tiered hierarchy of vision in his five levels of moving from theory to practice, from the most abstract questions (“philosophy”) to more grounded questions (“philosophy of education”) to even more practice-focused questions (“theory of practice”), etc. While he is careful to say that one does not always start at the top and work one’s way down the ladder, still it is clear that there is a hierarchy; the questions at the top of the hierarchy are the most fundamental and, ideally, ought to govern practice. In my own view, abstract questions about epistemology or metaphysics are not more important than more grounded questions about, e.g., one’s conception of a particular subject area. Hammerness’ important research has focused on the way in which teachers’ conceptions of their ideal classroom culture helps and hinders teachers in various ways. But my conception of vision as the sum of a set of animating ideas is broader and more comprehensive than an image of ideal classroom practice (although the latter is certainly an important component). Furthermore, when I write about “teaching vision,” I am thinking about more than a teacher-focused effort to cultivate and critique teachers’ own
In general, my approach to teaching vision employs three basic pedagogies: (a) investigation of particular educational institutions or pedagogic practices, in order to discern the ideas that animate those institutions or practices; (b) exploration of particular ideas that we might nominate as animating ideas (such as “autonomy” or “pluralism”), in order to develop the habit of probing ideas and in order to pursue the perennial question, what might it look like if we took this idea seriously in Jewish education; and (c) study of visions themselves, i.e., critical investigation of individual efforts to present comprehensive Jewish educational visions.

VISION: A SUBJECT OR A DISPOSITION?

Prior to teaching the course in the summer of 2007 to a class of six educators,9 the question of what it means to “teach vision” started to seem worthy of more and deeper consideration. When teaching undergraduates, the question feels a bit less urgent; in a setting such as Brandeis, where the idea of the liberal arts is part of the undergraduate culture, students are accustomed to exploring a variety of topics without assuming that they will immediately apply to practice. But in the case of the summer course, teaching educators, I began to wonder afresh: Why are we asking these questions about vision? What should they learn about animating ideas? What do I hope to accomplish with these students? What is this subject—if it is even a subject—all about?

To start, the particular ideas and particular texts that we encounter are means to an end, not ends in themselves. I am not wedded to particular texts and regularly encounter new texts that I consider for the course. I have never imagined that this course would survey the field, providing the

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9Enrollment in the course has fluctuated between a low of 4 and a high of 18. In 2007, all six students were Master’s students with some professional experience. It is important to note, for the purposes of this study, that while I treat the students as novice educators, they are not entirely inexperienced. Kunzman (2003) argues, on the basis of a study of students who participate in a teacher education program after some time teaching, that “their previous classroom experience ... may have made them more receptive to exploring theory and understanding its relevance and value for their teaching” (p. 250). He is careful to explain that this is not an argument for gaining experience prior to teacher education, but it is nevertheless an observation that it is particularly significant for thinking about teaching vision or teaching educational foundations more generally.
students with a comprehensive set of vision options or a complete inventory of animating ideas. The notion of “coverage” seems entirely out of place here. Schein (2009) thinks about particular, compelling visions such as the ones found in *Visions of Jewish Education* (Fox et al., 2003) as “new subject-matter [sic] to be learned” (p. 366). I, on the other hand, tend to think about particular educational visions not as subject matter in and of themselves, but as instruments toward a further goal.

But instruments for what? If knowledge or mastery of the subject, in the sense of coverage of the main ideas or core texts, is not the goal, then what is? One way to think about this is to conceptualize a distinction between thinking about particular visions and thinking about vision itself. Thus, in my syllabus in 2007, I wrote that “the course will try to do two things”:

First, we will consider a variety of perspectives on matters that are central to an educational vision or to a Jewish educational vision more specifically. Not all of these perspectives are neatly packaged educational visions, but all of them are highly relevant. And second, we will consider questions about educational vision itself: What qualifies as a vision? Where do we find visions, and how are they expressed? [...] And the basic question: Is it really vitally important for education to think about the ultimate purposes of education, as claimed above? Why or why not?

The former is apparently (although not necessarily) more concrete and particular, the latter apparently (although not necessarily) more abstract and general. But both categories are sets of ideas or questions that I want the students to encounter.

However, while this distinction may be useful, it does not address the question of what encountering these two different categories of questions will do for the students. What, in other words, should they learn, and why? When I have tried to articulate the learning goals of the course, the phrases that come to mind are dispositional: awareness and appreciation of vision; sensitivity to animating ideas; capacity and motivation to attend to animating ideas in thinking about Jewish educational practice, and to think about vision and its conceptual and practical challenges; capacity and motivation to ask, with regard to any particular Jewish educational practice or institution, *why*, and to challenge the responses in appropriate ways. These are the kinds of things that I want the students to be able to do, or rather, the capacities that I hope to foster.11

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10This is the case even regarding *Visions of Jewish Education* (Fox et al., 2003). While it remains an invaluable core text for the purpose of teaching vision, it is also noteworthy that its centrality has diminished over successive iterations of the course.

11The issue of dispositions in teaching has become increasingly prominent, and controversial, in recent years for both intellectual and political reasons (Diez & Murrell, 2010a). In the context of teaching and teacher education, “dispositions refer to a teaching stance, a way of orienting oneself to the work...
Indeed, for educators, these are not just academic capacities but very practical ones. What shorthand might we use for these capacities? At the outset, I mentioned the idea of teachers as “practical intellectuals,” but that seems too generic. We might be tempted to say that we want educators to be “visionary.” However, I am not describing the capacity to invent and promote bold and creative visions, which is what “visionary” usually suggests. We might be tempted to say that we want educators to be “reflective” or “intentional,” to exercise reflection on or intentionality in their practice. This, too, is in the right ballpark—the issue of intentionality is central to vision, as will be discussed below, and the capacity for reflection is fundamental—but it’s too narrow. Ideally, an educator is intentional and reflective about her own practice, and it is worth emphasizing that the students whom I meet, at the end of their graduate teacher education program, have already been inducted into a conception of teaching that is highly intellectual and deeply reflective. But a vision-related capacity is the ability and motivation to reflect on the intentionality (or lack thereof) in the practice of others as well, and in the institutions that one encounters, and moreover, the capacity not just to be intentional but to engage in a critical discourse around intentions.

I am describing the capacity to seek out animating ideas and critically engage with them, even if—or especially if—they are created by others, and to not be satisfied with practice that is uninformed and unguided by animating ideas, and to be alert to and accustomed to thinking about the particular challenges of implementing ideas in practice. Instead of using the

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12 As part of their program, they carry out and write up a child study; they observe other teachers and talk about their observations; and they plan and execute a piece of teacher research. Their yearlong core seminar is a location for ongoing reflection on their practice, as they assume increasing levels of responsibility in the classroom. Given this context, I am confident that the philosophical work that we pursue in this class is consistent with much of what they are learning and have learned elsewhere in the program.

13 For discussions of courses in “educational foundations,” and conceptualizations of their purpose in terms of “theorizing practice” or “adaptively reconceptualizing . . . educational tasks” or “critically examining assumptions,” see, respectively, Sanger (2007), Bredo (2005), and Larrivee (2008).
terms “visionary” or “intentional” or “reflective,” then, we might call this a “philosophical disposition,” implicitly calling upon both the disciplinary sense of philosophy as the practice of conceptualization and critique as well as the more popular sense of philosophy as the sphere of big ideas.

But this is not quite right either. In adopting dispositional language, we have to be careful to avoid a familiar trap, namely, the trap of fleeing to subject-neutral dispositional abstractions. We do not teach generosity in general; we teach generosity in reading particular kinds of texts or generosity in making historical judgments. We do not teach critical thinking in general; we teach critical thinking about statistical arguments or critical thinking about persuasive rhetoric. So, too, we do not teach (and in this course, I do not teach) intentionality in general, or reflection in general, or a philosophical disposition in general. Instead, by practicing a critical discourse around animating educational ideas, or by practicing the discernment and exploration of animating ideas in educational practice and institutions, I am teaching a subject-specific disposition, something that we might perhaps call a philosophical disposition toward Jewish educational practice. The overarching goal of the course, then, is this: to cultivate a philosophical disposition, toward Jewish educational practice, among Jewish educational practitioners.

