Extending the Conversation on *Visions of Jewish Education*: The Danger of Recipes

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This article extends the conversation begun by Levisohn in volume 71:1 of this journal, and continued by a number of respondents in volume 71:2. These articles identify two notable themes among the responses: The first is the issue of pluralism, and the tension between vision and exclusion. Despite the best of intentions, it seems unavoidable that vision-driven institutions must necessarily exclude certain ideas, certain practices, and most painfully, certain people; standing for something must always mean not standing for everything. Second, several respondents are concerned in one way or another with the very nature of an educational vision. Particularly, the question arises whether the construction of a vision around the key question, “What is an educated Jew?”, is limiting, either intellectually or practically. Beyond discussing these two themes, the article extends the conversation about vision in Jewish education by raising a concern, which the author attributes to Franz Rosenzweig, about the way in which a commitment to organizing institutions according to vision may obscure the fundamental need for openness and spontaneity in educational arrangements.

The responses to my essay, “Ideas and Ideals in Jewish Education,” (Levisohn, 2005) are both thoughtful and generous. At the same time, the diversity and number of the respondents makes it difficult to reply to them either collectively (since they are diverse) or sequentially (since they are so many). Instead, I will describe some connections that I see among the responses, with no attempt to be comprehensive. And I will then conclude with an

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My thinking about educational visions has been influenced by countless conversations with friends and colleagues, but I would be remiss if I did not mention, specifically, the students who have both embraced the importance of an educational vision and challenged it at every turn.
Additional argument about “vision” in general, in order not to end the conversation but, rather, to extend it further.

Diane Tickton Schuster’s focus on the “gap between learning and action” in adult Jewish education might make us wonder why we should assume that the former ought to lead to the latter. In other words, is “action” (however defined) an important component of the vision of adult Jewish education, and how widely shared is that vision? Implicitly, the issue here is one of pluralism and exclusion: How flexible are we willing to be when we examine the actual products of our educational institution, and what happens when they don’t seem to affirm precisely the ideals that we might have wanted? We might reframe Barry Holtz’ discussion about educators around the same issue of pluralism: To what extent do vision-driven institutions have room for the “loners and good-hearted lunatics” who don’t quite fit the vision?

Josh Zweilback, too, implicitly raises the question of pluralism in his account of the congregant who finds the congregation’s vision exclusionary. While Zweilback is enthusiastic about the value of creating and communicating a vision, he honestly admits that this particular congregant might never embrace this particular vision. Indeed, a vision must necessarily exclude certain ideas and practices, and this may entail excluding certain people in subtle or not-so-subtle ways. Perhaps inclusivity and pluralism can be part of the vision itself, as Daniel Lehmann would claim? They surely can, but it is impossible to square the circle: Standing for something must always mean not standing for everything.

Moving from the question of pluralism to the nature of an educational vision, Visions of Jewish Education proceeds from the assumption that there is a certain class of questions that deserve to be treated in the context of developing a vision—first and foremost, the question of the educated Jew. But each vision is made up of responses to and convictions about a combination of questions: not only “What is an educated Jew?”, but also “What is human nature?” and “What is God?” and “What does it mean to participate in a tradition?” and “What does it mean to study sacred texts?” and, yes, even “What does it mean to educate?” Helena Miller reminds us that the absence of women’s voices does not mean the absence of gender in these visions, beginning the process of reading the visions through the lens of gender. Daniel Pekarsky reminds us that the visions include, too, implicit conceptions of community. Thus, any vision includes much more than just a conception of an educated Jew.

But Steven Lorch goes further, expressing some discomfort with the character of the four visions in Visions of Jewish Education for the way in which “educational methods and visioning processes are conspicuously absent.” If I am understanding his point correctly, he is not complaining that the visions in the book are insufficiently detailed, as if we ought to expect a Moshe Greenberg, for example, to be an expert in teaching Hebrew. Rather, he is concerned with the model of a vision in which the question of the
educated Jew is primary. Other questions—how we conceive of knowledge, how we conceive of the good, and how we conceive of teaching and learning—are no less significant when trying to envision an actual educational institution, and should not be considered secondary or merely questions of implementation. Daniel Lehmann’s second argument is closely related; his worry, I take it, is that the fruitful insights of contemporary intellectual currents never find a place in the discussion because of the way in which an educational vision is defined. Perhaps, then, something as complicated as a guiding vision for an educational institution can never proceed from just one central question.

Finally, I want to offer an additional thought about the fundamental argument of the book. The respondents published here are, to a person, in favor of vision in Jewish education. They believe that clarity and consistency regarding the underlying purposes of an institution can only promote the more effective pursuit of those purposes, even if there may be concerns about how visions are enacted (e.g., in Holtz’ discussion of the value of eclecticism, in Finkel’s articulation of organizational obstacles to implementation, or in Pekarsky’s treatment of the issue of elitism). Indeed, when put that way, how could one not agree?

