In imagining the relaunching of the Journal of Jewish Education, the editors wanted to offer its readers the opportunity to engage in ongoing discussion of significant issues in Jewish educational research and scholarship. The conversation would be sustained over time, by diverse participants, producing a polyphonic inquiry, a give and take from issue to issue in the spirit of Mikraot G’dolot.

We are delighted to introduce the first such conversations based on Visions of Jewish Education, the important book edited by Seymour Fox, Israel Scheffler, and Daniel Marom. Jon A. Levisohn opens the discussion here; in coming issues, several academicians and practitioners will offer brief responses to his essay. Although Levisohn will offer the last rejoinder in print, the editors are confident that the conversation will be sustained as readers of the Journal continue to discuss among themselves the role of existential and institutional visions of Jewish education.

Ideas and Ideals of Jewish Education:
Initiating a Conversation on Visions of Jewish Education

JON A. LEVISOHN

In this essay, Levisohn reviews Visions of Jewish Education, edited by Seymour Fox, Israel Scheffler, and Daniel Marom, and the larger project of which this publication is a part. He acknowledges its seriousness of purpose and its emphasis on critical reflection on the purposes of Jewish education as a welcome change from much of the rhetoric of Jewish continuity, placing this effort in the context of other efforts at Jewish educational improvement. He then explores some possible limitations of framing an educational vision in terms of the “educated Jew,” including especially its individualism and its potential elitism. Finally, he considers the identities of the primary contributors to the volume and raises the question of how the discourse of Jewish educational visions might be different in the hands of different contributors. The essay thus serves as a platform for a continuing discussion of the Visions Project as a whole.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The early history of large-scale American Jewish education was dominated by education for Americanization. As the community assumed the basic form in which we know it today, shaped by the massive waves of immigration in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, educational efforts were oriented towards acculturation within and accommodation with the larger American cultural context. That is, the goal of Jewish education was to produce American Jews, Jews who were comfortable with (some level of) Jewish commitment and observance while fully integrating into American society.

But that is no longer the case. At a certain point—in some circles through the influence of newly-arrived prewar refugees and postwar survivors, in other circles due to the emergence of ethnic pride in the 1960s and 1970s, and most broadly as a response to alarming indications of an erosion of Jewish commitment and continuity in the 1980s and 1990s—the underlying orientation shifted. Instead of focusing on the creation of American Jews, the Jewish community began to focus on the perpetuation of the Jewish community itself. Instead of worrying about helping Jews integrate with American societal and cultural norms, Jewish educators and educational institutions now aspire to helping Jews (and their children) remain Jews. The catchphrase for at least 15 years now, has been Jewish continuity, and education is the means to the end.

Is Jewish education up to the task? Skeptics abound. Some of these skeptics are convinced of the overwhelming attraction of general American culture; they doubt that any educational effort is sufficient to foster an American Jewish identity that successfully resists its temptations. Typically, however, this argument is unimaginative in two senses. First, it assumes only more of the same—or more precisely, more of the worst examples of religious education, the tired and stale forms with which it is familiar—rather than considering the best examples available. And second, it ignores the new and vibrant expressions of Jewish identity, a particularly American Jewish identity, that have emerged or might emerge in the coming years. In other words, when considering whether Jewish education is working or not working, one has to look not just at traditional and familiar markers of commitment and vitality, but also for new and innovative ones—not just synagogue attendance on Yom Kippur and giving to Israel but Jewish blogging and Jewish art and the creation of new Jewish rituals.

There is also a second group of skeptics who regret what they perceived to be an abandonment of the social mission of the institutions of the organized Jewish community in favor of more narrowly educational goals. That is, these skeptics—and there is some indication that they are presently enjoying greater attention—claim that to pour intellectual and material resources into education is (figuratively or literally) to throw good money after bad, money that is more justly spent on direct services to the needy. But education is not a zero-sum game. If Jewish education is ineffectual, then yes, one of the forms
of commitment that will decrease is commitment to the social mission. But if, on the other hand, Jewish education succeeds in nurturing commitment and creative development, then among the expressions of such commitment is, surely, the centrality of *tzedakah* (charitable giving) among one’s obligations.