Framing the teaching of vision is dispositional terms might well capture not only the kind of teaching that I do in this academic course, but indeed a broad range of ongoing professional learning. But it raises two immediate issues. First, we might fairly wonder how to assess such a thing. What proxies might be available to indicate that such a disposition is further developed than it previously had been, or is more finely tuned than it was? Does a philosophical disposition show up in what students say, what they write, the questions that they ask—or in what they do? These are important and difficult questions—but they will receive less attention in the present inquiry. Instead, as I proceed, I will primarily focus on a second issue. What is this subject all about? What is the curriculum for the cultivation of a philosophical disposition? What are the subject-specific challenges that students encounter or that their teacher encounters? What does it look like to cultivate not a philosophical disposition in general, but specifically a philosophical disposition with regard to educational practice, and not educational practice in general but Jewish educational practice in particular? By “curriculum,” I do not mean a list of books but a range of central issues or topics or questions that, one may reasonably claim, are at the heart of the subject at hand.

So, what can I learn, by looking back at my own practice and the students’ experience, about these questions? The bases for my inquiry are

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14On assessment of teaching dispositions, see Murrell, Diez, Feiman-Nemser, and Schussler (2010), especially Chapters 1, 2, and 3.
the artifacts and materials of the course, as generated in the summer of 2007: my own teaching journal and notes, the students’ work, and some audiorecordings of classroom conversation. What can I learn about the idea of “teaching vision” by analyzing these materials?

VISION: A TOPIC IN SEARCH OF A QUESTION

At the conclusion of the first class session of the course—in which I had conducted an exercise in which the students had identified specific educational institutions, described what was significant or noteworthy about them, probed the question of what is most important for students to learn, and studied Schrag’s (1995) approach to this question—I wanted to get the students writing about vision. I had orally introduced the distinction between particular institutions or particular conceptions of educational goals, on the one hand, and the idea of vision in general, on the other. I had proposed that the real purpose of the course was not to explore this or that particular idea (although we would often spend time doing precisely that) but to explore the idea of vision, and I wanted now to reinforce the point. So I asked them to do some in-class writing on the question, What should a Jewish educational vision be, and what should it do?

Predictably, their responses were all over the map. There were some ideas about what ought be included in a Jewish educational vision (e.g., “I think a vision of Jewish education should contain a clear and shared idea of what kind of ‘Judaism’ is being taught/learned within an institution”), and some ideas about how a school community should relate to the vision (e.g., “Teachers, community, etc., should have an understanding of the vision”). Other students had ideas about what function a vision can or should play (“A vision may help students and parents feel a sense of continuity throughout grade levels” or “A vision of Jewish education should serve as the guiding principle for creating an educational experience”), or how it can help the educational effectiveness of an institution (“If you start with a coherent vision and try to remain true to it, the institution and the practices that result should have a certain consistency” or “A vision of Jewish education narrows the set of key concerns in an institution. The educational vision can help keep the focus”). There were also some intuitions about the construction of a philosophical basis for educational practice (“An appropriate vision must start with serious thinking about what it means to educate, and what Jewishness adds to individual and communal life, that is, why Jewish education”).

What this variety suggests is that while students may well have an intuition that vision is significant or necessary, and thus an assumption about the importance—the weight, the gravity—of the topic, there is a lack of clarity
about what the question is. Or perhaps they know that the topic is important
to the instructor and are valiantly struggling to say something coherent in
response to his questions. What are we trying to understand when we study
vision? This lack of clarity is expressed, as well, by the inclusion of responses
that slipped into a discussion of the content of Jewish educational visions,
mentioning tradition, Jewish text study, rituals, Hebrew, diversity, etc.

Initially, I noticed these last responses and assumed that they were sim-
ply answering the wrong question; instead of answering the question about
what a Jewish educational vision ought to be, a question about form, they
were offering their own opinions about content. But the confusion or con-
fusion of form and content, when thinking about vision, is not merely a
“category mistake.” Of course, certain kinds of statements are clearly about
the content of particular Jewish educational visions, and certain kinds of
statements are about the form. The statement, “Jewish education ought to
emphasize Hebrew because language lies at the heart of identity,” for exam-
ple, is a statement about the content of a particular Jewish educational vision.
“Clarity of vision can lead to greater coherence in educational practice,” on
the other hand, is obviously a content-neutral statement about the form,
about visions in general. When asking the students about what a vision
should be and what it should do, I meant to elicit the latter rather than the
former. But certain statements are not so easily distinguishable as one or the
other.

I learned this in particular, later in the course, from the student who
insightfully noted the happy correlation between Devora Steinmetz’s educa-
tional vision at Beit Rabban as depicted in Pekarsky (2006), with its emphasis
on intentionality (i.e., students should have reasons for everything they do),
and Pekarsky’s description of Beit Rabban itself as an educational institu-
tion with a dominant vision characterized by a robust intentionality (the
school has a reason for everything it does).15 So is intentionality a quality of
form or content? When we talk about intentionality, are we simply using a
synonym for vision-guided practice or vision-guided institutions? Or do we
mean to say that intentionality is (or can be) an aspect of a particular vision,

15In fact, a parallel double-layer of intentionality is embedded in the students’ teacher education
program itself, which aspires to a significant level of intentionality in its practices and aspires to foster
intentionality among its students. In other words, a maximally intentional teacher education program
aspires to cultivate maximally intentional students (i.e., novice teachers), and one of the ways that
it does so is by creating an opportunity for them to encounter an example of a maximally intentional
school that aspires to cultivate maximally intentional students. When I introduce the idea of intentionality
to students, I propose to them that it functions as a kind of meta-idea, an idea about the importance of
having ideas (as well as idea about the way that schools or other institutions ought to function, and an
idea about human flourishing). For some, cultivating intentionality (along with agency) is a particularly
important aspect of what it means to prepare professionals (see, e.g., Diez & Murrell, 2010b, p. 13). As I
discussed above, intentionality is necessary but not sufficient; a “philosophical disposition” is a more
comprehensive quality.
that intentionality is a particular animating idea about teaching or perhaps about human flourishing in general? We seem to mean both: Pekarsky can affirm that Beit Rabban is a vision-guided institution because of the intentionality with which its pedagogic decisions are made, and at the same time, the vision that guides the institution itself prizes intentionality and strives to cultivate intentionality in its students.

This, in turn, raises the intriguing question of whether an educational vision must emphasize intentionality to qualify, in our eyes, as a legitimate educational vision. And that question itself is a species of a larger genus of questions about visions that we may not like. Are they alternative visions, or inferior ones? Intellectual honesty compels us to admit that, if vision means anything, it must accommodate a variety of possibilities. But then, do all institutions have a vision, but some have coherent or far-reaching or profound ones—some of which we may affirm and some of which we may find repugnant—while others have weak or flawed ones? Or do some institutions have only a grab bag of cultural practices and norms that do not qualify, in our eyes, as a vision? As we work through these questions, students struggle with conflicting impulses. The dominant impulse from the students that I encounter is a pluralistic one, which avoids casting judgments on others (individuals or institutions) and tends to say, “Different strokes for different folks.” However, students also sometimes demonstrate a typically suppressed normative impulse, that judges others as either insufficiently authentic (or sometimes insufficiently “serious”) or as overly rigid and authoritarian (sometimes expressed in terms of exclusivism or, ironically, judgmentalism, i.e., “who are they to say that I’m not a good Jew?”). The charge of inauthenticity and lack of seriousness—usually a charge leveled by traditionalists against liberals—is itself sometimes conflated with the claim that such institutions have no vision. My own answer here is to try to split the difference. On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge that there can be visions—consistent, coherent visions—that we do not like just as there are visions that we do like. On the other hand, we ought to differentiate vision (or, vision-guided institutions) from something that we might just call culture (which all institutions have, whether they are vision-guided or not). Practices and norms without intentionality are “mere” culture; only when there is intentionality, and a minimal level of reflective coherence among those intentions, do they collectively rise to the status of vision.

