

DIVERSITY@BRANDEIS

A REAL TURKEY

By Harry Mairson

The fall semester at Brandeis was marked by racial incidents which left students and faculty very upset. Were these actions of thoughtless individuals, or do they reflect deep-seated racism and intolerance in the Brandeis community? Those individually culpable must bear responsibility; the easiest, simplest, and maybe sufficient solution is to punish them as a warning and example to everyone, and move on. But the University administration has been additionally charged to address issues of diversity and tolerance, without merely casting bromides upon the troubled waters. *What is the University supposed to do?* What concrete actions should it take? Nobody really knows.

Fifteen years ago, someone had a concrete idea what to do. In the interest of—yes, encouraging diversity—Brandeis President Evelyn Handler oversaw removing the Hebrew letters from the University seal, putting “No classes” in the catalog instead of “Closed for *Shmini Atzereth*,” and introducing an “International Foods” line in one dining hall where you could get a plate of shrimp and black bean sauce. These moves were intended to address the need for a “character balance” on campus. Also created was a University Committee on Students of Color, formed to address the perceived difficulty of life at Brandeis for these students. At the same time, the University ran a “December Holiday Fair” which encountered various problems reported in the *Justice*, including considerable unease about a Christmas tree in the Usdan Student Center.

The consequent eruption of the greater Brandeis community was Krakatoan. The *eminence grise* of the Brandeis chaplains, Rabbi Albert Axelrad, publicly bemoaned the fate of Brandeis’ lost “Jewish soul”. For her ham-handed decisions, so laden with symbolism, President Handler got fired. She was run out like a Biblical scapegoat into the desert, cursed with the sins of her actions.

Then the pendulum reversed direction. In a significant symbolic gesture, Interim President Stuart Altman wore a *kippah* during the first commencement after Handler’s departure, and in 1994, Jehuda Reinharz became President. At Brandeis’ fiftieth anniversary, Professor Jonathan Sarna, Braun Professor of

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American Jewish History, spoke approvingly of Reinharz returning Brandeis to matters Jewish, as quoted in the *Jewish Advocate*: “President Reinharz has been able to articulate a vision for the University that makes its ties to the Jewish community central to what the University is about. He glories in the University’s Jewishness.” Further quoted in a *New York Times* article, he said of the Handler era, “Brandeis was like a guy named Mendelssohn trying to pretend that he’s not Jewish. Once that came to an end, things improved quickly.” President Reinharz added in the *Advocate* article, “Brandeis is a microcosm of world Jewry, and this imposes special obligations upon us. We are seen today by the Jewish community as the think tank and action center of the Jewish community.”

The honest, straightforward words of Brandeis leaders are matched by commensurate actions—Brandeis puts its money where its mouth is. Banner investments of Brandeis, backed by millions of endowment dollars, include a large department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, a Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service (together having about 35 full time equivalent faculty, in a University that has about 200 tenured faculty), and an International Research Center on Jewish Women (now the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute). There are other similar programs and institutions I haven’t mentioned. A budding and inevitably pro-Israel Mideast Institute waits in the wings, with 20 million dollars already raised for it out of a 30 million dollar target. President Reinharz named Professor Sarna to head the search for an Institute director. I do not think Professor Sarna will have to look very far to find such a distinguished scholar and accomplished fundraiser.

You can characterize these commitments in various ways. You can call it the traditional focus of Brandeis. You can call it a well-run, consistent University with a carefully chosen set of priorities. You can call it building on our strengths. You can call it a good target for fund raising, on which the University crucially depends, especially during a capital campaign. You can call it *tikkun olam*. You can call it an academic extension of my Greater Boston Jewish family. They are all true. But you can’t call it a commitment to or an investment in diversity. Because it isn’t. It’s the opposite of that. I’m not even sure that you can call it nonsectarian, one of the “four pillars” of the University’s mission statement.