Nevertheless, there’s one concern that continues to nag at me in all of the talk of visions. Indeed, it is a concern that can be associated with all educational planning, all thoughtful determination of ends, and all efforts to align processes with those ends. It is a concern about the way in which planning tends to preclude spontaneity and openness, and a worry that attention to proximate ends—even noble and legitimate ones—may preclude sufficient openness to ultimate ends.

My source for thinking about these matters is a series of paragraphs in Franz Rosenzweig (1920/1955), who describes his idea of the Frankfurt Lehrhaus as follows:

What is intended to be of limited scope can be carried out according to a limited, clearly outlined plan—it can be ‘organized.’ The unlimited cannot be attained through organization . . . Any ‘plan’ is wrong to begin with—simply because it is a plan. The highest things cannot be planned; for them readiness is everything. (p. 65)

He distinguishes here between those things for which we can plan and those things—the “highest things”—for which we cannot. For the former, we can develop institutions according to our best and most thoughtful visions. For the latter, instead of planning, we must simply be ready.

Rosenzweig then continues, on the next page, in a passage that might have been written in direct response to Visions of Jewish Education: “All recipes, whether Zionist, orthodox, or liberal, produce

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1I have referred to these lines in another context: see the conclusion of Lavisohn 2004.
caricatures of men, that become more ridiculous the more closely the recipes are followed . . . There is one recipe alone that can make a person Jewish and hence . . . a full human being: that recipe is to have no recipe . . .” (p. 66, italics added).

Following a plan, Rosenzweig claims, can only produce mimicry, not authenticity. It matters not how thoughtful and compelling a vision may be; the attempt to implement a vision, a “recipe,” and to produce individuals on that basis, is destined to fail because genuine human lives are not carried out according to moral or religious templates. The only recipe is to have no recipe.

Rosenzweig concludes the section of his essay by addressing educators directly. If educators should not be engaging in planning, in organizing, in building institutions according to compelling visions, what should they do?

Those [educators] who would help [the Jewish individual] can give him nothing but the empty forms of preparedness, which he himself and only he may fill. Who gives him more gives him less. Only the empty vessels in which something may happen may be kept in readiness—“time” and “space.” Really nothing more is needed—time to speak in, and space to speak in. This is all that can be “organized” in advance, and it is very little, next to nothing. (p. 67)

In Rosenzweig’s view, apparently, any attempt to structure educational experiences for students, any effort to determine curricular goals or pedagogic priorities, is counterproductive. All that is necessary are the “empty forms of preparedness,” forms that will be filled with the content of genuine and individual engagement that cannot be predicted or prepared in advance.

Now, Rosenzweig’s rhetoric here surely is excessive. He does not actually believe that an educational institution should be noting more than an empty room. And in fact, his leadership of the Lehrhaus was guided by thoughtful consideration of the different types of learning experiences that students ought to encounter. Furthermore, it is worth noting that what Rosenzweig is presenting this essay can be considered, itself, an educational vision; that is, he is not merely articulating his plan for a particular educational institution, but rather a vision of what Jewish education can and should be, given the modern cultural and religious condition. So it’s not quite right to say that this is an argument against vision in education.

And yet, there’s an important insight here about the way in which a focus on purposes, and on planning and organization to achieve those purposes, might actually undermine our loftiest goals. We tend to think that more planning, more discussion, more elaboration and articulation and clarification is better because it leads to better teaching and, therefore, better learning. For example, we tend to think that we ought to have an
articulated idea of what we want our graduates to know and be able to do. We tend to think that we ought to have a clear conception of why we want to teach a particular text and how that teaching fits into some larger educational purpose. But sometimes, as Rosenzweig says, “who gives him more gives him less.” Sometimes, our clarity of purpose makes us resistant to spontaneity and openness in an engagement with the text. Sometimes, focusing on the student as a future product distracts us from attention to the infinite value of the moment of encounter in the present.

Can our institutions be places characterized by responsible and ever-more-thoughtful planning, places where practices are guided by principles, without crowding out openness and attunement to the highest things? I believe they can. Indeed, institutions can make even this principle central to their guiding visions. But the danger is always lurking at the door—the danger that we will become so entranced by our vision, by the serious intellectual labor that has gone into the vision itself and our development of institutional guidelines consistent with it, that we will avoid spontaneity, that we will undervalue genuine encounter, and that we will end up producing caricatures rather than real people. No discussion of vision in education should ignore the danger of recipes.

REFERENCES