The form-content issue also reappears as a question about essences. For many of us, including most of my students, the idea that some doctrines or rituals constitute the eternal, unchangeable core of an historical phenomenon like Judaism—its essence—is inherently suspicious. Religious traditions are products of historical circumstances, they inevitably evolve over time, and it is hard to know what evidence would possibly substantiate a claim that some beliefs or practices are (trans-historically) essential to
Judgment. Normative, perhaps, but not essential. But I encourage my students to at least entertain the idea that there is some unchanging core. If we can imagine this, and if we acknowledge that some members of our community are quite convinced of this, then we might notice that statements about essential elements that ought to be included in a Jewish educational vision are, at the same time, statements about what a Jewish educational vision is or, more accurately, what it ought to be. If that’s the case, then a vision of Jewish education cannot avoid those essences if it hopes to be authentically Jewish.

As I noted, this is not the way most of us usually think. Most of us, I believe, are comfortable with the idea that Jewish beliefs and practices serve purposes; they have instrumental value. That is, if they are valuable, the reason that they are valuable is because of the way that they contribute to a healthy and flourishing human life. This is why we easily adopt the language of, say, the educated Jew, the individual who embodies a particularly Jewish version of that human flourishing. What is our picture of the educated Jew, we ask—what is our picture of the flourishing human being in her or his Jewish guise—and what kinds of experiences (ritual experiences, cultural experiences, intellectual experiences, spiritual experiences, etc.) can support her or his development? But when I ask that question of my students, I implicitly set up the educated Jew as the criterion against which to judge those experiences. I thus embrace an unspoken belief that no particular practice or idea is essential, that Judaism is ever evolving, and that what we need to figure out now is what kinds of educational practices will lead to the outcomes we desire. I am on solid ground, to be sure, following not just Mordecai Kaplan but, more traditionally, Maimonides, who conceived of Judaism itself as an educational system leading individuals toward human perfection. Nevertheless, others may find this way of thinking wrongheaded. If, for example, the performance of a mitzvah has cosmic significance, as in kabbalistic systems of thought, then it will not do to think about that mitzvah merely in terms of how it contributes to the development of the educated Jew.

Interestingly, this point emerged in our discussion of Beit Rabban as well. Steinmetz, according to Pekarsky’s (2006) account, believes that Torah study is central to Judaism and thus must be central to Jewish education. Jews study Torah, period. We may ask what Torah means (what is considered “Torah” and what is not). We may ask what the most appropriate mode of study is. But we do not ask whether we ought to study Torah, or what benefit it produces. Torah study is not an instrumental good; it is an intrinsic good. It is essential to (Steinmetz’s conception of) Jewish education.

This is particularly dramatic because everything else in the school has a reason; everything else seems to be explainable in the light of a conception of the educated Jew that it is designed to serve; everything else can be
explained, or justified, or legitimated. Everything else is, in this limited sense, instrumental. But in Steinmetz’s Jewish educational vision, Torah study needs no justification. Steinmetz does not commend the study of Torah in order to produce the educated Jew; the educated Jew is the student of Torah. Of course, again, that opens up the question of what Torah is, and what it means to study it. It would be a serious misunderstanding to assume that “Torah” in this context means the Pentateuch. “Studying” in this context means far more than simply learning the plot of the textual narrative, or even its ethical messages. To spell out our Jewish educational vision, then, is to explain what we mean we talk about the study of Torah. To return to the main point: the idea of Torah study may be more than simply one element of the content of a Jewish educational vision, among other elements. It may, in fact, function more as a matter of form.

It is also worth noting that students, at this early stage in the course, were already thinking about the problems or pitfalls of vision. One wrote, for example, that “a vision might make an institution unresponsive to changes and challenges.” Another: “I wonder if a vision might hinder the autonomy of the teacher.” A third raised the question of pluralism: is it possible for an institution to be vision-guided but also pluralistic with regard to other values or commitments? It is not coincidental that these three problems are all quite practice-oriented. I do not mean to suggest that they are all expressions of actual situations in which the students find themselves (which they may or may not be). While the questions are practice-oriented, they are not practical in the sense of pursuing immediate solutions or guidance. At the same time, they are clearly not theoretical in the sense of being abstract or merely about ideas. At the very least, they emerge from the students’ thinking about their experience as practitioners in real institutions.

Finally, at least one student went “back to basics,” as Schrag (1995) would say. “I’m wondering what the point of Jewish education is,” wrote this student. “Is it to teach the religion, texts, traditions? Is it to share and exchange different experiences of what it’s like to be Jewish? Is it to make all Jews feel comfortable and welcome?” Good questions for any Jewish educator to ask—and for the instructor, these questions are good to hear. Whatever it means to teach vision or to cultivate a philosophical disposition, surely generating and nurturing these questions about purposes are part of the picture. At the same time, I have to turn the question of vision back against my own teaching. Are there better and worse versions of these questions, more insightful and probing and less so? Am I satisfied with the asking of questions, or do I expect students to also generate answers (and how do I think about the relative value of the answers that they come up with)? Surely I do not believe that the student who scribbled out the questions above, in the first session of the course, has learned all he needs to learn about vision. But what does he need to learn?
A LEARNING AGENDA

In part because of my own puzzlement about the question of what it means to teach vision, and in part because of a commitment to pedagogic transparency and a belief that students learn best when they think about what they are seeking to learn, I turned the problem over to them. I asked them to do some writing in response to two questions: What do you want to learn in this seminar, and how might you learn it?

Upon analysis, their responses are rather dramatically focused on the personal-professional. In one sense, this is not surprising; novice teachers are notoriously consumed by struggles with their practice. But this seems different. As noted above, in the discussion of the three practice-oriented responses to the question of what a vision is and what it should do, these teachers were not demanding answers to their practical questions of what to do in a particular situation or how to teach a particular subject. They were not seeking immediate guidance. They were not expressing impatience with theory. Rather, it seems more accurate to say that they were seeking understanding that would help them move their institutions to better, more productive, or coherent places.

This is not exclusively the case, of course. The students wrote that they wanted to learn to identify visions (“I want to learn to spot institutions that are succeeding with or struggling with realizing a vision of Jewish education”). They wanted to think about their own ideals (“I also want to learn what kinds of vision appeal to me so that I may be able to find schools that match my ideal vision”) or about the contemporary sociological landscape (“What do various Jewish educational visions say about the self-perception of Jewish life by Jewish educators?”). They wanted to think about some of the challenges inherent in creating and maintaining a vision-guided institution (“How do schools effectively maintain their vision, while productively revisiting and reviewing their school on a regular basis?”). And at least one student hoped to learn about “the impact a vision-guided institution has on its faculty and students.”

But in expressing what they hoped to learn in the seminar, nearly all the students also referred to their own present situation, either explicitly or implicitly referring to their institution. One student referred to her own situation, for example, in asking, “What happens when you do not agree with the school’s vision at large?” Another student wrote: “I’d like to look into whether or not the school I currently work at has a vision and if so, to what degree we attempt to guide our work by it.” A third referred to the challenge that her school was facing: “What happens when there are a great deal of differing views, and how should a school go about establishing a vision among such opposing ideals?” In all these examples, the students are focused primarily on institutions and practices, and only secondarily on ideas.
It is worth reiterating that these are not “how to” kinds of questions. By way of contrast, consider that one student also wrote that she wanted to learn “how to actualize one’s vision.” That kind of response makes my heart sink, because I have no wisdom to impart on the subject of how to actualize a vision. In fact, I am skeptical that the practical judgment required for the actualization of vision can be learned in a seminar at all. The actualization of vision, like any other practice, is best learned through guided experiences—through apprenticeship, through coaching, through mentoring. As Wittgenstein (1958) noted about learning to understand how another person is feeling, “Can another be one’s teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right tip” (p. 227e). A university seminar cannot substitute for the individual teacher or mentor providing the tip at the moment when the novice is about to make (or has just made) a critical error in judgment.

