Should Jewish Day Schools Aspire to Create Educated Jews?

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The title of this article — should Jewish schools aspire to create educated Jews? — is obviously intended to be provocative. In one sense, the answer to the question is surely yes. When we set up systems and institutions for educating people, our goal is to educate those people. Jewish day schools educate Jews. So it seems as if we are asking, “Do we want to achieve our goals?” Why else would we do whatever we decide to do, if not to achieve whatever we aspire to achieve?

But let’s look more closely. The idea of the “educated person” — or, the “educated man” — has a long history in general philosophy of education. In the field of Jewish education, the idea of the “educated Jew” is associated with a project of the Mandel Foundation in Israel that came to be known as the Visions of Jewish Education Project and that produced, among other things, an important edited volume, Visions of Jewish Education, in 2003. Led by Seymour Fox, z”l, the Visions of Jewish Education project began in 1991 by asking questions about the educated Jew.

In other words, the project assumed from the outset that the way to construct a vision of Jewish education would be to articulate what we mean by the educated Jew — what we imagine that a graduate of an aspirational institution knows and is able to do, or perhaps, what that person values and believes. We want vision-guided practice; we want institutions that are energized by compelling visions that focus the attention of their faculty, their students, and their supporters. To generate these visions, we then assume, we ought to start by painting a picture of the ideal graduate. This assumption, however, deserves closer examination.

The Danger of Planning

First, we might notice that any effort to focus on the future runs the risk of avoiding the present reality — especially the reality of children. In the mid-18th century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau sounded one of the keynotes of progressive educational theory when he warned against thinking about children as pre-adults. “People sometimes speak about a complete man,” he writes in Book 2 of Emile. “Let us think rather of a complete child.” When we think about the educated Jew, are we focusing on the “complete man” rather than a healthy, grounded, flourishing child? Rousseau writes in his preface, “[People] are always seeking the man in the child without thinking of what he is before being a man… Begin, then, by studying your pupils better.” In some respects, the critique is as true now as it was in Rousseau’s day; schooling is often implicitly designed as a race to see how fast we can make children into adults. Think about the common assumption that enrichment means moving ahead in the material. Ahead towards what? Or think about the all-too-common outcome of exercises to determine what students
ought to know, in which it turns out that few if any adults in the building meet those broad and deep expectations. If we are not careful, the bold vision of the educated Jew—everything we aspire for children to achieve as adults—will blind us to the reality of the Jewish child.

In fact, the dangers of planning for the future adult are not just that we will lose sight of the child. There is a second, related danger that we can point to. In Franz Rosenzweig’s famous essay “Towards a Renaissance of Jewish Learning” in 1920, he calls for learning without organization, without planning. “All recipes,” he warns, “produce caricatures of men, that become more ridiculous the more closely the recipes are followed.” What begins as a principled effort to define the educated Jew may quickly disintegrate into just such an exercise in recipe concoction, and we can easily imagine the caricatures that result from slavish efforts to produce such a person. Start with 12 years of rigorous Jewish studies, mix in several summers of a total immersive Jewish experience, add in one dose of Israel, and stir. But people are not products to be produced, and they are certainly not produced by recipes. Instead, the only way to proceed is to rely on what he calls “the empty forms of preparedness,” the creation of appropriate times and spaces for apparently spontaneous interactions.

Of course, simply setting up a time and a space for interaction is no way to run an innovative new center for adult Jewish learning, which is what Rosenzweig was proposing in that essay. For that matter, it’s no way to run a Jewish day school either. The interactions that take place in those settings are not spontaneous; at their best, they are the result of the careful design of learning environments and the thoughtful creation of learning materials. Just as Rousseau, for all his professed commitment to an education through spontaneous natural experiences, has clear ideas about what he wants Emile to learn, so too Rosenzweig, for all his commitment to “the empty forms of preparedness,” actually spent his days lining up lecturers and seminar leaders to create a distinctive set of educational experiences for the adults Jews of Frankfurt.

So we can set aside some of the rhetorical excess in both Rousseau and Rosenzweig. But both of them, in different but related ways, remind us that our attention to the idea of the educated Jew carries with it a danger that is associated with all planning, all preparation for the future. John Dewey famously argued that “Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself.” When we focus on the idea of the educated Jew, we ought to be aware of the risk of turning education into a preparation for some future life.

Ideology is Overestimated

The Visions of Jewish Education Project was committed, from the outset, to nurturing multiple visions rather than a single consensual vision. Fox and his colleagues believed that they had a responsibility to develop multiple articulations that would enrich and renew Jewish educational discourse, articulations as diverse as the range of compelling alternatives in modern Jewish life. In other words, pluralism at the level of ultimate questions of meaning and purpose would inevitably lead to pluralism at the level of educational theories.

