

# Vision by Evolutionaries and Revolutionaries

by Cyd B. Weissman

*Excellence in Jewish education requires us to be visionaries, whose work is both evolutionary and revolutionary. Change will take time, and will require us to have Moses-like moments joining evolution and revolution and also to ask challenging Burning Bush questions.*

“Can there be a better tomorrow?” That was the simple question my great-*Bubbie* Kohler asked when she stood in the doorway of her dirt-floored house to see a Russian town ablaze with no promise for her seven children. With ship’s passage to a destination that could barely be pronounced, a faith in tomorrow, the *chutzpa* and the muscle to back it up, she changed the future for the generations that followed.

We each carry the story of an ancestor who crossed a desert or a sea, whether it is Abraham or *Nachshon* or someone closer on the family tree, who looked across the divide to say, “Despite the odds, I know where I have to go. I’ll find a way to get there.” This is our inheritance as Jews. We are the descendants of visionaries who have put their life force into changing the future.

We raise up the stories of visionaries who came before us, because the national agenda and, if you allow, our personal agendas include the questions:

- ♦ What will our great-grandchildren, one hundred years from now, recall about us?
- ♦ Will they say we were a generation that looked across the great divide that characterizes 21<sup>st</sup> century Jewish life and Jewish education to see a fuller, better tomorrow?
- ♦ Will they say we were Jewish educators who risked everything because we clearly saw a world of possibilities and then had the faith, the *chutzpa*, and the muscle to back it up?

We can be – we need to be -- a generation of educational visionaries. The emerging national message says that educational excellence is being defined anew, because too often we stand in the doorway of our classrooms to see, despite all of our hard work, that we have not yet arrived.

Excellence today requires us to be visionaries. Visionaries see a powerful dream incarnate. They see a compelling picture of a better tomorrow that is out of immediate reach, and yet attainable. Visionaries create a picture of the future that is spurred on by challenging questions and a bold willingness to experiment. A compelling vision inspires us to achieve beyond what we think we are capable of accomplishing. It focuses people, energy, and resources to support a year-by-year plan to turn a wishful picture into reality.

The work of a visionary is evolutionary, moving step-by-step, and it is revolutionary, changing the world as we know it. The tomorrow of a visionary does not need to be one hundred years from now. Five years into the future is a fine start.

To begin the evolutionary work of creating a shared view of a better educational tomorrow, pause from caffeinated living and speed-dial thinking. Have a *Moshe Rabeinu*-moment.

*Midrash* says there were folks in the desert who walked right past the burning bush. Moses paused. To stroll like Moses is to pause at something others see as ordinary and acceptable, and then to question.

Moses paused long enough to discern a phenomenon that shook his very sense of the possible. A bush that burned but was not consumed defied logic and forced him to question. Out of this dissonance -- out of an experience that challenges all that is accepted to be true -- comes the visionary’s first question. *One small question has the power to ignite others to question.* It ignites others to challenge what is real and what is possible.

Moses’ simple question was “Why doesn’t this bush burn up?” In the following verses, Moses, God, Pharaoh, and the Israelites ask almost twenty additional questions before the *parasha* ends, unraveling everything that was accepted and opening the possibilities for a new way to look at the world.

## Pause, See Anew, and Question

Take a Moses-like stroll through a congregational school. Pause, see anew, and question. Try to look closely at what many people walk past, because in every generation, placed in our midst, is a burning bush waiting to be discovered.

Notice who enters the building. Notice who walks away and who does not even come close.

Open the door; smell the refreshments being sold. Hear the voices in the students’ minds say, “I’m budging in line to get my snack first.” In one student’s mind hear,

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"*V'ahavata l'rayecha kamocha*. The little kids go first." A parent who attends family education workshops a few times a year collects change and instructs, "Being polite is most important." The principal calls, "Don't be late." Dissonance is loud.

Continue the stroll. You are looking for a fire that burns and yet the object is not consumed.

Down the hall a teacher rushes to copy a lesson plan from the publisher's curriculum. "Here are the ten prayers you have to teach," he was told at the beginning of the year. Prayer is not his bridge to Jewish life, but he follows the publisher's lesson.

Soon you'll come upon a burning bush of our times. A bell rings.