The other responses, on the other hand, while focused on the practical, are at least in the right ballpark. Instead of hoping to learn how to do something, they are questions about practice, questions that emerge from practice. I do not pretend to have answers to them, either, but I do maintain hope that our study together will contribute something. To be more specific, I hope that the course will enable the students to link the questions about practice with ideas that illuminate those questions. One aspect of a philosophical disposition, then, is to be able to conceptualize questions about practice and to discern the ideas toward which those questions point.

The students’ responses to the second question that I had posed, about how they might learn what they hope to learn, were appropriate to the material: almost every student mentioned case studies of visionary institutions as the way to explore the questions that they have. (Some, who are concerned about their own institutions, also came up with ideas about studying their own institutions through interviews and literature analyses.) Naturally, their ideas about case studies may have been influenced by the reading that they had already done about the Beit Rabban school in Vision at Work (Pekarsky, 2006). If so, it corroborates the impression that I already have (based on earlier teaching experiences and student reports) about the pedagogic power of Pekarsky’s text. I continue to use texts that present animating ideas in isolation from specific institutions and locations. But I have learned to introduce Vision at Work early in the course, in the first or second session. In studying the case of Beit Rabban, students almost instantaneously engage not only with the particulars of Steinmetz’s vision and its implementation but with the questions about vision itself. They grasp, intuitively and deeply, the way that exploring another institutional vision can illuminate their own.16

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16Broudy (1990) argues that improvement in teacher education requires the development of cases that represent the “consensus of the learned” about the central problems and dilemmas of practice. That is not exactly the kind of case that Pekarsky’s text represents; it is not focused on problems of
LEARNING FROM AN ENACTED VISION

The presence of the BIMA and Genesis programs on campus during the summer provides an opportunity to study an enacted Jewish educational vision. In 2007, Genesis was an 11-year-old program that brought together Jewish high school students, from diverse backgrounds and many countries, for a 4-week program “integrating Jewish studies, the arts, humanities and community building.” BIMA was a newer program, also targeting Jewish high school students but with a specific and intense focus on the arts. BIMA, which had been independent, affiliated with Brandeis (and Genesis) in 2007. The two programs shared leadership, infrastructure, and certain programmatic elements, but remained distinct.

After reading background materials about the programs, the students in my course had an opportunity to speak with Bradley Solmsen, director of the programs. They then went to observe different parts of the programs, different activities, and reconvened to share what they had learned. But after some discussion, I found myself trying to help them create a link between theory and practice, searching for a way to frame what I hoped they would learn from the experience. How should their discussion with Solmsen and their experience of visiting BIMA and Genesis serve the purpose of cultivating a philosophical disposition toward educational practice? I turned to a pedagogic technique that I had used before, asking a set of four questions and giving them time to write their responses:

1. What is surprising to you about BIMA/Genesis?
2. What is troubling to you about BIMA/Genesis?
3. What is inspiring to you about BIMA/Genesis?
4. How does exploring BIMA/Genesis shape your thinking about vision in Jewish education?

The first question is designed to put the respondent in a learning frame of mind. The second is designed to open up the possibility of critique. The third is designed to give the respondent the opportunity to focus on the positive, to learn from extraordinary institutions or practices. The fourth question, then, moves from a discussion of this particular institution to the more abstract level of vision discourse.

The students’ responses to the fourth question contained a number of thoughtful contributions. Some of these represent important lessons about practice so much as the challenges of vision-guided institutions (or, of this one in particular). But it may be possible to merge the ideas. A course on vision is not focused on the cultivation of facility in the practice of teaching, but rather, the cultivation of facility in the practice of the philosophical disposition toward educational institutions and practices. Accordingly, the cases that it considers should not represent characteristic problems of teaching, but rather, characteristic problems of vision.
Jewish education and its possibilities. For example, one student called attention to the seriousness of purpose in these “informal” Jewish educational programs:

I’m particularly impressed with the thought and reflection and intentionality that seem to have gone into creating the programs because my first prejudice was that, as summer programs, the educational seriousness may be secondary to the social/communal aspects.

But of course, visionary institutions can come in all shapes and sizes; what is important is the power and clarity of their animating ideas, not the duration of the program or the institutional structures to enact them. This is an important lesson.17

Another student noticed, in these programs, a culture of vision:

Visioning is not something that happens once a year at a staff retreat; it is a constant process of creating contexts where certain kinds of thinking and doing can happen. The program encourages the staff to ask big questions about the nature of their work while trying to solve particular problems of implementation.

Clearly, this student was impressed by Solmsen’s stance, in both his conversation with us and in some written material that he shared, as well she should be. Aside from many exciting aspects of the BIMA and Genesis programs, Solmsen has a vision of intensely intellectual professional development for his staff—we might say, perhaps, the cultivation of a philosophical disposition—and sees the incessant asking of questions as a hallmark of that effort. This, too, is an important lesson.18

Other responses to the fourth question (about how BIMA and Genesis shaped their thinking about vision) represent significant insights about vision in general. For example, a number of responses raised the question of the relationship between the educational vision of individual instructors and the vision of the program as a whole. As one student wrote: “I am wondering about the overarching vision of the program in relation to the vision of the individual instructors.” After all, teachers are not merely automatons, mindlessly executing a predetermined script. It seems clear that a robust educational vision must be shared, held in common among a faculty that

17For a key discussion of informal Jewish education and the need for clarity of educational purpose, see Reimer (2007).

18As above, in the case of Beit Rabban, so too here there is a curious relationship between levels of inquiry—expressed here not in terms of intentionality (although that is certainly present in BIMA and Genesis as well) but rather in terms of Solmsen’s conception of professional development. What Solmsen is trying to do with his staff is parallel to what I am trying to do with my students (by, among other things, studying Solmsen’s program).
is entrusted with pursuing it. It also seems clear that absolute coherence is unattainable and probably unwise. Barry Holtz (2005) calls attention to the “good-hearted lunatic” who may not find a place in a vision-guided institution, but even non-lunatics will not be carbon copies. So this leads to the corollary question, raised by one of the students: “What’s the relationship between instructor autonomy (shaping the courses in accord with their own visions) and programmatic vision?”

If some of the students called attention to the role of instructors relative to the institutional vision, others did likewise with the role of the teenage participants:

One of the program leaders said to the students that none of them knew exactly what the summer would be like since the way it evolves depends largely on the group of students, the community they create, and the choices they make in their own studies. I found this fluidity (depending on the students) to be a really interesting dimension to the program’s vision. This raises a question: how does a vision remain specific and have continuity from year to year when the participants and instructors determine so much of the curriculum?

The student recognized that a democratic, do-it-yourself spirit is not merely a technique but is itself a “really interesting dimension of the program’s vision.” This feature is undoubtedly especially notable, in the students’ minds, because of the contrasting prominence of the visionary leader in the study of Beit Rabban. But it also opens up the question of what it could mean for an institution to have a vision when so much is in the hands of the participants to determine. One response is to say that the participants make choices within a bounded sphere; the bounds of the sphere are the elements of the program’s vision, and the participants make choices about how to carry out the vision. This is an easy answer—but not necessarily a satisfactory one. After all, one thing that happens in open, democratic systems (including educational systems) is that the leaders and planners get surprised. In a democratic culture, there is no firewall between what can be questioned and what cannot.

