

# Creating and Enacting Shared Visions For Congregational Education

By Rob Weinberg

The publication of *Visions of Jewish Education*<sup>1</sup> by Fox et al. brought increased attention to the need for clear vision as a focusing and aligning force in Jewish education. Since 1992, when the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE) was founded by the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, we have been engaging synagogues in a process of exploring, articulating, and enacting their own shared visions for congregational Jewish education. What began as an experiment with two, then five more, and then seven more Reform congregations has now reached a total of 41 congregations across the liberal denominational spectrum and continues to grow across North America. We are continually awed by the ability of the ECE process to enable a joint lay/professional congregational “task force” to articulate a vision that reflects the hopes and dreams of a congregation. Such visions motivate lay and professional leaders to exert concerted, creative, collaborative effort to transform reality in their congregations, bringing them ever closer to their visions.

*Since 1992, the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE) has been engaging synagogues in a process of exploring, articulating, and enacting their own shared visions for congregational Jewish education. Such visions motivate lay and professional leaders to exert concerted, creative, collaborative effort to transform reality in their congregations, bringing them ever closer to their visions.*

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “VISION?”

The ECE’s approach to vision combines insights drawn from educational philosophies (both Jewish and secular) and the literature and methods of organization development. Following Burt Nanus’ 1992 book *Visionary Leadership*<sup>2</sup>, we define vision as “a compelling organizing image of a desired future of an institution.” Rabbis, educators, and lay members learn through ECE that a powerful shared vision creates meaning, energy, and direction. It creates *meaning* by describing a Jewish educational future that is, in important ways, better than the present, thereby capturing the collective imagination of leaders and members. It creates *energy* because it is a compelling picture of a future that congregants own, having “drawn” the picture themselves, and that they can realize through their own commitments and actions.

Once people recognize that they can create this future, they eagerly contribute their skills, talents, and resources to make it happen. And it focuses energies in a common *direction* by pointing the way both to where the congregation wants to go and to what it wants to *become* as a congregation of learners.

“Desired future” may seem broad or vague. But the substance becomes clear as we guide lay/professional task forces to ask questions about Jewish learning that lead them to articulate visions that go well beyond the common practice of simply listing the curricular topics that comprise the content of a good Jewish education. Vision, as we understand it, focuses more broadly on both the desired *goals* and the *experience* of Jewish education. It includes structure, educational process, context, and impact. It grows out of fundamental questions that challenge current congregational paradigms and assumptions about:

- ♦ The purposes of Jewish education.
- ♦ Who are the teachers and who are the learners (including the role of parents in children’s Jewish education).
- ♦ The relationship between Jewish learning and living.
- ♦ The role of community in Jewish education.
- ♦ What it takes to make a Jewish experience truly memorable.

## HOW DO WE HELP SYNAGOGUES CREATE THEIR OWN VISIONS?

Engaging a diverse task force of lay people and professionals in envisioning a new educational future for a living, ongoing congregation or school may seem daunting or foreign. ECE succeeds in creating a visionary conversation among lay and professional leaders by creating a safe community for open dialogue; by linking to Jewish tradition through text; by working from the personal to the congregational; and by asking a different set of questions that starts from the positive, acknowledges the congregation’s unique realities (both challenges and opportunities), takes account of history, and opens minds to new possibilities.

*Rob Weinberg, Ph.D. is Director of the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), an initiative of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, HUC-JIR/Los Angeles. To learn more about ECE, visit [www.eceonline.org](http://www.eceonline.org) or [rweinberg@earthlink.net](mailto:rweinberg@earthlink.net)*

*A Sample Conversation*

A typical example of an activity we use to engender this new way of talking about Jewish education is an exercise we call “Memorable Jewish Learning Experiences.” Each congregation assembles a diverse Task Force that includes lay people, rabbis, educators, teachers, and others. Early in the process we pose to them the following question: “What has been your most memorable Jewish learning experience, and what made it so memorable?” Although the question does not specify positive experiences (some experiences are memorable because of how bad they are), invariably the mostly-adult participants list experiences that they found so engaging they’ve never forgotten them.