For pluralistic Jewish day schools, this may seem attractive, and indeed, it is a virtue of the project that it successfully resisted any effort to achieve artificial and superficial consensus. But any intentionally pluralistic institution faces a particular challenge in articulating a vision, which must be appropriately flexible and inclusive without giving up on a rich, textured, compelling articulation of goals. Visions of Jewish Education includes four such rich and textured visions— but none of them would be appropriate for a pluralistic school. At the same time, a vision has to offer ideas that enable choices, ideas that guide decision-making in matters of educational policy. As Devorah Steinmetz recently argued in these pages, “I would not want pluralism … to end up being the criterion by which the program is measured or that shapes the direction of the school.” Answering “all of the above” to every choice is no vision.
But the problem is actually deeper than that. In fact, I want to suggest that we ought to question assumptions about the role of ideology in the development of educational vision. This is not to suggest that ideology is altogether unimportant, but rather, to challenge the implication that ideology determines pedagogy. We sometimes pretend that, once we figure out the biggest ideas, the day-to-day decisions will flow from that process. As I have recently argued elsewhere in discussing the teaching of classical Jewish texts, we sometimes seem to assume that the most significant pedagogical fault line lies between those who treat classical texts as sacred (in some sense) and those who do not. But such an abstract conception, while theologically meaningful, may be pedagogically inert. The affirmation that one is encountering the word of God (in some sense) provides little pedagogic guidance. Likewise, the idea that one is encountering a text that is not the word of God is also compatible with a very wide range of pedagogic practices. When we focus on the big ideas of the educated Jew, we may delude ourselves into thinking that we are constructing a vision that can provide guidance for our teachers and our curriculum, when in fact we are doing nothing of the kind.

Let me make the point a bit more concrete. I recently encountered an attempt to articulate enduring understandings and essential questions in Tanakh. As many day school educators know, those terms are borrowed from Understanding by Design, a popular and useful approach to curriculum development that emphasizes the responsibility of the instructor to articulate ambitious learning goals and then to plan backwards to the learning activities that support those goals. So what are appropriate enduring understandings and essential questions in the subject of Tanakh? If you are immersed in conceptions of the educated Jew — if you’ve been thinking about the ideological stances that the educated Jew ought to embrace — then you may well end up, like the author of the example that I encountered, imagining that enduring understandings in Tanakh include ideas like “the Torah is the record of God’s revelation” or “The historical fate of the Jewish people is a function of its relationship with God, which is defined by its observance of Torah and mitzvot.”

These are certainly big ideas, and my intention is not to question their appropriateness for any particular school. Depending on one’s priorities, they may well be of paramount importance. But they are not helpful for creating compelling lessons in Tanakh. They do not allow educators to select certain appropriate texts, rather than others. They do not generate instructional approaches or guide one towards the design of compelling learning opportunities. They are ideas about Tanakh, to be sure, but they are so far removed from the nuances of actual biblical texts that one would be hard-pressed to explain how any particular lesson ought to promote those ideas. If a teacher were to tell us that her goal in teaching, say, Exodus 19 (about the Sinaitic theophany) is to promote the idea that “the Torah is the record of God’s revelation,” we would not be pleased. Instead, we would be justifiably concerned, for she has flattened a rich and nuanced text, full of soaring imagery, complicated choreography, and interpretive difficulties, into mere cliché. We might sit down with the teacher and say, “Let’s think harder about what, specifically, you want to accomplish here, so that your pedagogy can match your desired outcomes.” We might even go so far as to refer to the concern, articulated by Dan Pekarsky and others, that vision discourse always runs the risk of promoting slogans instead of content-rich conceptions. Whatever enduring understandings of Exodus 19 might be (and of course there will be many compelling candidates), they surely ought to be more robust than a slogan about the Torah as the record of God’s revelation.

Another way to put the point is this. The idea of the educated Jew encourages us to think, at least in part, about ideological stances on issues of ultimate importance. There is surely much value in this, and great need for it. But we may be misled, in promoting the importance of ideology, into thinking that we have accomplished more than we actually have. Pedagogic guidance emerges less from ultimate stances, and more from finer-grained conceptions of what
kinds of questions and answers are important within a particular subject, and what good teaching looks like, and what it means to learn.

This is not an argument against the importance of vision. As Fox, Pekarsky and others have argued, we cannot afford to perpetuate educational practices that are devoid of powerful and compelling visions. Instead, it is an argument – or at least, the outline of an argument – for the importance of a particular conception of vision, a more complicated conception. That conception of vision is not limited to the idea of the educated Jew, and does not assume that everything else will smoothly follow. Instead, it emphasizes the multiple contributing sources of vision-guided practice: ideas about human nature and human flourishing; ideas about the divine and about kedushah (sanctity); ideas about good teaching and learning; ideas about particular subjects of study and what meaningful accomplishment looks like in those subjects; and ideas about the ideal community, Jewish and general. All of these ideas should contribute, in fundamental ways, to a vision of Jewish education.