Exuding a passion regularly seen in Jewish educators, another teacher begins with a cheerful greeting: "*Shalom Haverim*." The lesson for today: Honor the Sabbath. No effort has been spared. There is singing, dancing, and an art project. The students sing *brachot*, eat *hallah*, and read in Hebrew and in English from *Bereshit*. God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day and so should they. You could say that the lesson is on fire.

A bell rings. The students run to their cars because the demands and priorities of the week are great. "It was fun," a child says as he enters his car. "I learned about *Shabbat*," says another. The cars veer off because the demands and priorities of the weekend are even greater.

Is your heart pounding? You are standing before a burning bush. Ask the simple question: "Why are the lessons on fire and yet they are not being consumed?"

This bush, although different in many ways, is like Moses' *sneh* (bush). It defies logic and demands us to question. We expect a well-developed lesson plan with stated goals, original text, and creative techniques to be successful. We expect the lesson to be consumed, to be part of the students' lives, but too often learning turns to vapor. It is easy to walk past this place -- a place where conflicting goals and values make learning disappear.

## The Burning Bush Questions

It is not enough for Jewish teachings to be learned as a remote subject. We can't be satisfied until learning rests on a student's heart so it can move *in* to a student's heart. We question, because we want *Torah* to be *in* the learners' lives, *in* their decisions, *in* their sense of self, and *in* their actions. Only learning that is taken in, consumed, and internalized can do this. So the visionary asks: "Why is the fire of *Torah* not being consumed, not being internalized?"

When you ask not only the burning questions, but also the burning bush questions, the status quo is challenged. The principal asks, "How could we anchor learning in authentic Jewish community?" The teacher asks, "How can I design learning to enter students' lives?" The parent asks, "What are my hopes for my child?" The rabbi asks, "What are our shared goals, language, and values that help us live as the sacred community we say we are?" The student asks, "How is learning a compass for living?"

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tion that sparks others around you to question what is and what could be. A visionary doesn't begin with the answers. The visionary directs the evolutionary chain with questions.

*Time Magazine's* cover story on July 4, 2005, about Abraham Lincoln led with: "We don't outright invent history, but often it is made by the questions we ask."

I know this to be true because of the work I do with The RE-IMAGINE Project of the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE). ECE is part of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education of Hebrew Union College, and The RE-IMAGINE Project is funded by UJA-Federation of NY. This project brings a new set of ques-

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tions to the educational conversation. Twenty congregations of various sizes and movements from the New York area paused at the burning bush in their midst to ask, "If we have so many educational successes, why do we see a gap between what we hope for and what we accomplish?"

Collaborative teams in The RE-IMAGINE Project -- including teachers, the rabbi, the principal, the cantor, high school students, and adults from all parts of the congregation -- come together to create a shared picture of the future of Jewish education, in part by asking four significant questions:

1. How do we/how can we create long-lasting memories?
2. How do we/how can we link what is learned to what is lived?
3. What is/what should be the role of the family in the child's Jewish education?
4. What is/what should be the role of the community?

These questions, coupled with *Torah* learning, online learning of other congregations' re-imagining, clarification of shared values, and thoughtful reflection take RE-IMAGINE teams on a journey to a promised land of their making that holds their hopes and dreams for Jewish education. By creating a shared picture of the future and a year-by-year plan to reach it, they turn a wishful picture into reality.

Too often congregational schools are driven by a laundry list of good ideas. Vision-driven congregations, on the other hand, judge the next great idea by the question, "Does this change bring us closer to our vision?" The concept of alignment — making decisions about resources and innovation based on a shared picture of the future — is a critically different and necessary way to work.

Schools are complex places. Without a vision, programs are fragmented, teachers lose motivation, students learn in a vacuum, and sporadic improvements fall short, because they are undirected and uncoordinated. Without a shared vision, the school looks like the one you just walked through in your mind's eye with few shared values or goals. Despite passion and commitment, people in the school are left to put their own oars in the river.

When a school has a shared vision, the organization works more like a boat where everyone rows together toward the same destination. These congregations risk saying out loud, “Programmatic piecemeal change is merely a servant to deeper, long-lasting, vision-driven change.” These congregations work in an evolutionary way where each step leads toward common goals.