However, I imagine a third group of people—especially experienced educators and those knowledgeable about the histories of educational reform—observing the fray in a detached way, with an amused expression. These people are not skeptical about Jewish education, itself; on the contrary, they are intensely committed to it. But they can only be entertained by the simplistic reduction of the debate into camps that are in favor of Jewish education and against it. They smile at the idea that people would speculate about what “education” might or might not accomplish without paying attention to the kind of education that one has in mind. In this last category, I would include two philosophers of education, Seymour Fox and Israel Scheffler. In a short monograph in the mid-1990s entitled *Jewish Education and Jewish Continuity: Prospects and Limitations* (Mandel Institute, Jerusalem, 1997), they argued that the challenge of Jewish continuity must be met by a concerted intellectual effort, not just a marshalling of resources and a massing of troops but an intellectual effort to think through what Jewish education is for. The “first step...is to disclose the vision, or more correctly the visions, of Jewish education that might address the prospective life situations, thought worlds, and spiritual environments of our people” (Fox and Scheffler, 1997 p. 11).

*Visions of Jewish Education,* the volume under discussion here, represents the fruition of that first step.1 Edited by Fox, Scheffler, and their colleague Daniel Marom, and 12 years in the making, the book is a product of the Mandel Foundation’s effort to generate “a serious conversation among proponents of variant conceptions of Jewish life and their attendant visions of Jewish education” (p. 13). At its core, it contains a series of essays by four eminent scholars of Jewish Studies: Isadore Twersky, Menachem Brinker, Moshe Greenberg, and Michael Meyer. A supplement follows each essay, a kind of commentary on the text immediately appended to the essay itself, sometimes clarifying ideas in the light of the scholar’s other work and sometimes adding material gleaned from the scholar’s responses to groups of educators and others with whom drafts of the essays were shared. In addition, the volume includes contributions from Michael Rosenak and Scheffler that provide perspectives on the

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1Fox, S., Scheffler, I., & Marom, D. (Eds.). (2003). *Visions of Jewish education.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. The present essay is a development of some ideas about the book that I have written about elsewhere, in a book note in *Jewish Book News* 21:3 and then in a review essay entitled “How to do philosophy of religious education” (*Religious Education* 90–101, 100:1, Winter 2005). In that essay, I present three models of what it could mean to do philosophy of religious education from within a particular religious tradition; *Visions of Jewish Education* serves as an example of one of those models. In contrast, the present discussion is not primarily concerned with theorizing what philosophy of religious education can or should be. Instead, I have taken this opportunity to focus on *Visions of Jewish Education* on its own, to deepen my arguments and build upon some of my ideas about the book, and especially to place them in some larger contexts.
project from Philosophy of Education (each of which also receives an interpretive supplement). 2 Finally, the volume also includes introductory chapters articulating the rationale for the project and explaining its history, and a concluding section with two further essays by Fox and Marom, which focus on aspects of the implementation of visions in practice.

The essays, individually and collectively, are exquisite examples of the kind of serious inquiry into the purposes of Jewish education that emerges, and can only emerge, from the depths of intellectual and spiritual involvement in Jewish history, literature, and thought. Twersky, until his untimely death, was LiHaver Professor of Jewish Philosophy at Harvard; his article is both a presentation of Maimonides' philosophy of education and, at the same time, an attempt to persuade the reader to see all of traditional halakhic Judaism as an educational process. Brinker is Crown Professor of Modern Hebrew Literature at the University of Chicago and Professor of Philosophy and Hebrew Literature, Emeritus, at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem; he articulates a self-consciously secular approach that is rich in historical study, towards the goal of nurturing an autonomous decision by the student to remain a part of the "family." Greenberg, a scholar of Bible, is Becker Professor of Jewish Studies, Emeritus, at the Hebrew University; he defends an intensely spiritual education that nurtures the innate needs and desires of humans, but with a faith that those needs and desires will be well served by engagement with the classical texts of the tradition. And Meyer is Ochs Professor of Jewish History at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati; his contribution expresses an explicitly Reform perspective, embracing modernity but standing in critique of it, "aiming at the creation of Jewish religious lives that stand under the authority of an obligating God" (p. 150). Some readers may find these essays dense to the point of intimidation, and will be better served by beginning with the practice-oriented contributions of Fox and Marom, where the impact of ideas is more explicit. Other readers may particularly enjoy the philosophical perspectives of Rosenak and Scheffler. And all readers will benefit from the introductory chapters that provide a framework for what follows.