The Ideal Community

This last sphere of thought – about the ideal community – generates the third and final concern about the idea of the educated Jew. The focus on the individual, the single educated Jew, to the exclusion of the community or the society, is hardly unique in educational theory. After all, the idea of the educated Jew builds on the tradition of philosophic inquiry into the idea of the “educated person” to which I referred above. (See Israel Scheffler’s chapter in Visions of Jewish Education for some of these connections.)

But what if this way of considering the purposes of education is too narrow? What if the focus on the educated person, or the educated Jew, overlooks a function of education that is more communal? I do not mean only that individuals ought to be members of communities, that they have certain responsibilities to others, and that they derive certain benefits from being in association with others. In education, building school communities is instrumentally valuable for any number of reasons: because it facilitates engagement (both emotional and financial), because it lowers barriers of resistance to institutional goals, because it creates loci of meaning that contribute to individual human flourishing. All these benefits are generated by having good and healthy communities in the schools, or created by the school, or with which the school interacts.

However, my point here is to consider the possibility that communities are not only instrumentally but also intrinsically valuable, that they are ends in themselves rather than (or as well as) means to the end of individual fulfillment and flourishing. What are the educational implications of thinking about communities as ends in themselves? What happens if, in our construction of visions of Jewish education, we seek to establish not only what is an educated Jew but also what is an ideal Jewish community?

As it turns out, it is quite hard to sustain an inquiry into this question; discussions of educational aims seem to collapse into individualistic terms almost inevitably. In my work on this question, I first sought to borrow from communitarian political theorists, people like Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, who help us articulate a vision of human flourishing in which the good life is (among other things) a life led by the individual embedded in healthy and vibrant communities. But even when we articulate that vision, we have not escaped the focus on the individual. After all, a need, while possibly important or even essential, is still in the service of the thing that needs it. So we can affirm the idea that individuals need healthy communities, but when we do so, we are implicitly saying that the value of communities is, in the end, derived from a conception of individual human flourishing. The former (the community) is derivative; the latter (the individual) is primary.
But if political theory does not get us where we need to go, the Jewish tradition – what Daniel Elazar famously called the “Jewish political tradition” – just might. How can we articulate the concept of the ideal community? Well, the tradition represents its values in terms of mitzvot, obligations; a mitzvah is, at once, a technical obligation and the expression of a particular value. Most mitzvot are incumbent on individuals, of course. The individual is obligated to give charity, to lift a lulav on Sukkot, to honor one’s parents. But some are not. The individual is not obligated to establish a judicial system; instead, the community is obligated to do so. Likewise, certain public worship rituals are the obligation of the community, not of the individual.

Another example is education: when parents are unable to educate their children, the obligation falls to the community. An analysis of these communal obligations, and others, suggests a three-part taxonomy. Some communal obligations derive from or suggest a conception of community as acting in loco parentis (as in the case of educating children). Others derive from or suggest a conception of community as a kind of corporation, in the legal sense, acting not merely as a collection of individuals but as a corporate entity (as in the case of certain communal rituals). And others derive from or suggest the communal expression of certain deeply held values (as in the case of the establishment of a judicial system, embodying the values of justice and order).

If we then ask our educational question, about the pursuit of community as an educational end in itself, this taxonomy may provide some guidance. Community is certainly a means towards individual human flourishing. But it is also valuable as an end in itself in these three ways. The community steps in where individuals cannot. The community is a corporate agent for certain purposes. Finally, and most interestingly, the community embodies or expresses certain deeply held values. If we are constructing a vision for Jewish education, then perhaps alongside our ideas about the educated Jew, we ought to articulate these ideas about our ideal Jewish community.

Recently, Yitz Greenberg has written (about Jewish day schools in particular, in an address titled “Judaism and Modernity,” 2006) that “the day school gives educators the opportunity to create a world which can embody the holistic holy community which is our dream for the world.” Notice his focus on community as an end rather than a means. There is nothing in this brief expression of a vision for Jewish day schools about the benefit of holism for the individual educated Jew. There is nothing about the purpose of holy communities in creating such people. Instead, a “holistic holy community” is an end in itself, as an expression of our deeply held ideals on the community-wide or indeed global scale. Perhaps, he suggests, we might create day schools to be microcosms of those holy communities.

So should Jewish day schools aspire to create educated Jews? Of course they should. But as we think about what that means – as we do the hard work of articulating our visions of Jewish education – we ought to keep three cautionary notes in mind. First, we ought to remember Rousseau and Rosenzweig, warning us about the limitations and liabilities of planning for the future without sufficiently attending to the student in front of us. Second, even as we promote ideological engagement with weighty matters of ultimate concern, as we certainly should, we ought to be wary about whether and how those ideological stances guide pedagogical practice. Frequently, they do not. And third, we ought to be alert to the individualism implicit in the focus on the educated Jew. We can balance that individualism by promoting a deep understanding of the importance of community as part of our conceptions of the educated Jew. But even more significantly, we can balance that individualism by articulating a specific, positive vision of the kinds of communities that we want to create – and then creating those communities in our schools.