Another student returned to the question of what kinds of visions qualify, for us, as worthy of note. BIMA and Genesis, like Beit Rabban, emphasizes the construction of learning environments in which students have a high degree of autonomy and trust. The student asked:

Once again, we are seeing an example of progressive education in action. So once again, we should wonder about the argument on behalf of vision. Is it the case that vision itself is important, or is it rather the case that we are inspired by educational experiences that are guided by a progressive vision of education?
Is it merely a coincidence that institutions that stand out as visionary or vision-guided also happen to be broadly progressive? Or is there a kind of elective affinity between progressive educational principles and a stance that emphasizes the importance of vision? If that’s so, what does that mean for the position, basic to vision discourse, that it is the presence of some coherent educational vision that matters for educational quality, rather than the presence of any particular educational vision?

Finally, a fourth student noted that BIMA and Genesis target different student populations but wondered about the salience of a vision that focused on developing only a part of the ideal educated person:

Together, Genesis and BIMA would seem to address the intellectual and artistic sides of personhood. Will the programs ultimately be better together than apart? It would seem that they might. I wonder whether it’s “right” for each to focus so narrowly on just one aspect of experience.

The question, of course, is not limited to BIMA and Genesis. We associate vision with focus and discipline; a vision-guided institution, we sometimes say, does not try to be all things to all people. But to the extent that any educational institution focuses on a particular set of character traits, it necessarily leaves others out, sacrificing universality for focus. This is true whether one is talking about the arts versus, say, athletics, or whether one is talking about ideological or denominational focus. The question that this student raises is thus replicated in conversations (at other times in the course) about whether it would be appropriate for Beit Rabban to maintain its distinctive focus if it were located in Kansas City, rather than New York City—in a place, that is, where the value of inclusion and responsiveness to communal needs increases in prominence because of the absence of alternative educational options.

We seem to be faced with a conceptual dilemma. When we imagine or describe vision-guided institutions, they are primarily institutions where choice is central, where students or families appreciate and voluntarily identify with the vision of the institution. If they do not identify with the vision, they will (and should) go elsewhere. These institutions are freestanding entities independently committed to their animating ideas. Other institutions, on the other hand, are committed not primarily to educational ideals but rather to the communities from which they spring. These institutions run the risk of following rather than leading, of being beholden to the myriad disparate and contradictory educational ideals of a particular community. And the rhetoric of vision tends to emphasize those risks; note my own use of images of

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freedom and autonomy, in the case of vision-guided institutions, as opposed to images of constraint and limitation, in the case of community-consensus institutions.

Yet the idea that one could not enact an educational vision outside of the conditions of choice—in Kansas City rather than in New York City—is narrow-minded. Surely one can. Surely a talented educator could create a school, in a small community, that is not beholden to myriad disparate and contradictory educational ideals but rather represents the educational aspirations of a community at its best and most coherent. In fact, we should recognize that such an institution might emphasize, among its animating ideas, the value of community, of communal solidarity and unification, and perhaps even of pluralism as a positive feature of an ideal educational environment. Such an institution would not (or should not) aspire to be all things to all people, without sacrificing its vision—but it could certainly aspire to achieve a broad basis of communal support, not merely for pragmatic reasons but for ideological ones.20

The study of BIMA and Genesis thus generated four significant (unplanned) questions about vision: (a) a question about the relationship between vision-guided institutions and the individuals who are entrusted to enact the vision; (b) a question about the relationship between vision-guided institutions and the individuals who interact with the institution as participants or students, especially under circumstances in which a democratic spirit pervades the vision; (c) a question about whether all coherent visions are worthy of our approval, or whether, on the contrary, the idea of vision suggests something about the (progressive) content of those visions that pass muster; and (d) a question about whether vision-guided institutions, having abandoned the pretense of being all things to all people, must necessarily abandon the universality of their vision.

I did not have these particular issues in mind when I grabbed the opportunity to observe the enactment of an educational vision in the BIMA and Genesis programs, or when I asked the students to write about those observations. But surfacing and considering the four issues identified in the

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20Lurking beneath the surface here is the question of what ideas qualify as appropriate components of an educational vision. The focal question in Visions of Jewish Education (Fox et al., 2003) is an individualistic one: What is the ideal educated Jew? As I have argued elsewhere (Levisohn 2009, note 7), there is another equally significant question for the purposes of developing educational visions, namely: What is the ideal Jewish (educational) community? In fact, in another in-class exercise, I tried to guide the students to see that “animating ideas”—components of vision—come in several shapes and sizes. They include not just ideas in response to the question, What is the ideal educated Jew?, and not just, What is the ideal Jewish (educational) community?, but also, What is Judaism?, and What is this subject about?, and What does it mean to teach? and other questions as well. In contrast to Fox’s five hierarchical levels, I diagram all these questions in an array around a central bubble, titled “practice of Jewish education,” with arrows from the questions to the bubble, indicating the way that each potentially influences practice.
preceding paragraph is surely part of what it means to cultivate a philosophical disposition toward educational practice. If I am looking for markers of learning, moments that indicate that the students are developing a capacity to think about vision and its challenges, their writing about these issues seem to fit the bill.

QUESTIONING EVERYTHING

Earlier, I noted the student who, at the outset of the course, had voiced basic questions about our objectives in Jewish education. “I’m wondering what the point of Jewish education is,” he had written, and I had observed that generating and nurturing this kind of wonderment—questioning everything—would seem to be an important part of what it means to teach vision. Midway through the course, an initial discussion of *Visions of Jewish Education* (Fox et al., 2003) developed in just this direction.

What learning did the conversation generate, and what conclusions might we be able to draw from it?

I opened the discussion by asking what the *Visions of Jewish Education* project was all about. “Why,” I asked, “did the Mandel Foundation [which had supported the project] get hooked on the idea of vision to begin with?” This question elicited responses based on the introductory chapters in the book, which the students had just read, defining the situation of modern Judaism and the problems of modern Jewish education. “But,” I continued, “why wouldn’t we just want to use market research? Let’s just figure out what people want, and give it to them!”

The students recognized this for what it was—a rhetorical question designed to focus on what a vision can contribute to educational institutions. They offered responses about inspiring people, presenting them with ideas that they never imagined, bolder and more far-reaching images of the possible. This, in turn, led to a discussion of authority. “I think that by having a vision, it gives more authority,” said one student. “We’re the educators. We know where we want to go. We know what the community needs.”

Other students, while not disagreeing, called attention to the implicit arrogance of statements such as these, the way in which they unavoidably impose beliefs on others. No one advocated simple populism, and all seem to acknowledge that some perspectives may be more informed and more insightful than others, but the paternalism that is implicit in the construction and promotion of vision generated discomfort. One student identified a need for visionary educational practitioners from outside the “mainstream” of Jewish education and classical Jewish studies—proposing that assembling a more diverse set of visions, from people who are not senior male scholars of Jewish texts and history of a particular age such as those represented in
Visions of Jewish Education, might alleviate the sense of elitism with which we were struggling—but of course, these particular individuals would also speak with their own kind of authority, and the question of promoting a vision for others does not go away.

One student pushed the point:

If Jews are choosing lots of paths in their lives, and Jewishness is not a substantial part of that for some of those people, starting from the assumption that it should be a substantial part of those paths is already disconnected from what’s happening. [So perhaps we ought] to really ask the question, in what ways is this [Jewish life and commitment] compelling, and in what ways is it not compelling, [rather than assuming] that it should be compelling.

Perhaps the most we can hope to do is to understand where visions fall short. Perhaps, that is, the very idea of constructing a vision that we hope or expect to be compelling to disaffected Jews is misguided.