Along with the public posture of the institution, its campus community also changed. According to 1998 Brandeis Orthodox Organization student president Todd Kammerman, the Orthodox student population tripled within a decade. The traditional community grew measurably when on-campus undergraduates actively recruited students from day schools and yeshivas. What about diversity? “Brandeis has a huge identity problem,” said Elisheva Rovner, then Hillel director for student activities and former president of the Orthodox Organization. “The conflict is that on the one hand Brandeis wants to maintain its unique role at the forefront of the Jewish community, while on the other it has a desire for diversity.”

In the aftermath of ugly anti-Muslim posters appearing on campus, the Muslim Student Association expressed its collective discomfort with being Muslim at Brandeis. They appealed to President Reinharz for a mosque on campus, and for courses and faculty on Islamic history and religion rather than Arab, Mideast politics. What the BBSO demanded during the *Justice* scandal (that the writer, sports editor, and editor-in-chief step down, together with a front page apology and BBSO statement) was likely without extended impact: *Justice* staff comes and goes under normal circumstances, and what’s one page? But the Muslim Student Association requested a more significant, long-term change in the University. Accommodating the BBSO was about tolerance (what

we will and won't put up with), but saying yes to the Muslim Student Association was about diversity—who's taking those courses from tenured professors of Arabic art history, sitting in the mosque, and having a vested interest in Brandeis?

The President responded, as reported in the *Justice*, that the University cannot build a house of worship for every religion, and that it lacked the money to build a mosque. When reminded of founder Abram Sachar's Brandeis memoir, where he envisioned someday a mosque on campus, President Reinharz replied, "Whatever Sachar's vision was, it wasn't mine." We saw what the price was for serving shrimp fried rice. What is the price for building a Brandeis mosque?

Abram Sachar's memoir was called *A Host at Last*. At last, a University sponsored by the Jewish community, just like famous American universities founded by other religious groups. There is no telling with what pride Jewish immigrants believed in this vision. Sachar's memoir wasn't called, "A University by Jews, for Jews," and if you are a host at last, you need guests. Are Jews the perpetual hosts, and blacks, Muslims, and non-Jews the guests? Unless "diversity at Brandeis" means *teaching* about the pluralism you seek in communities and institutions once you *leave* Brandeis—and it's disingenuous to preach what you are unwilling to practice—it has to mean more than inviting others to sit at your table and eat your food. It has to mean actually deeding part of the table to your guests.

At a recent University meeting to discuss diversity and tolerance, President Reinharz said, "Brandeis belongs to everybody, or else it belongs to nobody." This is not true of Brandeis, nor is Brandeis some neutral, abstract marketplace of ideas—it's a place swirling with conflicting goals and ambitions. It's a pinball machine that everyone wants to tilt in their direction, financially and ideologically: presidents, deans, academic departments, faculty, students, dining hall workers, alumni, trustees, donors. Like all politics, it's a never ending struggle over who Brandeis belongs to. "Diversity" is part of that conflict. When a black student expresses an interest in more courses on African history, and the developmental economics of African nations—as one did at a recent University meeting—she is asking for greater enfranchisement in the institution. She wants to take courses where she gets to hear about herself and where she came from, in a way that Jewish students get from countless courses and venues. She's asking for a deeded part of the table. Others are also asking.

My colleague Eli Hirsch of the philosophy department was asked by a senior administrator what the University could do to help his department, and he answered, "I'd like to be in a department as big as NEJS. What do we have to do to get noticed?" Said the administrator, "I don't know." The music department has needed a piano for years that can be played by visiting artists without the piano getting slugged in *Boston Globe* reviews. A senior administrator told me, "We can always fix it up at halftime." Other departments have also watched their resources wither, with no explanation other than an implied sentiment that they no longer really matter. These too are matters of diversity. It is natural, particularly during difficult economic times, to think that your only choice is to build on your strengths—a kind of academic social Darwinism. But to address matters of diversity, you are compelled to build on your *weaknesses*.

This university hasn't diversified as far as Wesleyan, or Tufts, or Brown. The difficulties of continued diversification to effectively welcome blacks, for example, are even further out on the horizon. So for diversity *starters*, we could have a big Christmas tree right in front of the new student center. (And thanks to Jerry Cohen of the American studies department, who bought it, we

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did this year.) We could double the size of the philosophy department, and reestablish its graduate program. We could buy the music department a brand new Steinway concert grand piano that it has needed. And in the spirit of diversity, every octave has seven white keys, and five black keys. For fundraising, there would be naming rights for the sharps and the flats, even though they're the same keys—*there's* harmony.

