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.

Part I

The Visions Project

1

Envisioning Jewish Education

For more than 200 years, Jews in the Western world have aspired to civic and social equality. They have argued and worked for full political rights, for admission to universities, for access to the professions, and for the right to participate in all branches of commerce.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, these aspirations have in large measure been realized. Jews have taken advantage of the opportunities increasingly afforded them to participate in the political, social, economic, and intellectual life of Western open societies. They have become full and active participants in the civic and political life of their communities.

Yet, paradoxical as it may seem, enhanced participation by Jews in modern society has exposed Judaism to a historic test of survival. "The occasion for this test," as the philosopher Leon Roth has described it, "was not primarily the religious one of confrontation with other faiths but the political one of being granted civil rights":

> The change of political status was the result of a long process, and its duration differed in different countries. Its more obvious landmarks were the admission into the Netherlands of some of the refugees from Catholic Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth century, the re-admission of the Jews to England in the seventeenth, the emergence in Germany of a Jewry educated on Western lines in the eighteenth. Its great symbolic manifestations were in the France of the Revolution: the tearing down of the walls of the ghettos in the first years of the Republic, the calling of a "Sanhedrin" (supreme Jewish religious court) by Napoleon in 1807.
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> Up to this point in the history of European Jewries the previously elaborated tool of survival, religious law or *halakhah,* was astonishingly successful. It supplied the organization which kept each community a

> self-contained islet in the Gentile sea; and it prescribed the type of action which, for better or for worse, satisfied the majority of individuals.
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> When the walls fell, however, a new situation was created, and not for Jews only but for Judaism. . . . For a score of centuries Judaism had taught the Jew how to survive political oppression. It had now to be re-adjusted to the fact of political freedom.[1]

The resulting struggle to reorient Jewish life in the modern world confronted Judaism with an enormous challenge. The dimensions of this challenge were philosophical as well as civic. The problems of Jewish education in modern society stand out sharply by contrast with the premodern period for which, as one of us has elsewhere described it,

> education in the Jewish school, home, and community was one continuous entity, embodied concretely in all spheres of life. . . . Scattered in their diverse and fragile communities, Jews assuredly had no control over the world, but they had the word, and the word gave them access to the highest heavens, to which their religious life was dedicated. . . .
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> The Jew lived a precarious existence, but the philosophical framework of Jew and non-Jew alike was largely the same. . . .
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> The holiness of the Jewish Scriptures, central to this philosophical worldview, was virtually unquestioned. . . . Jewish education was thus based on systematic beliefs, of which the basic philosophical features were recognized and shared by all. . . .
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> Now every feature of the premodern context has been destroyed or rendered problematic in the modern period. The emancipation and entry of the Jew into the mainstream of Western life broke the tightly knit harmony of home, school and community. The general breakdown of the medieval worldview shattered the inherited conception of nature and history shared by Jew and non-Jew alike, undermined traditional attitudes to their religious Scriptures, and destroyed the uniform traditional response to Jewish existence which constituted the basis of education in the past.[2]

Compounding this continuing challenge to the internal life of Western Jewry came the unprecedented external catastrophe of the Holocaust in the twentieth century. Yet despite this incalculable trauma, which destroyed countless Jewish communities and, further, shook the foundations of traditional Jewish faith, Jewish life managed to evince remarkable strengths in its aftermath. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 demonstrated the durability and resilience of Judaism and the Jewish people, galvanizing Jews all over the world to support and build the state and generating in them a new sense of pride and an enhanced confidence.

In the Diaspora as well, individual Jews flourished in the free environment, striving to develop a way of life as a community that would combine Jewish loyalties with full participation as citizens of their countries. They established synagogues, schools, seminaries, hospitals, social service agencies, defense and philanthropic organizations, and they maintained strong ties with Israel. Despite such efforts, however, the erosion of Jewish loyalty continued apace as Jews became increasingly vulnerable to the pressures of a free secular environment and the inevitable weakening of inherited ideological commitments.