2. TIME TO THINK

Each of the essays is surely worthy of a critical review on its own; indeed, the supplements themselves take the first steps in that direction by pointing

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2 In separating out the Rosenak and Scheffler contributions from the core chapters, I am following not the explicit organization of the volume (in which all of these are part of one section, entitled “Visions in Detail”) but what I take to be its implicit organization, in which Rosenak and Scheffler are demarcated as contributions about visions rather than fully articulated visions themselves. But this should not be taken as a diminishment of their importance. Indeed, given the goals of the volume, one might even argue that these chapters are more important, since they may enable readers to think critically and constructively about visions in Jewish education even more than studying the visions themselves.
towards some of the key issues that emerged when groups of educators engaged with the material. But rather than focusing on the individual essays, I want to call attention to some features of the project and the collection as a whole.

However, in the interest of full disclosure, I should note before continuing, that I currently work at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University, a research center that is supported by the Mandel Foundation. Moreover, I have participated in a series of study groups beginning in 2003, convened by the Foundation, to discuss the promotion of thoughtful inquiry into ideals and goals by practitioners, institutions, agencies, and scholars of Jewish education. But even if those things were not the case, I would still be predisposed to find the book important and the project exciting. It is, after all, a call to take ideas seriously. It is committed to the thesis that theory is relevant to practice. It extols the virtue of rigorous and critical thinking, and even claims that “the most urgent need in the field of Jewish education at present is provision of the time to think” (p. 15). Such talk is music to a philosopher’s ears!

Some might quibble with the claim that “time to think” is “the most urgent need.” Surely, some might say, the Jewish community needs practitioners, at every level, who might take advantage of such time, even if they had it. Like other public and parochial educational systems, Jewish education in North America suffers from a dearth of the kind of educators that have the intellectual capability to transform institutions. Warm bodies in classrooms are, thankfully, available. But we know well that many of the best educators—the most thoughtful, the most critical, the most dissatisfied with the status quo—join the one-third that leaves the profession in the first three years, and that retaining those with promise is the crucial issue. So perhaps, these observers would note, the most urgent need is not time to think, but educators to do the thinking.

Surely, too, others might observe that the Jewish community needs institutions that understand the importance of thinking, institutions that understand that encouraging the intellectual growth of their professional staff is in their own interest, the interest of the profession, and the interest of the community in general. These institutions would provide not just time but, more importantly, structures to support thinking; they would enable that intellectual work to proceed not in an isolated way but in collaboration with critical colleagues. Like the issue of personnel, this issue is also familiar to those working in other educational systems, public and parochial. Isolationism is a crippling educational pathology not just because of teacher burn-out (although this is certainly important). Beyond burn-out, isolationism is crippling because of the way that it undermines experimentation, meaningful critique, and a culture of teacher learning. So perhaps the most urgent need is not time to think, but institutions that support thinking.
And finally, some might comment that surely the Jewish community needs a better understanding of what it means to engage in thinking about the practices of teaching. Discussions of Jewish education are painfully oblivious to the actual practices of Jewish education, which remain almost entirely invisible and thus resistant to improvement. We do not talk about how we teach Bible or Talmud or Jewish history except at the level of curricular prescriptions; we have almost no research on the variety of these practices, their theoretical underpinnings, and their impacts; and we are almost entirely unable to offer guidance to prospective, beginning, or experienced teachers. This is not a matter of finding out “what works” for the purposes of replication. Rather, it is a matter of raising the level of insight and awareness about what actually occurs in the planning and execution of good teaching: the thousands of decisions that teachers make, consciously or unconsciously, about subject matter and students alike.

Each of these perspectives has merit, but clearly, this book cannot solve all those problems. It does, however, present examples of what it means to think deeply about fundamental issues in Jewish education, and in so doing, may prompt the reader—educator or layperson—to reexamine her own beliefs and perhaps even adopt a beneficially critical stance towards her own practice. There are many publications that provide practical advice for Jewish educators, and much work being done to develop innovative curricula at the local level. But works of serious scholarship on Jewish education as a particular form of religious education, volumes that represent advances in thought and challenges to our own thinking, are few and far between on our bookshelves. This, alone, would be a reason to celebrate the publication of this volume.