And by investing in making a university like all the other universities, we would be building a more diverse institution. With a piano, we'd be honoring famous Brandeis Jews like Leonard Bernstein, as well as that *bete noire* who incurred Jonathan Sarna's wrath, Felix Mendelssohn—recall “Brandeis was like a guy named Mendelssohn trying to pretend that he's not Jewish.” The first time I read this quote, it struck me as cleverly contemptuous, and I found myself personally insulted by it. Many ideologues have a vested interest in characterizations of Mendelssohn's Jewish roots, and in what way he uprooted himself; in the end, we have to rely on Mendelssohn scholars to interpret who and what he was, rather than what we might like him to be. This discussion is no digression: it's a significant and symbolic version of the Brandeis diversity debate.

Felix Mendelssohn was baptized as a child—“the passport to European civilization” and out of the ghetto, the Jewish poet Heinrich Heine called it—and went on to be the greatest Protestant liturgical composer since Bach, as well as a renowned composer of secular music (Beethoven's greatness surely prevents us from making such superlative claims in the latter domain). His grandfather Moses Mendelssohn was the preeminent figure of the *Haskalah*, the 18th century Jewish Enlightenment (Felix's no-larger-than-life father Abraham famously said, “Once I was the son of a famous father—now I am the father of a famous son.”). He was sympathetic to his grandfather's philosophical desire for modernization of Judaism in a rational and humanistic way, as well as believing in the universal themes of Protestant faith, especially its focus on the divine gifts of fraternal love, tolerance, and reason. Mendelssohn's liturgical music was written to serve the greater goals of those universal themes.

Naive social thinking, we conclude today? This was 150 years ago, and the social choices were more constrained then. In a recent interview of a high-level executive at a major Jewish organization, the executive confessed, “If what it means to maintain a Jewish life is that you have to live an insular existence and reject much of modern culture and modern values and modern scholarship...” he said sadly, his voice trailing off. “Look,” he said finally, “if the choice comes down to Borough Park or assimilation, we're all taking assimilation.” That may not be the choice now, but it was then: thus Heine's passport.

Now call it what you want, but Felix Mendelssohn was not *pretending* to be anything other than what *he* chose and wanted to be, which he did brilliantly. Leon Botstein, the conductor of both the American Symphony Orchestra in New York City and the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, musicologist and editor of *Musical Quarterly*, President of Bard College, and onetime presidential candidate at Brandeis, wrote that “Mendelssohn knew throughout his life that he was a Jew; he acknowledged this fact, struggled with it, and paid homage to it with both tacit and overt poignancy in his music, his personal life, and his

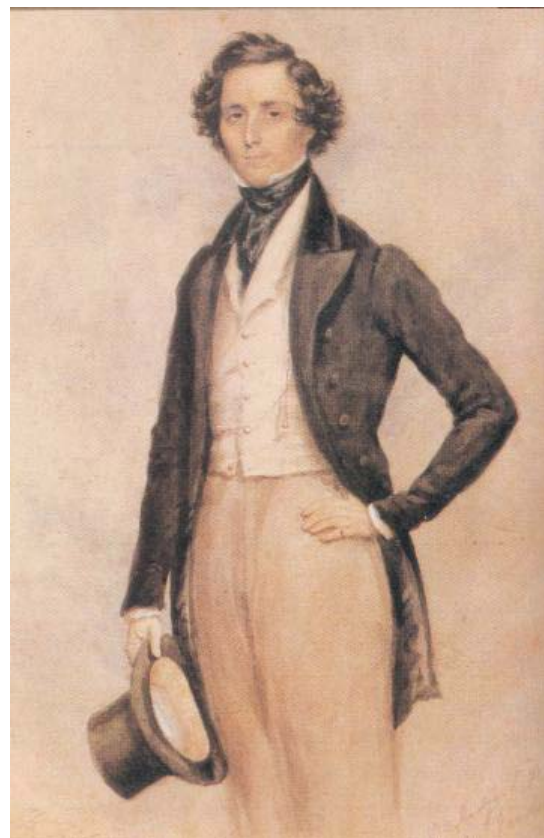
ideas.” In a 1997 conference at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Alexander Ringer concluded his talk with his teenage memories of hearing Mendelssohn’s oratorio *Elijah* in 1937, at the standing-room-only Berlin Oranienburgerstrasse Synagogue. On the eve of *Kristallnacht*, wrote Botstein in summary of Ringer’s talk, “Jews believed they were hearing a Jewish work written by a German Jew affirming the greatness of Judaism.”