Such erosion has affected Israeli as well as Diaspora Jewish communities. Indeed, even before the birth of the State of Israel, prominent thinkers, such as Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik, Yeḥezkel Kaufmann, Benzion Dinur, and Martin Buber, had foreseen that the hoped-for establishment of a secular and democratic society would lessen the commitment to traditional Jewish learning and culture. And such lessening, as predicted, has indeed been taking place.[3]

To be sure, the problems in Israel and the Diaspora are different, but they share common elements. In both cases, large segments of the Jewish population have been alienated from traditional Jewish learning and its values. Having been estranged from the Judaism of their past, they have lost commitment to a Judaism of the future. This breach in Jewish continuity poses a test arising from the very freedom for which Jews have striven. Can this breach be healed? Can Jewish loyalties thrive in an atmosphere of freedom, without the enclosure of a self-imposed ghetto?

It has been widely suggested by Jewish spokesmen that education is the answer to our problem. They have assumed – or hoped – that concerned parents, teachers, and educators can devise effective ways of stemming the tide of alienation and ensuring a creative Judaic future for the Jewish people. Many doubt, however, that education, under present-day conditions, offers a realistic solution. They are skeptical that any form of Jewish education can resist the attraction of competing ideas and ways of life pervasive in the open society. They find a paucity of new ideas that might energize educational effort and thus have little hope for educational intervention in school and community. They remind us of the low status of Jewish education as a profession, and they note that very few scholars are being trained for this profession. In short, they challenge the likely effectiveness of education as a solution to the continuity crisis.

In answer to the skeptics, various promising prospects for current Jewish education may be adduced. There is widespread recognition of the importance of informal as well as classroom settings for Jewish learning. There is a remarkable new growth of Jewish day schools. There is a growing appreciation by educators of the need for Jewish education to be comprehensive and lifelong, engaging the family and community as well as the individual, the adult as well as the child. Curricula are increasingly understood to require not only recourse to texts but also to materials drawn from the arts. Jewish educators seem increasingly

to recognize the power of affective as well as cognitive learning, of experimental as well as didactic methods. They acknowledge the need to recruit and train professionals and community leaders and to place them in positions of educational responsibility. True, these prospects for Jewish education have to be strengthened, financed, and vigorously pursued in programs of action by the community at large, but at least the outlines of an answer to the continuity crisis seem to be discernible.

This reply to the skeptics is indeed forceful and persuasive. Its every element represents a necessary component of an adequate educational response to our problem. Yet the skeptic is still right to be dubious. For although the reply offers necessary conditions for an educational amelioration of the problem, it does not include every such necessary condition, leaving out, in particular, the importance of a comprehensive educational vision of the purposes and contents of Jewish education.

Even if we include the element of vision, we have no guarantees that education would in fact turn the tide against widespread erosion of Jewish loyalties. We believe, however, that without the element of vision, our educational response is guaranteed to fail. This belief has led us to undertake a project that we hope will help stimulate a discourse on alternative visions of Jewish education.

Why do we emphasize vision? Without a guiding purpose, an educational system is bound to be scattered and incoherent, incapable of consecutive effort, unable either to grasp the possibilities of effective action or to avoid the obstacles in its path. Lacking a directive guide to the future, the system becomes repetitive and uninspired, prey to past habit, incapable of justifying itself to new generations of our youth in the worlds they will inhabit. What the skeptic is responding to, among other things, is the sense that current Jewish educational practice is too often spiritless, a mere recapitulation of conventional lessons and past practices, lacking both systematic connection with the depths of Jewish lore and the energy to make such lore come alive convincingly in the hearts of contemporary youth.