The flip-chart lists often include references to experiences at camp or in youth group, learning with an especially dynamic teacher or rabbi, learning as a family, or experiencing an ongoing ritual. What made these experiences so memorable is typically some aspect of the experience that touched the person, made Judaism come alive for them, bound them to a community of Jews, helped them make meaning out of confusion, or simply made them feel their voice was heard.

Next, we instruct the group to reflect on the list and ask: “What would it be like if more of our congregation’s Jewish learning experiences shared these characteristics more of the time?” As the brainstorming proceeds, we inject probes such as, “What would become possible that isn’t possible now?” and “What would teachers, educators, rabbis, students, parents, adult learners each need to do differently to make that happen?” As the group generates ideas and names possibilities, the first outlines of a compelling organizing image of a desired future for Jewish education in the congregation begin to emerge.

These fragments are documented, saved, revisited, and combined with other such fragments that emerge from other conversations that take place over several months of deliberation. These are the kernels of the emerging vision.

The final question we sometimes ask reveals much about the conditions necessary to engage disparate parties within a congregation in constructive, non-defensive conversation about the future. We ask, “In what ways has this discussion been different from how you typically talk about Jewish education (e.g., in the Education Committee, the religious school car pool, or the synagogue parking lot)?” In response, people say things like, “This was a positive conversation; it didn’t start from a complaint,” “This got us thinking about what was good for the whole congregation, not just for our own families,” and “This started out very personal, but quickly I could see how what we learned from it could apply to more than just me,” and “This helped me see that the seeds of the future may actually be in the past; that makes the prospect of change seem a lot less scary and a lot more possible.”

This is but one of many exercises and text-study discussions through which ECE guides the task force to create and share their compelling vision for congregational Jewish education. Brief descriptions of others can be found in Dr. Isa Aron’s book, *Becoming a Congregation of Learners*<sup>3</sup>, including a guide to how to study another congregation’s vision statement. But the statement is not the vision. The power of such a vision comes, not only from the words contained in a statement that expresses it, but from the journey through which the group has reached

that point. It prepares them to broaden the dialog about that vision to include the entire congregation. And it binds them together to form a cadre of support for actions to bring the vision to life.

**ENACTING VISION:**

**A SPIRALING SERIES OF INNOVATIONS AND ALIGNMENT**

Once a congregation has articulated its vision for Jewish learning, it has reached not the end, but rather the end of the beginning. It is the end of the beginning of what we at ECE hope will be a lasting culture of experimentation, marked by a spiraling series of innovations in the direction of (and aligned with) the congregation’s vision. The vision becomes a “yardstick;” the measure of success. Innovative ideas and actual experiments get evaluated based not on whether people like them, but by their ability to move the congregation ever closer to the vision.

Bringing educational programs in line with a new vision is no simple feat. Although the typical educational change levers — curriculum and teacher training — must ultimately be altered to align with vision, more often than not, systemic vision-driven change begins with the introduction of *structurally* different models of Jewish education. Let me illustrate what I mean by referring back to one of the vision statements excerpted on another page.

*Jewish Education as a Partnership Among the Generations*

To begin aligning their Jewish educational programming with their newly-minted vision of Jewish education as an intergenerational partnership, Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore (RSNS) has embarked on three initiatives:

1. Creating a co-op kindergarten model, where parents will support learning in the classroom and social connections among students; RSNS plans to evaluate and most likely expand this model the following year.
2. Offering, in the current year, a voluntary program called *B’yachad* that gives families the option to replace their child’s attendance at one day a month of the weekday religious school with family participation in a *Shabbat* experience. The congregation views this as a first step toward expanding the family *Shabbat* experience.
3. Introducing the “Tribal System.” RSNS has divided the entire congregation into 12 tribes. Each tribe will hold holiday celebrations and conduct social action projects to create the “*havurah*, intergenerational experience for a tribe.” In the future the congregation may link the tribal system to the co-op model. These three initiatives, which range from incremental extension of existing practices to bold departures from the past, all demonstrate the congregation’s resolve to align its actions with the lofty ideals of its vision.