For many reasons, Felix Mendelssohn became the poster boy of assimilation in the same way that Alger Hiss was the poster boy of the 1950s Red scare, representing the folly of German-Jewish “symbiosis” in a community that should have “known better.” This was particularly true in post-Holocaust Jewish historiography. Dually, the virulently anti-Semitic Richard Wagner was an obsessed critic of Mendelssohn and his music (for example, his 1850 essay *Judaism in Music*), but he concurred with Jonathan Sarna—for absolutely and diametrically opposite reasons—in the choice of Mendelssohn as ignominious symbol of the European assimilated Jew, a characterization Botstein judged as “perverse, brilliant, and historically appropriate.” *Assimilation* is what we today call the nineteenth-century Jewish urge for “embracing cultural diversity” in the name of the family Mendelssohn. Today, some may think that the University is supposed to play an analogous, *complementary* role of an academic single-combat warrior, sent out by the greater Jewish community and the Board of Trustees, to hold the line against all things non-Jewish—things to be politely hosted and tolerated, perhaps, but to be assimilated into the core of Brandeis culture, never. This is the unique Brandeis version of culture wars, and we all have ringside seats.

Nonetheless, in my mind, Felix Mendelssohn, perhaps the greatest child prodigy since Mozart, was one of the *real* Chosen People: chosen by God with genius, the genius to write the two Piano Trios that I adore, the unforgettable Violin Concerto, the two magnificent Piano Concertos, and the Italian Symphony. Felix Mendelssohn will be remembered when we are all forgotten. *There* was a guy who contributed to diversity—we’re short on geniuses—and I’d hire Felix on the faculty in a minute. It’s a shame that they’re not making Jews like Felix any more.

Many sensible arguments can be stated against diversifying Brandeis—arguments that I understand, and am even moved by, at both intellectual and emotional levels. I hint at some of these arguments above: if Brandeis is really *for Jews*, if Abram Sachar was a modern-day Joshua who made an educational home for his people, and Brandeis is part of the historical and religious mission of the Jewish people (“the think tank and action center of the Jewish community,” as President Reinhartz put it), a mission not mentioned in the University’s mission statement—and realize that Judaism is a *historical* and *self-referential* religion which, unlike others, celebrates in its major holidays the *perseverance* of the very people who practice it, with a historical time line from the Passover Exodus, and Purim, and Chanukah, and Bar-Kochba, and Masada, and the Warsaw Ghetto right up to our present day Waltham Israel-on-the-Charles—then there *really isn’t any reason* to be diverse, because that pluralistic diversification means assimilation into a common American academic culture. Assimilation is not perseverance.

ASSIMILATION IS WHAT WE TODAY CALL THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY JEWISH URGE FOR “EMBRACING CULTURAL DIVERSITY” IN THE NAME OF THE FAMILY MENDELSSOHN.



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And as a senior faculty member in the Hornstein Program told me at the height of the Handler crisis, with clear reference to the tragedy of the German-Jewish “symbiosis” which began with Moses Mendelssohn, and ended so terribly two centuries later, “There’s one thing we know—assimilation doesn’t work.” This history, wrote Amos Elon, an attempt “to establish what would today be called an open, multicultural society”—a story of emergence from tenement ghettos, advancement through *Bildung*, education, industry, with a concurrent cultural integration, intermarriage, and assimilation that so resembles a similar American history—cannot be lost on those who have studied it so comprehensively and professionally as professors, who have taken its historical lessons to heart personally, and who today play a major role in steering the direction of the University. Any consideration of pluralism at Brandeis has to take account of these issues.