3. THE CONCEPT OF VISION

The key to the project as a whole is the concept of vision. We therefore ought to gain some clarity on a central question: What is it about a vision that is so important that it deserves all the time and attention that the project has devoted to it? In a key paragraph that presents the core of the argument, the authors present what seems to be mostly a negative argument. That is, they are focused on what happens to an educational system without vision: It is “scattered and incoherent…uninspired, prey to past habit, incapable of justifying itself to new generations…spiritless, a mere recapitulation of conventional lessons and past practices” (p.8). Each of these evocative phrases (and there are others) is deserving of careful consideration, and the surrounding paragraphs too are worthy of close study. And yet, I wonder whether the authors’ purpose would be better served with a more direct and straightforward presentation.
For the sake of comparison, consider Daniel Pekarsky’s three-part argument about visions. He argues, first, that a vision of the ultimate goals of education is important because it informs educational decision-making. Second, in addition to that ongoing guidance, a vision also enables the possibility of authentic educational evaluation (of institutions, or of individuals); only when we know what we are striving for can we assess how we are doing. These two arguments are general; the third argument is specific to Jewish education within the context of modern society. Pekarsky argues that, given that context and its competing values, it is “important for contemporary Jews to encounter powerful visions of a meaningful Jewish existence” (p.33). To be successful, these must be visions that can stand up to the competing visions of the good life that are available, implicitly or explicitly, in popular culture. For many readers, I suspect Pekarsky’s arguments would concretize the powerful rhetoric in a helpful and persuasive way.

At the same time, it also seems worth noting that these straightforward arguments lack something that the rhetoric of Visions possesses—a sense of the passion, the power, the excitement of an institution that is motivated by a clearly articulated and shared vision. Vision-driven institutions are more thoughtful about their choices, as Pekarsky notes. They are capable of assessments in accord with their own priorities rather than someone else’s, as he argues. They provide compelling alternatives to the standard choices available in the culture, as he discerns. But they are also places of energy and enthusiasm, notable for the fervor of the commitments that are shared by faculty and students alike. As the authors of Visions write, “A sense of purpose is active, not passive; it is a call to engagement and thus the energizing of latent capacities” (p.8). So we do need clear and sober conceptual arguments for vision, as Pekarsky provides us. But those conceptual arguments should not be confused with the kind of motivating power that an attractive vision can generate in an institution, a power that can transform an institution from a dull and lifeless place to one quickened by compelling ideas.

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3 Pekarsky, D. (1997). The place of vision in Jewish education reform. Journal of Jewish Education, 63: 31–39. In his article, Pekarsky also helpfully distinguishes between an “institutional vision,” a vision of what a particular institution should be and how it ought to operate, and an “existential vision,” which speaks to more fundamental issues about what humans ought to aspire to. These are obviously related in various ways; in this review, I suggest that an institutional vision is not merely a mechanism for achieving an individualistic existential vision but also should include a set of claims about what a community should be.

4 This is why we need not just conceptual arguments about the role of vision in Jewish education, as in Pekarsky, and not just attractive visions, as are presented in Visions, but also compelling portraits of vision-driven institutions - models and images of what such institutions look like. One example in this vein in the monograph entitled Vision at the Heart: Lessons from Camp Ramah on the Power of Ideas in Shaping Educational Institutions, by Seymour Fox with William Novak (Jerusalem: Mandel Institute, 1997). Another example is a fascinating study of a remarkable elementary school, forthcoming from Daniel Pekarsky himself. These portraits begin to make visible how vision-driven institutions operate and how their visions serve as the motivating force that I have described.
4. THE CONCEPT OF THE EDUCATED JEW

One of the ways to think about the notion of a vision of Jewish education is to consider the question, “What does it mean for someone to be an educated Jew?” Or, slightly differently, “What is the ideal product of a Jewish educational institution or system?” And indeed, this is the way the Mandel Foundation’s project began, by asking the scholars to respond to questions such as these, and traces of those origins are found sprinkled throughout the volume (e.g., in the title to Michael Meyer’s chapter, “Reflections on the Educated Jew from the Perspective of Reform Judaism”). These questions are undoubtedly useful; they can serve to help us articulate our ideals for our institutions, and moreover, the concept of “the educated Jew” can call upon, as an intellectual resource, the tradition of scholarship in general philosophy of education that surrounds the question of “the educated person.” Indeed, this is just what Scheffler’s chapter sets out to do. Nevertheless, it is also worth paying attention to the limitations of these questions, the ways in which the questions—or the notion of “the educated Jew” itself—are also subject to critique.