We were heading into the territory of good and fundamental questioning, a mainstay of philosophizing about education or anything else. I paraphrased the student’s point in bold terms: “Why should we care about the choices that people are making? Why should we be so patronizing to say that those choices are wrong choices?” A rather anxious silence ensued, followed after some time with a nervous, joking reference to the mother of one of the students, who (we had already heard) impresses upon her children a deep sense of obligation to the Jewish people and their future. I continued to probe. “Why should we bother creating visions in response to something that we’ve diagnosed as a problem? For example, we have pathologized intermarriage in the Jewish community,” I said. But unlike a physiological disease like cancer, “intermarriage doesn’t kill you, and it’s not painful.”

More uncomfortable silence, followed by an acknowledgment by one student of the seriousness of the question: “If they don’t want to be there, why force people or guilt them into being Jewish? I have a bunch of reasons for wanting to be Jewish [myself], but I don’t know where that comes from.” Another student responded with some frustration: “I don’t think this conversation is going to get anywhere.” The questions, it seems, are too deep and too fundamental.

After some discussion about whether it would be a bad thing for Jewish culture to disappear from the world—what one student called, “allowing Judaism to die”—and about whether that argument should be relevant to the choices that individual Jews make, I tried to connect the issue back

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21 On this issue, see my own discussion of Visions of Jewish Education in Levisohn (2005).
to educational values or norms. I asked the students to think about other educational goals. The issue on the table was whether they are willing to stand up and advocate for a Jewish vision, even if they have reason to conclude that (some) students are not interested. Well, would they be willing to stand up and advocate for normative spelling, normative mathematics, normative science, even if students are not interested?

Again, silence. And then, a student—the same student who had earlier challenged the idea that we ought to have a vision for the choices that others make—offered an expression of a Jewish educational vision in which respect for the autonomy of the student is central. “Jewishness,” he said, “is deep and rich and can be meaningful for people.” He continued:

And as people who have found it meaningful, we want to help others find it meaningful—in a process [in which those others will make their own choices] about where to go with it. . . . It’s not about making Jews. It’s about people engaging in meaningful Jewish life. . . . And if other folks go off and live a rich Buddhist life, that’s great. Let’s help people live rich lives. Jewishness can be a component of that, but it’s not a necessary component of that.

The picture, in other words, is highly fluid and undetermined, and the role of the educator is facilitative rather than directive. Autonomy is essential, and it seems hard to see how the educator can make any normative judgments at all.

I pushed on this point: “So that makes it sound like our goal is ‘rich lives,’ to help people create rich lives, and we actually don’t care how they do that. Some people are going to find meaning in meditation, and some people will find meaning in hedge funds.”

The same student quickly jumped back in: “There’s still a question of what it means to live a good life! It’s not so simple.” The other students responded with good-natured laughter. Everyone apparently grasped that, while the argument about respecting students’ autonomy may be compelling, the problem of normativity had not been eliminated. As educators, we have no choice but to make judgments about what constitutes a “good life.” As important as respecting students’ autonomy may be to us, we also know that we are not merely facilitators of the choices that students make; we also, inevitably and necessarily, make judgments about those choices, and our pedagogic decisions flow from those judgments.

I was pleased that this tension—between respect for autonomy and the inevitable value-ladenness of teaching—had been introduced. It’s the kind of issue that is a mainstay of discourse in philosophy of education, an issue with which students ought to engage. What I had not anticipated, prior to the discussion, was how central it is to vision discourse, in particular, and thus how important it is as a component of the cultivation of a philosophical
disposition. In retrospect, of course it is. Any Jewish educational vision is an explicit and self-conscious effort to promote compelling Jewish educational ideals, to present arguments for those ideas, and thus to convince those who might not be inclined to agree. If the vision is more than a collection of clichés, the reader gets to see the gloves come off, as agreeable platitudes are replaced by arguable claims. Whether or not the reader agrees with those claims, encountering them can be an occasion—if we seize the moment—for confronting the inevitable question of student autonomy.

I was not satisfied with leaving the conversation at such an abstract level, so I proposed to the class that they think not about students in general but about a friend. I gave the example of a friend who is lying to herself about some particular problem in her life—a relationship or a dependency—proposing that we would not want to be supportive and facilitative of behavior that we think is not healthy. Self-deception is inconsistent with our conception of a good life. And so we are comfortable “imposing” our view of the good life (honesty with oneself) on our friend, perhaps not emotionally comfortable but at least ethically comfortable; we recognize that it is right and proper for us to call attention to her self-deception, gently and with compassion, in order to try to encourage her to make better choices.

After some discussion of this point, I turned back to the issue of making “Jewish choices”:

So how do we, as Jewish educators, feel about people making non-Jewish choices? Joining the Catholic Church? What if a friend comes to you and says, “I’m Jewish, I always thought that Christianity was kind of silly but... I now realize that there’s incredible richness and integrity to the Christian intellectual tradition, and spiritual depth, and I just feel like I’m home.”

The scenario raises the ante. This is not about whether to attend a second seder or some other relatively minor choice within the framework of Jewish life. Instead, it is about whether to adopt an entirely different religious tradition. How would they respond to their friend?

One student proposed a sympathetic inquiry into what is missing in her life: “What does Judaism not offer you?” Another student, in reaction, proposed asking a corollary question that, however, might indicate a genuine openness to learn about the other faith: “What does Christianity provide for you?” In response, I asked: “And are you imagining that that’s a conversation in which you are open to the possibility that that choice is right for the person?” I wanted to understand whether this was a conversation to convince the other person—whether the question about where Judaism has failed or where Christianity has succeeded was a ruse to probe the friend’s defenses, in order to plan a counterattack on behalf of Judaism—or whether it was an open-ended conversation with no preconceptions about
which outcome would be preferable. If the former, the question would be how one can justify undermining the friend’s autonomy: What gives us the right to determine, on the friend’s behalf, what the right choice is, and to advocate for that choice? If the latter, the friend’s autonomy has been respected, but apparently at the cost of being unable to advocate for a Jewish vision.

A student responded:

Well, I’m open [to the possibility that that choice is right for the person]—but it saddens me. I feel like Judaism is quote-unquote dying out. . . . Ultimately, it’s their choice, but it saddens me, because the Jewish population is threatened with dying out. . . . We have more of an obligation to keep Judaism alive because we’re so small.

In response to the friend’s choice, this student expressed her “sadness”—not a critique of the choice but a sadness, coupled with concern for the Jewish people. I pointed out that this perspective, while undoubtedly genuine, would be unlikely to sway an actual friend committed to making an actual principled choice. The student who expressed this idea believes in her obligation to keep Judaism alive, but the friend clearly does not. More silence.

Finally, in the last comment before we took a break, another student said that, if faced with this situation, she would send the person to a rabbi whom she trusts. I find this fascinating: it is the only time in the entire course, or indeed in any of the times that I have taught this course, that I can recall a student declining to answer a question or offer a view but instead suggesting that another person, in a greater position of knowledge and authority, might be able to answer it. The seminar had been a place where we put questions on the table and struggled with them; there had never been a time when we felt that we were not equipped to think about the issues at hand. The fact that this proposal emerged at this moment suggests that, at least for this student, certain questions are too basic or too threatening. Or perhaps it is an indication that, while she has no readily available grounds on which to challenge the hypothetical friend’s autonomy, she devoutly hopes that someone else does.

Let me conclude my discussion of this episode, an instance of “questioning everything,” with three observations. First, in reflecting back on the

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22This is not necessarily the case. After all, a Christian might adopt a sophisticated theological position that affirms the importance of Judaism and of its perpetuation, as many Christians (both Catholics and Protestants) have done in the last decades. But it is unlikely that a Jewish convert to Catholicism would do so. In any case, the discussion with my students was focused not on the nuances of contemporary Christian theological stances on Judaism and the Jews, but on the stances of Jewish educators toward Judaism and the Jews.
episode, I am pleased that it allowed us to think seriously about the possibility of people making other, “non-Jewish” choices—not dismissing those who do so as ignorant or weak-willed but genuinely considering that possibility as a real and principled one. I sensed that, for some of the students at least, this may have been the first time that they had done so. And while, in this instance, this was not a premeditated pedagogic move on my part, any study of vision in Jewish education ought to engage in this kind of exploration. Thinking about those who make “non-Jewish” choices opens up the question of whom we believe a Jewish educational vision is for, and how we might hope to reach those people, and what in fact it means for a vision to be “compelling.”