### The Jewish Educators’ Revolution

Now is the time to be more than evolutionary. It is also the time to be revolutionary. The 21<sup>st</sup> century Jewish Educators’ Revolution has been declared by educators who *risk creating new visions*. Revolutionaries are challenging the structure of education that we have inherited — the drop-off structure augmented by sporadic parental, and minimal communal, participation. They seek to replace learning that takes place in a vacuum with learning that is experienced within an authentic Jewish community consistent with the congregation’s values, learning that strives to practice what it teaches.

Revolutionaries take bold action despite the uncertainty that characterizes the path toward new vision. Willing to experiment with the unknown because of the successes they have had in the past, revolutionaries act with *chutzpa*, faith, and the muscle to do the never-before-tried.

To begin to act as a revolutionary, experience a different *Moshe*-like moment. To stroll like Moses now is to act boldly in the face of uncertainty. Nowhere on Moses’ resume did it say, “Experienced in parting rivers or seas.” And yet, at the Sea of Reeds, he used his rod in a new and experimental way, taking action in part because of the success he had had with the rod at other times in other settings. He risked failure because he had known success. Thoughtful, directed action, born out of a willingness to experiment, outweighs anxiety and moves the revolutionary closer to new possibilities.

### Joining Evolution with Revolution

Experience the confidence of a Moses-like action-conquers-uncertainty step as you walk through three RE-IMAGINE congregations where lay and professional leaders have acted courageously to move closer to their promised lands despite today’s Reed Seas: busy schedules, limited resources, and seemingly conflicting goals among stakeholders.

Stroll in your mind’s eye through the Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore (on New York’s Long Island) to see Rabbi Jodie Siff, Rabbi Lee Friedlander, and their team acting on their belief that they can change the future. See their vision, *Jewish education occurring in partnership among the generations*, turning into reality with three alternative models of Jewish education that they have launched over the past year. Listen to Rabbi Siff comment on one of their experiments: “We’ve shifted students’ primary experience with the synagogue from doing interesting classroom activities to experiencing the joy of *Shabbat* with parents and congregants. We build knowledge and relationships across the generations. We don’t tell students to have a relationship with God; we structure the learning so they experience that relationship.” This congregation is experimenting with

creating Jewish learning in an authentic caring community because of their answers to “How can we create long-lasting memories and how do we link learning to living?”

Lynn Lancaster, Rabbi Gerald Skolnik, and their collaborative team from Forest Hills Jewish Center, a Conservative urban congregation, have taken action despite the Reed Seas in their midst. Listen as Lynn says, “Everything moves fast and no one has time. Yet despite this, our team sees a future where families are integral to the educational experience of children. We planned education for adults and for adults with their children. Who knew busy parents would say, ‘We want more.’? We’re not just offering educational programs across ages. We’re weaving a synagogue and a school into a community.” With a new student population, the congregation is experimenting with the time, place, and method of learning. This is the agenda of the congregation, not just the principal, because of their answer to “What is the role of family in a child’s Jewish education?”

Stroll lastly through The Community Synagogue of Rye, a Reform congregation where revolutionaries believe they can lift their rods in new ways to make teachers part of their community of learners. Laurie Landes, Rabbi Daniel Gropper, and their team have launched embedded learning for teachers. Teachers learn together during the school day while members of key committees in the congregation — like *Tikkun Olam* and Israel Affairs — lead special learning activities for students. Professional development is ongoing and is linked directly to the student outcomes identified by their new vision. The adult community is acting on their responsibility to educate the next generation of Jews. The Community Synagogue is structuring education differently based on their answer to “What is the role of the community in a child’s education?”

Each year these evolutionaries and revolutionaries, who question reality in order to boldly shape reality, move forward with experiments, learn from their successes and failures, and move forward again. These congregations and others like them across the country risk seeing and risk making a better tomorrow.

The last teaching in Harvey Fields’s *Torah* commentary series<sup>1</sup> is by Aaron Wildavsky, who wrote, “The genius of Moses lies in joining revolution with evolution. He leads the people out of Egypt, introduces them to new values, creates new institutions [new structures], yet he does so gently and with patience.” Change will take time, and will require us to have Moses-like moments joining evolution and revolution. If we dare to do this, if we dare to ask the challenging questions and if we allow ourselves to be inspired to act boldly, then I say, God willing, we will change the future for ourselves and for generations to come as we move closer to a *Goldene Medina* of Jewish education. ❁

#### ENDNOTES:

1. Fields, Harvey. *A Torah Commentary for our Times*. New York: UAHC Press, 1998.