

Judaism, American Jews, and DEI

Shabbat P'kudei 5785

March 28, 2025

Rabbi Barry H. Block

“Brandeis [University] was established in 1948 by the American Jewish community at a time when Jews and other ethnic and racial minorities, and women, faced discrimination in higher education.” Specifically, at the nation’s most elite colleges and university, Jewish applicants faced quotas that set a maximum limit on the percentage of each newly admitted class that could be made up of Jews. If accepting the “best qualified” batch of applicants would cause a class to be one-quarter Jewish, for example, less than half of those would be accepted. In response, Brandeis’s “founders created a nonsectarian research university that welcomed talented faculty and students of all backgrounds and beliefs.”ⁱ

By 1968, quotas no longer restricted Jewish populations at elite institutions, but Black students felt marginalized at Brandeis. As Professor Chad Williams, Chair of Brandeis’s African and African American Studies Department, tells it: “Black students didn’t just let their discomfort be known, they mobilized to make Brandeis a truly welcoming institution. The Afro- American Organization issued a series of proposals ... that led to the creation of the Transitional Year Program, for promising students who had limited precollege academic opportunities ... and more financial aid for black students. As a result, the number of black students enrolled in fall 1968 more than doubled the number enrolled the previous year. Brandeis’ first female African-American professor, Pauli Murray, also began teaching that semester.”ⁱⁱ

In short, Brandeis, created to address discrimination against Jews, twenty years later understood that the university’s founding principles called upon it to enhance the **diversity** of the student body, to assure that all students were fully **included**, and to find an **equitable** path to success, specifically for Black students.

This week, our Torah portion teaches us about the breastplate that worn by the High Priest whenever he officiated, which isn’t as unrelated to my sermon topic as it seems. The golden breastplate, hanging from “blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen,” held twelve stones, one to represent each of the tribes of Israel.ⁱⁱⁱ

The twelve gemstones representing the tribes were to be arranged in four rows, each being three across. Rabbi Craig Lewis observes: “The evenness, the balance, and the inclusiveness of all the gemstones, at first glance, make a statement: all are equal before God.”^{iv} And yet, after consulting a gemologist, Rabbi Lewis has something more nuanced to say: “The stones are not equal in

value. The amount of lapis lazuli needed to match the amount of emerald in value would destroy the balance. The stones would all be different sizes, rendering even rows impossible. Still, by virtue of being on a priestly adornment, each gem is considered beautiful, worthy to shine like the other gems.”^v

In some ways, groups of people can be compared to the different values of the stones, and not because some humans are more valuable than others, God forbid. Brandeis added a transitional year program for newly admitted Black students in 1968, for example, because many of them had attended segregated schools and were the first in their families to go to college.^{vi}

Brandeis had apparently decided that its unique mission required it to **include** Black students, but protests by Black students and their allies made the administration aware that the university would need to make special efforts to ensure that each of its students would have an **equitable** chance to succeed. The effort that began as the Transitional Year Program has evolved now to address the needs of an even more **diverse** array of “students who have demonstrated academic promise, leadership potential and resilience in their life experiences, but may have lacked access to pre-college academic opportunities and resources.”^{vii}

Rabbi Lewis suggests that such an approach is symbolized and even mandated by the array of gemstones in the breastplate: “For proper presentation, each gem demands its own unique treatment before being displayed, and ongoing maintenance for each gem is likewise unique. Cleaning agents used to polish amethyst could cause turquoise to fade. Heat treatments used on rubies could prove harmful to porous gems like lapis lazuli. Brushes used to clean emeralds are not recommended for use on carnelians. If all gems were handled uniformly, with the exact same resources in equal quantities, some would shine brightly while others would be dimmed into oblivion. The gems need to be treated with equity rather than equality.”^{viii} Remember: The gemstones are symbols for groups of people, originally the twelve tribes. Each has different gifts, varying experiences, and a wide array of needs.