One possible concern with the notion of an educated Jew may involve a sense of finality or fixedness, as if one is educated in Judaism as a preliminary stage toward being a Jew or behaving like a Jew, at which point one no longer engages in anything called Jewish education. But it hardly needs to be said that such an implication is very far from the minds of the contributors to this volume. Nothing in their essays suggests that Jewish education ends or should end at a particular point. On the contrary, their conceptions of the educated Jew are replete with expectations of continued lifelong Jewish learning—expectations that the authors surely have of themselves no less than they have of any other educated Jew. As Fox writes in his essay, “All the scholars were committed to visions that require lifelong learning, since ‘graduation’ from Jewish education is an oxymoron” (p.258). So this first concern, about the finality of the notion of an educated person, may be set aside.

A second concern derives from the obvious focus on the individual, the single educated Jew, to the exclusion of the community or the society. In other words, when we think about what we want educational institutions to be and do, perhaps we should not move too quickly to thinking about what they should do for individual students, but should rather pause to think about what they should do for, or as, communities. Are the authors susceptible to this critique? To be sure, they are highly sensitive to the contributions of community and tradition to individual identity, and therefore do not fall prey to the superficial idea (sometimes unfairly associated with classical political liberalism) that individuals have rights but not responsibilities. They are all attuned to the importance of a person’s contribution to society, as an intrinsic part of the ideal educated Jew. And yet, their visions of Jewish education are all, in the end, visions of the individual rather than visions of the community or of institutions. No one, for example, wonders about or
inquires into the way in which Jewish educational institutions are or ought to be manifestations of certain kinds of community. No one introduces a conception of a caring community, or a healthy community, or a just community, or a learning community; no one suggests that our institutions, especially our schools, ought to strive to be such communities. Surely, however, some such conception ought to be part of any vision of Jewish education that hopes to guide educating institutions.

Well, perhaps not? In the essay by Daniel Pekarsky to which I referred earlier, he distinguishes between what he calls an “existential vision,” a vision of the nature and purpose of Jewish being, from an “institutional vision,” a vision of how a particular institution should function. The latter, he argues, ought to be informed and guided by the former; one ought not to be entranced by a conception of a healthy institution without asking more fundamental questions about what goals that institution serves. Indeed, notions such as a “caring community” are precisely what he has in mind. If so, then perhaps the second concern is misplaced. Perhaps visions of institutions are always overly instrumental, and should be secondary to more basic existential visions.

In my view, Pekarsky’s point is well taken as a reminder that we too frequently focus on proper functioning instead of pursuing ultimate ends. Yet, while his distinction is helpful, it is a mistake to imagine that an existential vision can only be a vision of an ideal educated person. On the contrary, ultimate ends can be communal in addition to individual. Creating a learning community in a particular institution is good not just because of the kinds of individuals that such a community will produce, but because of the kind of community that it fosters. Means and ends are not, in the end, entirely separable.5

Finally, a third concern about the notion of the educated Jew involves the elitism that seems to be lurking in the shadows. When I teach material from the “educated person” tradition in 20th century philosophy of education, my students often find the language alien and the project vaguely disturbing, and it requires some translation work in order for them to see the value in it. Is this just muddle-headed political correctness? I do not think so. I think, rather, that this response represents an awareness of the ways in which schools do not work for everyone, and a suspicion that—no matter how progressive

