

Visions of Jewish Education

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Contents

<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page ix</i>
<i>About the Mandel Foundation</i>	<i>xiii</i>
Introduction	1
Part I. The Visions Project	
1 Envisioning Jewish Education	5
2 The Project in Operation	13
3 Six Visions: An Overview	19
Part II. Visions in Detail	
Introduction	46
4 What Must a Jew Study – and Why?	47
ISADORE TWERSKY	
Supplement: Isadore Twersky	77
5 Jewish Studies in Israel from a Liberal-Secular Perspective	95
MENACHEM BRINKER	
Supplement: Menachem Brinker	106
6 We Were as Those Who Dream: An Agenda for an Ideal Jewish Education	122
MOSHE GREENBERG	
Supplement: Moshe Greenberg	133

7	Reflections on the Educated Jew from the Perspective of Reform Judaism	149
	MICHAEL A. MEYER	
	Supplement: Michael A. Meyer	162
8	Educated Jews: Common Elements	178
	MICHAEL ROSENAK	
	Supplement: Michael Rosenak	201
9	The Concept of the Educated Person: With Some Applications to Jewish Education	219
	ISRAEL SCHEFFLER	
	Supplement: Israel Scheffler	233
 Part III. Visions in Context		
10	The Art of Translation	253
	SEYMOUR FOX	
11	Before the Gates of the School: An Experiment in Developing Educational Vision from Practice	296
	DANIEL MAROM	
	Conclusion: The Courage to Envision	332
	<i>The Visions Project: Participants and Forums</i>	334
	<i>Index</i>	341

Introduction

In 1991, the Mandel Foundation launched a project to stimulate the philosophical consideration of Jewish existence in our time as reflected in alternative visions of Jewish education, its purposes and instrumentalities, the values it should serve, and the personal and social character it ought to foster. *Visions of Jewish Education* is an outcome of the project.

Jewish life is currently undergoing something of a renaissance, with renewed interest by Jews in Jewish culture, religion, literature, and education. But prevalent conceptions and practices of Jewish education are neither sufficiently reflective nor thoroughgoing enough to meet the challenge of new social and cultural circumstances both in Israel and in communities elsewhere. What is needed are new efforts to develop an education of the future that will fully value the riches of the Jewish past and grasp the need for creative interaction with the general culture of the present. It is this conviction that motivates both our project and our book.

With the collaboration of the Harvard Philosophy of Education Research Center, we began our work by inviting a group of scholars concerned with Jewish life to compose written responses to the fundamental question of what a Jewish education ought to consist in under contemporary circumstances. These scholars were then convened for a first meeting at Harvard in 1992 to present their several formulations; thereafter, they met repeatedly, both in Jerusalem and at Harvard, for critical discussions of their diverse views. The overall goal of these discussions was to initiate basic thinking about the prospects of contemporary Jewish life, with primary emphasis on the education required to sustain and enhance such life.

The scholars who participated in our project were Isadore Twersky, late Professor of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy, Harvard University; Menachem Brinker, Professor of Philosophy and Hebrew Literature, Hebrew University; Moshe Greenberg, Professor of Bible, Emeritus, Hebrew University; Michael

A. Meyer, Professor of Jewish History, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion; Michael Rosenak, Professor of Jewish Education, Emeritus, Hebrew University; Israel Scheffler, Professor of Education and Philosophy, Emeritus, Harvard University, Director, Philosophy of Education Research Center, Harvard University; Seymour Fox, Director of Program, Mandel Foundation, Professor of Education, Emeritus, Hebrew University, and Project Director; and Dr. Daniel Marom, Senior Researcher, Mandel Foundation, faculty member, Mandel School, and Associate Project Director.

The three chapters in Part I explain the background and motivation of the project, provide an account of what it attempted to do and what it did, and offer a comparative introduction to the scholars' essays that follow.

The essays in Parts II and III include the visions of a halakhist and those of a biblical scholar, of a secularist and of a historian of Reform, of a pluralist concerned with community, of a philosopher treating of the educated person, of an educator studying the linkage between theory and practice, and of a participant observer who has worked to elicit and refine a particular school's vision as embodied in its daily practice. The reflections represented in these chapters, their strengths and their limitations, their disparities and their commonalities, their fundamental divisions as well as their sometimes startling convergences, their occasional scholarly surprises and their often inspiring insights into traditional as well as universal values – all of these cannot fail to invite the reader into a deeper appreciation of Jewish education, as well as the challenge to envisage its future.

We do not suppose our book to offer the last word on any of the topics with which it deals. Our project will have failed of its purpose if the reader assumes that the visions outlined in the book are final and finished projects, self-enclosed philosophical worlds. Nor should it be thought that they represent an exhaustive list of promising approaches to Jewish education or that all that is required is a judicious mix and match among them. Our hope is that the chapters to follow may initiate a continuing process of reflection and an ongoing conversation on the topics treated here. Such a process may yield unforeseen creative responses to the issues in question and in itself bring new life to the community within which it takes place. It is the strenuous effort to envision afresh the depths and the heights of Jewish learning to which our project has been dedicated.