The months and years ahead will challenge RSNS to figure out what it looks like to learn and teach across the generations in ways that build community. Full alignment involves creating coherence throughout the educational system, including not only educational structure, curriculum, and teacher training, but also budget, governance, staffing, policies, communications, and vocabulary. Planning in advance to view each innovative step as itself a learning experience (a pilot of sorts) means building in

evaluation mechanisms that will answer certain questions and lead to others. Congregations that do so begin to foster (or extend) an ongoing culture of experimentation that is critical to realizing a grand vision. No vision worth reaching for can be realized overnight.

#### *The View from Ten Years of Vision-Driven Change*

In his *Rosh Hashanah* sermon in 1995, Rabbi Rick Jacobs of Westchester Reform Temple (WRT) put a stake in the ground. In a sermon titled "The End of Religious School as We Know It," Rabbi Jacobs urged the congregation to undertake a major effort to reinvent their religious school. Out of that effort came WRT's involvement in ECE and the development of two innovative programs: Sharing *Shabbat* — an alternative religious school model that creates a weekly *Shabbat* morning community of families who worship, study, and socialize together — and a new high school program for teens, designed to nurture not only teens' educational needs, but also social, spiritual, and emotional needs. Integrating formal and informal Jewish education, WRT engaged teens through Teen Theater, Teen Healing Services, regular *Shabbat* dinners, and informal *Torah* study in the Teen *Havurah*.

After several years of creative effort and successive refinements of these programs, you might think the congregation would rest on its accomplishments. Instead, they began to ask themselves, "What about the rest of our school population that

isn't involved in one of these programs?" In July 2001 they took the next step in realizing their vision by creating a new group, known as the Religious School Initiative. Co-chaired by lay leader Lisa Messinger and Director of Education Sorel Loeb, a broad cross-section of members and Temple professionals began to re-imagine religious education at WRT...again. After months of reading and discussion, and consultation with ECE staff and Rhea Hirsch School faculty, the group developed a new set of assumptions that served as a refinement of their vision and formed the basis for a new set of initiatives. When you walk up a spiral staircase you can only see part of what lies ahead but, with each step, you can see a little more. In much the same way, WRT refined its vision based what they had learned from their prior innovative experiences with Sharing *Shabbat* and the Teen Initiative. Their newly articulated assumptions:

- ♦ Community can only be built by regular interaction with a (more or less) consistent group of people.
- ♦ Community should be composed organically across all boundaries of our school-age population and their families (not arbitrarily determined grade-level groupings) to create a true WRT community – not a replica of communities outside the Temple.
- ♦ Continuity of relationships, between teachers and students, families and teachers, and between students and students, is a critical component of learning.
- ♦ Jewish enculturation can best take place in the context of *real*

## Educational Visions of ECE Congregations: Some Examples

The statements of vision that emerge from the sort of process described in this article are as different as the congregations that create them. Most are the product of multiple drafts and many long hours of discussion. The words are chosen with great care. Some offer explanatory notes, not unlike a page of Talmudic text with commentary. Others elaborate a brief vision with goals or values statements. Here are two sample excerpts from congregations that set out specifically to re-imagine their congregational religious schools. As you read them, think about what these statements say about the fundamental questions raised above.

#### ***From Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore, Plandome, NY***

Jewish education occurs in partnership among the generations, and between the Reconstructionist Synagogue Community and its members. Our religious school is integrated into our larger synagogue community and draws upon the resources of our entire congregation. We place a strong emphasis on intergenerational community building and life long Jewish learning among all members.

#### ***From Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, San Francisco, CA***

Our goal for *Kadimah* (the congregation's religious school) is to create and sustain a thriving children's education program that is thoroughly integrated with the life of the entire congregation. Our school will be a core part of a larger "congregation of learners," in which adult members - parents and non-parents alike - are partners in learning with our children. Our school will feature:

1. A curriculum that combines traditional Jewish education with an emphasis on Jewish diversity and social justice, in an LGBT/queer-positive community.
2. A program that combines professional staff with an active corps of teen and adult members serving as teachers, mentors, and role models
3. A welcoming of spirituality into the lives of all involved with *Kadimah* - adults, youth, and children
4. A strong emphasis on community building.
5. A sustained commitment to experiential learning and to strengthening the connections between synagogue, home, and the diverse urban community around us.
6. A creative use of resources in maintaining a dynamic program.

Our education program will be a school that our entire congregation takes pride in and feels responsible for. It will be a formative experience of identity for our children, a school they will be proud to have been part of, and a place where they want to be.