Vision, as we understand it, is not simply ideological preference. It implies both comprehensive understanding and guiding purpose. It places the work of education in the setting of a present that is an outgrowth of the past but that also contains within it the seeds of a future to be grasped creatively through imagination and effort. The learning of the present is not merely a doing of the done thing, an inertial obedience to a favored ideology. It is an invitation to pupils, educators, families, and communities to create, through reflection, a desired and meaningful tomorrow. A sense of purpose is active, not passive; it is a call to engagement and thus the energizing of latent capacities. A school or community with reflective purpose is liberated from slavery to the mindless momentum of the past, as well as the fads and fashions of the present, free to pursue the lead of deliberate and self-renewing ideals.

Vision, in our sense, is not mere wishful fantasy. The guiding purposes it projects are based not only on an appreciation of the past but also on an engagement with the practical possibilities of the present. The educational activities that it guides are founded on realistic perspectives, not on prophecy or nostalgia. An educational vision offers a map of the current possibilities of action, but it also develops an itinerary that takes us from where we are, through realistic steps, to a future illuminated by our purposes. It defines overarching educational goals but also suggests strategies for approaching them.

Visions are not commands. They are not rigid, incapable of modification in course. To the contrary, they typically change and grow in the process of being acted upon. Like ordinary itineraries, they change in response to the experiences to which they lead. Their function is to energize our actions in certain directions, but they respond to the consequences of the actions they stimulate. As well, they respond, as do maps, to changes in the environments of action. A road map a decade old will be misleading, preparing the tourist to travel in an environment that no longer exists. In sum, visions need to be sensitive to relevant change; as such, they offer continuous guidance to our efforts. Rigid visions are unintelligent; actions lacking intelligent visions are blind.

The power of educational visions is amply evident in the history of educational thought, both in the general and in the Jewish sphere. One need only mention the names of Plato and Aristotle in ancient times, and those of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Herbart, and Dewey in modern times to be aware of such power. The ideas of John Dewey, to take the most familiar twentieth-century example, responded to the new intellectual climate comprised of the modern experimental and biological sciences, as well as the new forces of urbanization and industrialization, by reconceiving the tasks of education as requiring enhanced critical thinking in the developing industrial community.[4] Such ideas helped to transform American education in a short time, promoting the creation of new educational institutions, new forms of teacher education, and new curricular approaches, and dramatically influencing every corner of the field of education.

The popular conception of Dewey's educational doctrine equates it to the idea of "learning by doing," and proceeds to vulgarize it into a mere emphasis on the pupil's unguided activity. What is insufficiently understood is the motivation of Dewey's doctrine stemming from his theory of meaning. Dewey's view, in brief, is that meaning is always a matter of connections or relations, specifically, the relations between the actions we take and the consequences that result. Acquiring a knowledge of such relations depends on our noting the effects that our activities bring about. As our sense of such effects grows, our environment continues to grow in meaning. Learning, that is, the grasp of meanings, is thus always active rather than passive. As Dewey sums up his idea, learning is a matter of trying and undergoing: We do something to nature and receive what nature does to us in return.

Experience in this light approximates experiment as practiced in modern science. Although the ancients disparaged practice as mere routine and associated it with the local knowledge of the trades and crafts, modern science sees practice as the primary source of our general knowledge of nature, for its method is one of experimentation carried out deliberately in the interest of inquiry.

The key to Dewey's idea of education is to conceive the school as an active environment for learning, encouraging the connection of the student's intentional acts with their consequences, in such a way as to promote an enhanced understanding of oneself and one's environment. The school should not oppose practice; it should intellectualize practice by putting it to systematic use in the promotion of meanings. The technical activities made possible by science are to be viewed always in light of their consequences for human life. "Learning by doing" is thus seen not only to derive from a philosophical vision of meaning, but also to respond to the twin challenges of modern science and the new social forces sweeping America. Far from a mere emphasis on unguided activity, it provides systematic depth and range to an educational practice undergoing challenge by new circumstances.