The second observation relates to the enormous difficulty that the students had in making normative claims. Using the transcript of the session, I have tried in the preceding paragraphs to portray the puzzled and anxious silences that characterized this discussion, which was very different in tone from other sessions and other discussions. In part, these silences reflect the genuine and deep respect for the autonomy of others; the notion of a vision being right for others, even if those others may not realize it, is deeply troublesome. With all our talk of compelling visions and animating ideas, we seem to face a crisis of confidence when confronted with the reality of the choices that many contemporary Jews make.

Finally, though, I am struck that, in allowing the conversation to continue, I redirected it from time to time but never tried to change the tenor by, for example, introducing new ideas. Perhaps even more attuned to student autonomy than usual (because it was the subject of the conversation), I refrained from proposing more nuanced ways of thinking about the issues, as I might have done. Moreover, I never returned to these basic and fundamental questions later on in the course. I never asked what we might want to say, now that we have encountered some new and substantive ideas about the purposes of Jewish education, to our friend considering conversion to Catholicism, or why we should care about the choices that others make, based on what we’ve learned. I do not imagine that any material we encountered would have provided easy answers, and I do not believe that the purpose of the course is to equip them with such answers. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to expect that the students would be able to relate those animating ideas back to the basic questions and thus to think about them more deeply. Cultivating a philosophical disposition should entail not only asking questions about practice, even basic and fundamental questions. It should also entail developing more nuanced and more sophisticated answers to those questions.

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23 This is one reason that I typically devote a session in the course to discussion of Freud’s *Future of an Illusion* (1927)—to spend time on the outside looking in, as it were.
What, then, does it mean to study vision? Is it possible to identify a set of questions or topics that are central, that deserve a place in a “curriculum” of vision? In the last session of the course, I took a few minutes to enlist the students’ help in thinking about this. I asked them to generate a set of questions that, they felt, would help disclose important aspects of thinking about vision. The task that I gave them was not as clear as it might have been, and the students had a hard time with it. But together, they came up with the following list of 10 issues or topics (not all of which are questions):

1. How would you define vision?
2. What’s a vision good for?
3. Beneficiaries and contributors: whose vision, and for whom?
4. Universalism versus particularism of a vision: comprehensive and broad versus narrow or limited to one subcommunity
5. What are the philosophical assumptions of a vision? What are the implications of those assumptions?
6. Benefits and limitations/challenges/pitfalls
7. What does it take to enact a vision? (relationship of vision to practice)
8. How can a vision outlive its founder? (evolve and change, with its positive and negative connotations)
9. Relationship of a vision to other visions (pluralism)
10. How should a vision permeate an institution? (autonomy, diversity)

Most of these should look familiar from the discussions earlier in this article. Question 1, How would you define vision?, and Question 2, What’s a vision good for?, echoed my own question to the students at the outset of the course: What should a Jewish educational vision be, and what should it do? Question 3, about who contributes to the development of a vision and who benefits from it, reflected our discussion about imposing a vision on others, as well as other discussions about the possibility of a do-it-yourself kind of vision that would be more democratic in spirit and less reliant on august intellectuals. Question 4, about the universalism or particularism of a vision, and Question 9, about the relationship of one vision to other visions, built on the Beit-Rabban-in-Kansas-City scenario: Must a compelling vision emphasize focus at the expense of inclusivity? Does the power of the vision of BIMA, for example, rely on its specialized focus on the arts?

Questions 5, 6, and 7 are good and critical questions to ask about any vision: What are its philosophical bases? What are its benefits and what are its limitations? What does it take to enact such a vision? Questions 8 and 10, however, emerged particularly from our study of Beit Rabban, although they are worth considering more generally: What is the relationship between
a vision, a visionary leader, the educators who are inspired by and also entrusted with the vision, and the institution itself in which the vision lives and through which it is expressed?

Analyzing this list and the issues and topics discussed earlier in this article, five areas of focus emerge as particularly significant for a curriculum of vision.

A. The challenge of autonomy: How should we think about the potential imposition of vision on others? How can we pursue the development of compelling visions while also respecting autonomy? As discussed, this is an issue not only in terms of students of a particular educational institution but also in terms of the educators who are entrusted with carrying out the vision. In what sense can a vision encompass their status as autonomous agents with their own ideas and their own aspirations and values?

B. The challenge of focus: The idea of vision is predicated on choosing among values and options, but every choice necessarily excludes some constituencies or interests. Are vision-guided institutions only feasible in situations where multiple options exist among which the market (students, families) can choose? Is it possible for an institution to be both vision-guided (and hence focused) and inclusive? Can inclusivity itself be an aspect of vision, and if so, at what cost?

C. The challenge of essences: Visions discourse is most comfortable with the idea that educational efforts serve the goal of the development of the individual (or, sometimes, of the community). We easily understand the logic of saying, “We do x in this school or camp or community so that our students will learn y,” or “We ask students to do a in the hopes that this will foster b.” This logic of cause and effect, where an educational activity or practice is intended to serve a higher and loftier purpose, is often what we mean by asking about vision, and conversely, our worries about vision-poor institutions is that they have not examined, and have few compelling ideas about, the coherence of this logic model. But this conveniently avoids the question of whether there are any noninstrumental educational goods, that is, whether there are essential elements of Jewish life and practice that deserve attention regardless of any expected outcome.

D. The challenge of change over time: How should we think about the perseverance of vision, or its evolution? We tend to assume that things of value are made to last. Yet we also recognize that visions may well be appropriate responses to particular historical and cultural circumstances. If, on the one hand, a school flourishes at a particular moment and then declines after 10 years, is that a failure of vision—or just an acceptable reflection of the reality that visions are not eternal? If, on the
other hand, a school evolves, perhaps even radically, does that suggest a distasteful obsequiousness and a lack of fortitude—or is it possibly appropriate for the vision that guides the institution to change over time?

E. The challenge of pluralism: What happens when we confront visions that we dislike, or worse? Are we genuinely prepared to accept the idea of multiple distinct sets of animating ideas, where those visions are judged on their (as it were) internal coherence? Can we perhaps make sense of the idea that a vision might be coherent and compelling but also, in some sense, wrong? What might it mean for a vision to be compelling to one group of people, but not to another? What are the limits of our pluralism with regard to visions of Jewish education?

These five areas of focus are surely not comprehensive, but they may perhaps serve as a starting point in a discussion of the curriculum of vision.

CONCLUSION: ASSESSING THE EXPRESSION OF A PHILOSOPHICAL DISPOSITION

At the outset of this inquiry, I noted that the paper would explore my teaching of this course in order to understand more deeply the idea of teaching vision as the cultivation of a philosophical disposition among educational practitioners. I mentioned two important issues: the “curriculum of vision”—what the subject is about, what the challenges are, how one might explore the relevant concepts or ideas; and assessing student learning. The article has primarily focused on the former, but in my conclusion, I will turn briefly to the latter. If teaching vision is conceptualized as the cultivation of a philosophical disposition among educational practitioners, how would we know such a thing if we saw it? My concern is not so much a practical issue about grading the students’ performance but rather a more general worry about how to tell if the students’ are learning what I want them to be learning, whether I and we are achieving our objectives individually or collectively, whether any of this amounts to more than just a series of entertaining conversations.