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5Indeed, Pekarsky knows this. In his introduction of the idea of an existential vision (1997 p. 32), he calls it “an image or conception of the kind of human being and/or community that the educational process is to bring into being.” A bit later, on the same page, he writes that existential visions articulate “what Jewish existence at its best in its social and/or individual dimensions looks like.” Pekarsky’s “and/or” in these sentences is pointing exactly to the issue that I have been discussing, the way in which an existential vision can be a vision of the ultimate end of the individual and/or a vision of the ultimate end of the community. To the extent that the concept of the educated Jew focuses the discussion entirely on the former to the exclusion of the latter, something central to the project of envisioning Jewish education is missing. I should note here that Michael Rosenak’s contribution to the book is intensely concerned with the question of community - but not in the way that I have been discussing. His focus is on the question of what holds these various core visions together, if anything, and how the value of community can be expressed. This is related to, but distinct from, the issue of what kind of Jewish community we want to produce and why. My thanks to Barry Holtz for prompting me to clarify this point.
our institutions become, no matter how sensitive we are when we promote our communal norms—we inevitably make life difficult for those who cannot or will not conform. This concern about elitism is not a reason to stop promoting communal norms; it is certainly not a reason to avoid probing visions of the educated Jew. But perhaps it is an intuition worth recognizing.

Visions of Jewish Education is not unaware of the challenge of elitism. On my reading, the book responds to the challenge in three ways. First, it responds with the argument that Jewish education can “address the needs of people with very limited backgrounds as well” (Fox, p.258). That is, each of the contributors believes firmly that their vision is appropriate and relevant to all kinds of Jews. For example, Greenberg believes that all people feel a basic human spiritual need, while Meyer explicitly addresses the problem of those who come as adults to the study of Jewish texts and traditions with no “Jewish memories”. Furthermore, the book responds to the challenge of elitism in a second way by presenting not one unified position on the ideal educated Jew but rather a number of positions. The editors go out of their way to emphasize that these positions are not to be understood as a menu of options, from which one ought to choose. Despite the fact that the core essays emerge from something that might be called “Orthodox,” “Conservative,” “Reform,” and “Israeli secular” perspectives, Jewish readers are ill advised to go looking for the best fit for one’s own denominational affiliation or that of one’s school, and non-Jewish readers should be warned against assuming that the authors are representative of their denominations in any significant way. Such an approach to the book would not further the agenda of the project, but rather undermine it, for the editors want their readers to engage with these essays, to challenge them and to be challenged by them, not to choose among them or to assign them to easily labeled boxes. Thus, in addition to the avoidance of one final and unified vision of Jewish education, the book also suggests that this is not even a desideratum. That is, the third aspect of the book’s response to the challenge of elitism is to appeal to pluralism—an intellectual pluralism that humbly submits these contributions in the conviction that nothing as complicated as a vision of Jewish education can fit neatly into a denominational box, and that we have as much to learn from those thoughtful presentations with which we disagree as those that we find more comfortable.

And yet, to return to the concern about elitism, each of the visions presented in the book is profoundly intellectualistic. This is not surprising; given the nature of the contributors and the nature of the Jewish tradition within

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6 There’s a further question—which is deserving of more attention than I can give to it at present—about the tension between the obvious normativity of the visions, on the one hand, and the commitment to pluralism, on the other. To what extent do these visions make a claim to be appropriate to all Jews? To what extent do they recognize any limitations to that claim? In Meyer’s case, for example, he explicitly identifies his vision as emerging from a Reform perspective, but also seems to think that it may be relevant to others beyond the Reform movement as well.
which they are working, one could hardly expect anything different. But on the charge of elitism, my students’ nagging concerns remain. Despite the conviction that Jewish education can address the needs of all Jews, despite the avoidance of one fixed vision, and despite the commitment to a pluralism of visions, one still worries about the children and adults who may not find a home here.

5. WHOSE VISIONS?

I have just referred to the denominational diversity of the contributors to the volume, and that is surely a noteworthy accomplishment: Intellectual projects that cross denominational boundaries are rare in the Jewish community. But in thinking about the identities of the contributors, as a group, two other salient features come to mind. First, the core contributors are all (in one sense or another) historians of Jewish texts and culture. And second, of course, they are all men.