Although each statement is different, each in its own way infuses greater meaning into the endeavor of Jewish education, draws a picture of a future worth working for, and guides that effort toward actions that support it, thereby denying energy and resources to actions inconsistent with the vision. Congregations are notoriously resource-constrained. A clear vision helps them make difficult choices about where to direct their human, financial, and physical resources. We encourage congregations to think of this as a multi-year alignment process.

Jewish experiences at home and Temple.

- ♦ Families who share meaningful Jewish experiences together will develop both knowledge and powerful memories that will enhance their Jewish identity.
- ♦ Meaningful Jewish experiences can be academic, social, artistic, spiritual, or social-action oriented.
- ♦ Parents can and should guide and support their children's learning, acting as teachers and role models and learning themselves.
- ♦ A program that is flexible in terms of schedule, pace, and sequence of learning will be of value to people who lead full, busy lives.
- ♦ Different types of content and skills can best be learned through different approaches and modalities.
- ♦ Different learners will respond to the approach and modality that best speaks to their interests and inclinations. Students should be empowered to make some choices about the avenues of their participation in our Jewish community (age dependent).

Based on these new assumptions, in 2002 WRT introduced—and continues to refine—three new programmatic initiatives:

- ♦ “*Likrat Shabbat*,” in which 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students come to the temple on a Friday afternoon twice a year for an informal education program geared to preparation for *Shabbat*. Joined by their families at 6 p.m., they share *Shabbat* dinner, celebration, and *tefillah* together.
- ♦ “*Ivrit LaMishpachah*,” a two-year program for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade students that provides Hebrew enrichment and support for the children and gives parents an introduction to Hebrew, a role in special activities with their children and as classroom teaching assistants, and the skills and tools they need to support budding Hebrew students at home.
- ♦ “*Mishpachton*,” a family-based, thematic learning experience for kindergarten through second-grade families that guides groups through exploration of *Torah*, *Avodah*, and *Gemilut Hasadim* on a three-year cycle. Parents study a parallel curriculum and work as co-teachers. Learning takes place in mixed-age groups in which children and teachers remain

together for several years.

These models continue to evolve based on a constant cycle of experimentation, reflection, and modification. In a recent conversation with Rabbi Rick Jacobs, he commented that, after over a decade of innovation, he feels the congregation is now at the beginning of its efforts. The spiraling cycle of reflection on WRT's vision of Jewish education, examining what's happening elsewhere, trying small pilots of new models, and spreading them more broadly throughout the congregation has become “the way we do it.” The congregation has applied similar processes to other aspects of synagogue life, including worship and, most recently, development of plans for a new building project.

#### RICH AND POWERFUL VISIONS YIELD RICH AND POWERFUL RESULTS

A dozen years of experience in ECE have proven that, given a well-designed and well-guided process, congregational professionals and lay people will engage energetically in developing and sharing clear and compelling visions of Jewish education that depict more than just the content of Jewish learning; they encompass the whole nature of the experience. Such a vision gives rise to important changes in all aspects of the educational system. With time, it changes the Jewish lives of students, parents, families, and congregations in sometimes profound ways. The collaborative process of creating such a vision brings powerful energy to the fore. Realizing our visions of Jewish education is a journey and articulating the vision is the end of the beginning. ❁

#### ENDNOTES:

1. Fox, S., I. Scheffler, and D. Marom (eds.). *Visions of Jewish Education*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
2. Nanus, B. *Visionary Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992.
3. Aron, I. *Becoming a Congregation of Learners; Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life*. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000.



**This article originally appeared in the Winter 2005 issue of *Jewish Education News*, published by the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education. Additional articles from this and other issues of *JEN* and from other CAJE publications, as well as information about the organization, can be found online at [www.caje.org](http://www.caje.org). Conference registration is also available online.**

**CAJE Conferences**  
**Third annual Day School and Early Childhood Conference**  
**June 19 - 22, 2005**  
**St. John's University Jamaica (Queens), NY**

**Conference on Alternatives in Jewish Education**  
**August 15 - 18, 2005**  
**University of Washington Seattle**  
**August 12 - 15**  
**Shabbat, Tisha B'Av commemoration, Pre-Conference**