We will here cite two major visions of Jewish life, one medieval and one modern, that emerged under radically different political, social, and intellectual conditions, conditions that in each case posed radical challenges to the Jewish people. The philosophy of Maimonides (1135–1204), to take our first example, represented, among other things, his effort to meet the threat of Aristotelianism to traditional Jewish belief. In this effort, he succeeded brilliantly, forming a synthesis of the premier scientific and philosophical conceptions of his day with Jewish thought, and, at the same time, producing a radically new systematization of the content of such thought. He neither rejected the traditions of his Jewish heritage nor turned his face against the intellectual currents of his cultural environment. Consistent with his new system, he devoted significant parts of his writing to education and to the sources upon which he took education to be based.

Throughout his writings, but particularly in his major works, *The Guide of the Perplexed* and the *Mishneh Torah,* he presented his conceptions of the ideal human being, the ideal society, and the nature of knowledge and learning. These conceptions served as the foundation for his chapter on pedagogy, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah,* the *Laws of Torah Study*, in the *Mishneh Torah*. He conceived of education as character education. Based on study of the Bible, the Talmud, and the rabbinic commentaries, the practice of *mitzvot* (proper actions) shapes a person's character through habituation, "habituation" itself being a central concept of Aristotle's ethics. Habituation is, for Maimonides, a precondition for undertaking philosophical inquiry, the pinnacle of a successful Jewish education, and the way to approach and cultivate the love of God. Maimonides' writings on Jewish law and philosophy created a school of educational as well as philosophical thought, and stimulated the rise of opposing schools with alternative visions of education.

Our second example concerns the establishment of the State of Israel, commonly told in terms of the efforts of *ḥalutzim* (pioneers) in the areas of settlement, agriculture, and defense. When one learns of the role of education, however, it becomes apparent that it had no less importance – perhaps even more – in meeting the challenge of a wholly new social and political situation drastically different from the Diaspora milieu. Driven by a small group of educational leaders, early Zionist education itself was responsible for the training of the *ḥalutzim* and for their mobilization in building the infrastructure for the Jewish state. Furthermore, these educators provided a redefinition of Jewish life in terms that had widespread appeal and served as a basis of continuity for Jews around the world.

The main asset of the early Zionist educators was a clear ideological vision of education. Four major points stand out in this vision: The first point was the status of Hebrew as a living language. The aim here was to transform Hebrew so that it would provide a comprehensive linguistic basis for Jewish life. For this purpose, new words would have to be invented and diffused, textbooks in such areas as chemistry and geography would have to be written for the first time, and a whole generation of adults would have to be retrained to speak in a different language. Alongside this came the second point – the integration of the Jewish and general aspects of existence. Living Hebrew was only one means toward the attainment of this end. In addition, an attempt would be made to extend the range of meaningful Jewish existence to the diverse areas of society, politics, economics, and culture. No longer would Jewish life be limited to special institutions, such as synagogues and study houses; rather, all aspects of living, ranging from stamp collecting to municipal politics, would be seen as an expression of Jewish identity.

The natural historical setting for this comprehensive Jewish life would be the land of Israel. The third point in the early Zionist vision of Jewish education thus demanded a new perspective on Jewish history and the introduction of hitherto unknown Jewish educational practices, such as hiking and touring, that would instill love of the land. Finally, the fourth point introduced the most challenging aim: to incorporate Jewish tradition into national consciousness. This forced educators to present Judaism anew so that it could serve as a basis for good citizenship for the Jewish people in the State of Israel.[5]

These historical visions responded to the challenges of their times. They do not, however, offer appropriate guidance for the problems of Jewish education in our own times, since the social and cultural circumstances, both in Israel and the Diaspora, have changed radically. In these altered circumstances, large numbers of Jews have become ignorant of Jewish knowledge and alienated from Jewish life. Religious rifts in Israel and elsewhere have intensified, the polarization between Orthodox and secular elements of the Jewish population reaching danger levels. The split between Israeli and American Jewry over the issue of religious pluralism threatens to tear the worldwide community apart. The American Jewish