To take the second issue first: should we care that there are no women’s voices among the primary scholars, indeed among any of the eight contributors? And if so, why? Thinking about this issue leaves us in a familiar bind: We surely do not want to claim that a woman’s perspective, a specific perspective that we might anticipate in advance, is missing—not least because of the irony of this particular male writer claiming to have some privileged insight into a female perspective. Nor do we want to essentialize such a perspective, as if women naturally hold a certain view in contrast to men. Can we claim, somewhat differently, that what is missing is not a woman’s perspective but rather a feminist perspective? This does not help much, because now we are in the position of having to explain precisely why these men, in particular, do not qualify as feminists. I do not mean to suggest a settled answer to the question of whether the visions in the book are or are not feminist; on the contrary, the question is certainly worthy of further exploration. I am quite certain that reading the book through the prism of gender would be illuminating, and would further our critical thinking about the gender norms that are implicit in our educational structures and ideals. I would welcome such a reading. But for the present, perhaps it is sufficient simply to register the concern, and to call it to the attention of the reader.

Turning to the first issue, what is the significance of the disciplinary affiliation of the primary scholars? Especially given the diversity of their historical interests—from the Bible to the modern world—does it matter that they are all historians? It is far from obvious what it even means to be an historian, beyond engaging in a practice that bears some Wittgensteinian family resemblance to the practices of (some) other historians. But the significance is not so much in what they are as in what they are not: in contrast to Rosenak and Scheffler and Fox, they are not philosophers. Lest I be misunderstood, I am not claiming that only philosophers should be allowed to speak on
philosophical matters, nor that only philosophical training equips one to do so convincingly. The former position is illegitimate, and the latter is patently untrue. Nevertheless, their disciplinary identification seems relevant. Why?

When I considered this, and tried to think about whether I should be troubled by it, I jotted down an idiosyncratic list of about 10 centrally important figures in twentieth century philosophy, and another 10 major figures in modern Jewish thought. There was surely nothing sacrosanct about my lists, but it was a place to start. Checking the text, I discovered that, of my philosophers, only John Dewey made an appearance (and only twice). The other nine do not appear at all. Of my Jewish thinkers, only Ahad Ha’am is well represented; he permeates Brinker’s essay as well as its supplement. Soloveitchik appears often—but only in the supplement to Twersky, and in the essays by Rosenak and Fox. Setting aside one passage in Brinker that lists some important figures to study, the other Jewish thinkers on my list—all nine of them—appear only twice in the volume in total. What does this tell us? I certainly do not mean to criticize any particular contribution to the volume, as if name-dropping is a prerequisite to serious thinking. But I do think this observation about the book indicates the ways in which these particular scholars—so deeply immersed in the classical sources of Jewish tradition and its history—may not be sufficiently explicit about the relationships between their ideas and contemporary philosophical traditions, either Jewish or general.

As an example, consider Brinker’s discussion of education for autonomy, what he calls educating “to freedom” rather than “for compliance” (pp.98–99): This discussion might be richer and deeper were it to refer to the rather extensive literature in philosophy of education on this topic. Or consider the debate over the role of Hebrew, to which the editors call attention in their overview (p.25): Surely this debate might be informed by theoretical conceptions of the place of language in human identity. Or consider Twersky’s introduction of the idea of berkel, a kind of habituation into the religious practices and norms from an early age that is, he believes, an indispensable prerequisite to a mature appreciation of such a life: This conception would be well-served by an encounter with the best contemporary thinking about moral education and its Aristotelian influences.

Or consider Greenberg’s emphasis on the fundamental spiritual needs of human beings, an emphasis which (as the supplement notes) is influenced by scholar of comparative religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith: Surely this strong claim calls out not just for a more careful and critical consideration of Smith’s influence, but also for a critical comparison to the closest analogue within modern Jewish thought, namely, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Or consider, finally, Meyer’s argument that the “way out of the dilemma [of teaching a normative tradition while respecting the child’s autonomy] lies…in the initial assumption that the child is being educated into a tradition…which aims to direct life, not merely to enhance it” (p.154). Meyer is admirably
forthright in articulating the way that the claims of tradition must be taken seriously, rather than treated neutrally; “Jewish education,” he notes pithily, “is not ‘objective’” (p.154). At the same time, his discussion might have benefited from a nuanced engagement with the literature in philosophical hermeneutics, which probes the ways in which traditions both impose norms and also accommodate critique.7

I do not expect these contributors to be something that they are not, but that is precisely the point. In the hands of scholars with different kinds of backgrounds, some of these kinds of issues might have received a different treatment, and the project as a whole might have benefited. Or perhaps these observations point to one way—not the only way, to be sure—in which the project as a whole may be carried forward. By expanding the circle of respondents and interlocutors to include scholars of modern Jewish thought and modern philosophy, the project might not only chart connections, and not only articulate similarities and differences, but might emerge with sharper and more nuanced positions as a result.