One of the students’ final assignments was a concluding reflective memo about the experience of studying vision. They were encouraged to look back at their initial writing on vision, in the hope that they would be able to articulate what they had learned since those efforts. One student admitted: “Coming into this class, I had never considered the concept of vision.” In a couple of other cases, students identified ways that their earlier expressions were shallow or ill informed. For example, one student wrote: “My early thinking was very focused on the ways in which vision could
help schools and their stakeholders.” As the course proceeded, however, “I became aware of vision as a way to address educational goals, not just institutional ones.” If I am reading this correctly, this student began with an appreciation of the functional benefits of vision, the way that having a shared vision might foster coherence and engagement. What he learned to appreciate, however, was the way in which the substantive elements of a particular vision—the animating ideas—might also contribute to principled pedagogic decisions.

Notably, several students made explicit reference to Pekarsky’s (2006) study of Beit Rabban, as well as to other specific institutions (such as Deborah Meier’s Central Park East School). “I did not know if it was possible for an institution to put [its] vision into practice and be successful,” wrote one student. However, “after reading Pekarsky’s book about Beit Rabban, I now have a clear picture of what a vision-guided institution looks like today.” Another student wrote: “The readings we have done, particularly Pekarsky and Meier, have provided me with concrete examples of what visions look like when they are enacted in an educational setting.” These references substantiate the claim, often attributed in educational discourse to Lee Shulman (1983), of the power of “images of the possible.”24 Similarly, one student specifically mentioned our encounter with Bradley Solmsen, the director of the BIMA and Genesis programs, as an opportunity to learn not just about vision in general but specifically about the way that a vision-guided educational leader wrestles with ongoing questions: “It was also interesting to see, in action, how a leader of such programs can still articulate some uncertainties and ongoing questions about decisions.”

In addition to affirmations of the efficacy of images of the possible, the students’ concluding memos also included two other important features: (a) nuanced expressions of what a vision is and how it works; and (b) substantive and thoughtful questions and critiques. As an example of the former, one student wrote that “vision-guided institutions... have specific ideas regarding the type of learning they wish to foster, the types of students they

24In his 1983 article, Shulman uses the phrase “images of the possible” in the context of his argument on behalf of case studies as a form of research that has the power to shape educational policy, rather than professional practice. Subsequent usage (in educational discourse) has focused more on the latter—and has often explicitly related the phrase to the idea of vision. See, for example, Hammerness (2006, pp. 82 ff.). In any case, Shulman (personal correspondence) makes no claim to have invented the phrase, which predated him. Martin Buber, for one, was using it in the early 1950s in an essay in biblical theology, but interestingly, not in a positive way: “Man’s heart designs designs in images of the possible, which could be made into the real. Imagery... is play with possibility, play as self-temptation, from which ever and again violence springs... This imagery of the possible... is called evil” (Buber, 1953, p. 91). His idea seems to be that imagination, escape from reality, creates the conditions for humans to be tempted to make reality over in the image of what they imagine, even doing violence to reality if necessary. We can think of strong ideologies as examples. And this, we might notice, is an inherent danger of vision, educational and otherwise.
aspire to create, the type of educational environment they hope to encourage.” Especially in light of the single-minded focus in some of the literature on the ideal educated Jew, this student’s expansion of vision to include not only “the types of students they aspire to create” but also “the type of learning they wish to foster” and “the type of educational environment they hope to encourage” is notable. Another student seemed to grasp how vision is directly related to her work: “Multiple times we, as educators, get sidetracked in our tasks; having a vision is a constant reminder of our end goal.” Her admission suggests a genuine recognition of the value of vision as a counterbalance to the inevitable dynamic of distraction.25

The second feature mentioned above, questions about and critiques of vision, is even more significant as a marker of learning. One student identified the almost inevitable focus on educational outcomes: “Another thing that worries me about this approach to education is that it sounds a little like sausage making. I think that philosophers and educators alike really do care about the integrity of the educational process, and that too much focus on the ideal outcome fails to reinforce this.” If vision encourages us to focus on outcomes, are there no independent evaluations of process? How do we nurture what the student calls “the integrity of the educational process” as essential to a vision-guided institution?

A second student struggled with where visions—the ones we celebrate as authoritative and compelling—come from: “In order to address the shortfalls of the educational visions we encountered, perhaps vision should come up from the needs of the constituency, rather than down from its self-appointed guardians. . . . What are contemporary Jews looking for?” I do not believe that the question, about what Jews are “looking for,” is simply an effort to replace vision with market research. Instead, it seems to me that this student is genuinely wondering how to make sense of a situation where some contemporary Jews, among the marginally affiliated or semi-alienated, demonstrate a kind of creative energy that, while perhaps not yet a coherent alternative vision, is nevertheless not well-served by the mainstream institutions of the Jewish community.

In a related question, a third student posed the problem of practitioners’ own vision:

25Compare Fenstermacher’s (2007b) observation, in the context of his discussion of teaching educational foundations to preservice teachers, about what he calls the “central task” of such courses: “Understanding this difference [between educational aspirations and current realities] is key to not losing one’s way as a teacher in what might be called ‘the systemics of schooling.’ Among these systemics are grade levels, marks, [etc.]. . . . Indeed there are so many systemic features to schooling—and they are so powerful—that one may easily become captured by them, in the sense that one comes to believe that attending to the systemics is what we mean by the education of children and youth” (p. 99). His solution, however, is not to focus on vision but the opposite—to focus on “systemics” in the hope that a deeper understanding of what they are facing will enable teachers to avoid losing their way.
As a beginning teacher, I would make no claims to be able to create a vision for education. . . . On the other hand, it seems that teachers (perhaps more experienced ones than I) should be consulted when it comes to creating a vision, since they are at least some of the ones who are going to put it into practice.

On one level, this is simply a question of power and authority. Who gets to decide? But at a deeper level, it reflects the challenge of creating institutions guided by ideas. After all, a vision is not like a computer program, instructing the machine—the educational institution—what to do first and what to do next. Teachers may not have a lifetime of study of classical Jewish texts behind them, but they possess an essential wisdom of practice that we ignore at our peril.

A fourth student questioned the implicit model of a vision-guided institution, in which every pedagogic and institutional choice is made for reasons that conform to the vision: “How realistic is it really for a vision to play into every single decision that is made when we all know that teachers make hundreds of on-the-fly decisions every single day?” Presumably, the student does not intend to defend idiosyncrasy or randomness as the basis for decision-making. But even if decisions are made for good reasons, does it necessarily follow that all those reasons ought (under ideal circumstances) to cohere into something that we can then call the institution’s vision?

A fifth student returned to the assumption, discussed above, that a vision ought to have staying power: “Our society and the needs of our educational institutions are constantly changing, thus our visions must adapt to the needs as well. . . . I think this balance between sticking to one’s idea of the vision and changing it to accommodate others is extremely challenging.” One can easily say that the vision is constant, but the way to apply it varies with circumstances. But this is insufficient, just as it is insufficient to imagine that content—subject matter—is static and fixed and the only pedagogic challenge is to figure out how to get that content into the heads of students. If our visions are products of particular times and places, we cannot avoid the question of how to modify them, whether in light of new cultural circumstances or to accommodate new partners in our mission.

The questions quoted from students in the preceding paragraphs are just words, of course; at best, they are highly imperfect proxies for students’ thinking or learning. Moreover, they are words composed by students who are eager to earn the approval of their instructor and may well simply be repeating ideas that they have heard (and may or may not have internalized) over the course of the semester. So I should clarify that these various markers of the philosophical disposition that we aspire to cultivate do not translate easily into assessments of individual learning, of individual growth over time.
Nevertheless, if we are seeking evidence of that philosophical disposition, these thoughtful questions and critiques—along with the nuanced expressions of what a vision is, and the articulations of change in their own conceptions—may be as much as we can hope for. Perhaps they are enough to affirm the value of the enterprise, by filling in a bit of the picture of what it looks like when we cultivate a philosophical disposition among educational practitioners. Perhaps, that is, they may provide at least a partial image of the possible for the teaching of vision.

**REFERENCES**