To cite a very different example, on average, women are, on average, smaller than men, unable to run as fast or lift as much weight. One result is that few women meet the standards of the United States Military’s special forces. Opponents of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts would have us believe that the military reduced those standards in deference to political correctness.^{ix} That’s a lie. The Pentagon never changed its eligibility standards because of DEI.^x A year ago, *Military Times* reported: “In the eight years since the Pentagon opened previously closed special operations jobs to women, just four have entered the training pipeline to become a Navy SEAL. Only 17 women have attempted Marine

Raider training in that same timeline. None of those applicants went on to secure a position on a SEAL or Raider team.”^{xi} Perhaps, rather than outlawing efforts to recruit them, special efforts ought to be made to prepare more women to meet the qualifications. After all, “General Bryan Fenton, Special Operations Command commander,” told *Military Times*, “Diversity of thought, education, experiences, culture, gender, race, and creed ... all provide value to special operations.”^{xii}

Admittedly, DEI is sometimes carried out with excess, occasionally in ways that harm Jews. A recent statement issued by a broad array of Jewish organizations, criticizing the Trump Administration’s cancelation of DEI efforts, acknowledged, “Some Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion champions have spoken or acted in ways that have caused us pain, including through overt expressions of antisemitism...It is not only possible, but necessary, to advance Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts in a way that is truly inclusive of Jewish safety, identities, and history.”^{xiii}

The breast piece must have been a very heavy weight for the High Priest to bear—literally, but not only literally. Meeting the needs of a diverse community requires effort, but it pays off. Finding separate brushes to clean emeralds and carnelians requires extra work and expense. The result: Each shines brightly! When two of the tribes want to settle east of the Jordan, Moses initially objects, but ultimately relents when those tribes present an alternative plan for participating in the defense of their people—that is, he accepts **diverse** paths to achieving an **inclusive** community, in which each tribe’s contribution is **equitable** even when they’re not the same.

In 2025, part of our blessing as a Reform Jewish community is to be a community of belonging^{xiv} for everyone—that is, making very clear that we want to provide every reasonable accommodation to celebrate a community that includes Jews with disabilities alongside the young and healthy, Jews by choice and people who aren’t formally Jewish but are part of Jewish families alongside others whose Ancestry DNA comes back “99+% Ashkenazi Jewish,” new members together with those whose families have been part of this congregation since 1866, LGBTQ Jews together with the “straight” folks, Jews of Color alongside those who appear white, Jews who are single and those who are married, and more. God has created and chosen each and every one of us, **including** all of us **equitably**, bringing a **diverse** abundance of gifts.

Amen.

ⁱ [About | Brandeis University](#).

ⁱⁱ Chad Williams, “Hard Truth-Telling,” *Brandeis Magazine*, Winter 2018-19, [Hard Truth-Telling | Brandeis Magazine](#).

-
- iii Exodus 39:8-13.
- iv Lewis, p. 135.
- v Lewis, p. 137.
- vi Williams and [Myra Kraft Achievers Program | Apply | Undergraduate Admissions | Brandeis University](#).
- vii [Myra Kraft Achievers Program | Apply | Undergraduate Admissions | Brandeis University](#).
- viii Lewis, p. 137.
- ix See, for example, [DEI has RUINED Special Forces, The Secret Service and Law Enforcement | STARRS](#).
- x See [Konstantin Toropin and Rebecca Kheel, "Pentagon Critics Blame Diversity Policies and Fitness Standards for Recruiting Woes | Military.com,"](#) March 30, 2023, which lays out the argument and debunks it, e.g., plank instead of pullups.
- xi Hope Hedge Seck, "[Few women are trying for elite special operations roles, new data shows](#)," *Military Times*, March 8, 2024.
- xii Ibid.
- xiii [Jewish Groups' Statement on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion | Union for Reform Judaism](#).
- xiv Union for Reform Judaism terminology.