6. A ROLE FOR SCHOLARS

The preceding reflections on the contributors as a group should not imply a critique of the inclusion of any of these particular individuals. Each is a master of his respective field, each is profoundly committed to the flourishing of the Jewish people, and each demonstrates sensitivity and insight in the expression of his ideals. Their involvement in this project represents not only the profound respect for scholarship demonstrated by the Mandel Foundation, but also an implicit recognition of the need to bridge the chasm between scholars and educators. After all, the explosion of Jewish Studies scholarship is surely among the greatest accomplishments of the Jewish community in the twentieth (and now twenty-first) century, unprecedented in scope, in fact unimaginable in any other epoch. But, as has often been noted, the phenomenon represents an untapped resource for the American Jewish community.

This is not the place to discuss the question of the intellectual and spiritual tensions between academic scholarship on the one hand and communal commitment on the other. The point is simply this: The contributions to this volume represent an engagement with the questions and concerns of the Jewish community that is qualitatively different from, and superior to, the typical sporadic and piecemeal synagogue speaking engagements that fill the calendars of American academic scholars of Jewish Studies. As such, these contributions serve as a model of what might be if the Jewish community were to find ways to tap into the vast wisdom in the field.

7 Note that Scheffler’s essay does consider the issue of initiation into a tradition as part of the conception of the educated person (p.224), and refers to John Passmore’s discussion of this in his The Philosophy of Teaching (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
The goal is not to have academic experts in Jewish studies disciplines instruct the educators in what to teach, or how. That model—a translation model, in which the scholar sees his role as translating knowledge generated in the academy into a form that is accessible by the teacher or even directly by the student — is flawed. As a strategy for curriculum development, it is overly directive, and as a strategy for professional development, it disrespects the practical knowledge held by the teacher. Rather, the goal would be to engage thoughtful and committed academic practitioners alongside, and in collaboration with, thoughtful and committed educational practitioners. Those collaborative conversations should focus not only on the construction of visions of Jewish education, where appropriate. But they should also focus on probing the pedagogy of the specific sub-disciplines of Jewish Studies. They should pursue the questions of what is worth knowing in Bible or Talmud or Jewish History, and why, and what kinds of educational encounters would serve those ends, and what kinds of problems emerge in constructing those educational encounters towards those ends, and what teachers would have to know in order to construct such encounters, and how we would know when we have achieved them. Surely we would all have much to learn from such collaborative inquiries, scholars and educators alike.

7. CONCLUSION: HOW NOT TO MISREAD THE BOOK

The editors of this volume are fairly explicit in warning the reader that there is a wrong way to understand the project. “We do not suppose our book to offer the last word on any of the topics with which it deals,” they write (p.2). On the contrary, “Our project will have failed of its purpose if the reader assumes that the visions outlined in the book are final and finished projects.” Even after 10 years, each of the visions is a work-in-progress. “Nor should it be thought,” the editors continue, “that they represent an exhaustive list of promising approaches.” Surely other scholars and educators, of comparable insight and maturity, would generate other visions.

Instead, “our hope is that the chapters...may initiate a continuing process of reflection and an ongoing conversation.” Thus, the wrong way to understand the project is to think that it presents a menu of vision-options. The book, they say, is not the last word on the subject. Their goal is not to offer solutions, but “to stimulate a discourse on alternative visions of Jewish education” (p.8). And just this, I believe, is the loftiest and lasting contribution of the volume, to initiate conversation at a new level of seriousness and sophistication, to stimulate discourse that is not comforting but challenging. But it is a contribution that cannot be received passively. Like everything of ultimate value, it requires a parallel contribution on the part of the recipient to bring its potential to fruition.