On the other hand, for Brandeis to become more diverse, it has to become less proportionately Jewish—not its history or its heritage, but what it is now. This contention is unassailable, and it is practically a logical tautology. The profound degree to which Jewish sponsorship of Brandeis is linked to the Jewish mission and to Jewish entitlement at Brandeis is the definitive, omnipresent, incendiary issue that uniquely characterizes this University’s longstanding problems with pluralism. And the reluctance to “embrace diversity” is bound up with a powerful, related sectarian ambivalence about assimilation.

No one should confuse *sponsorship* with mission and entitlement. A university, like a symphony orchestra, is a major intellectual and cultural institution. Imagine what it would mean for the Boston Symphony Orchestra to be Jewish sponsored—and in fact, once a singularly Boston Brahmin institution, it has increasingly become so. Would there be an affiliated institute of Jewish music? Would the conductor have to be Jewish, to help with fundraising? Would the programming be changed to include more Jewish composers, or Pops-like “Fiddler on the Roof” medleys? Not likely. I don’t think that Ernest Bloch’s *Schlomo* and Max Bruch’s *Kol Nidre*, which I like, would get played more often. The names on the endowed chairs would acknowledge sponsorship, Jewish donors would take pride in underwriting such an important cultural institution, and they’d get photographed in the newspapers eating sushi with Seiji Ozawa, or blintzes with James Levine. And the orchestra would continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with the New York Philharmonic, and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Chicago Symphony, playing Mozart, and Mahler, and Mussorgsky—and Mendelssohn.

Diversification isn’t an imperative: it’s a choice. In line with all the other honest talk, if we choose not to, someone should get up and say, “Having a Jewish university is more important than having a diverse university,” with a “cc:” to Reverend Mays, the University’s Coordinator of Diversity Programs. And in that case, we’ll need another pillar for the University mission statement. Respect and tolerance will improve the campus climate, but it will not bring diversity. Teaching “anti-racism across the curriculum,” an idea supported by a fair number of faculty, but one that I have privately criticized among friends and colleagues as “*al cheyt*, all the time,” will perhaps bring some awareness of problems, but will also bring a lot of other difficulties with it. Who is qualified to do this teaching? How do you get qualified? What exactly is being taught? How can I teach this when maybe I’m racist, but I don’t know it? Maybe it would be safer to say nothing than the wrong thing.

Furthermore, the University faculty can’t even agree on an undergraduate curriculum beyond the generalities of *non Western culture*, *writing intensive*, *quantitative reasoning*, and USEM—and the latter is, by common admission,

not about anything, which is why some faculty are proposing to make it about racism. Talking about Martin Luther King may make us *think* about diversity, but it will not *bring* diversity. The only way to achieve the latter is to change the direction of the University. Turning around Brandeis' priorities at this point would be like turning around an aircraft carrier. It would take the Brandeis equivalent of a Mikhail Gorbachov to do it.

Yale University had a Gorbachov whose name was Kingman Brewster—WASP, Mayflower, Yale graduate, Harvard Law School professor. Now immortalized in “Doonesbury” as President King, he was probably the greatest university president of the last century. When Brewster became President of that institution, it was still dominated by conservative, moneyed WASPs who regarded Yale as a finishing school for what was called “a thousand male leaders a year”—a bastion of elite male privilege where making connections, social clubs, senior societies, and sports came first, and scholarship, teaching, and learning came second. The anti-Semitism that kept Yale's Jewish student enrollment in small percentages and socially marginalized, and motivated the creation of Brandeis, is the same sentiment that continues to keep Jews out of certain country clubs, because Yale essentially *was* a country club.


What Kingman Brewster did, together with his director of undergraduate admissions, Insee Clark, was to turn the undergraduate admission standards away from ones that rewarded *inherited privilege*, towards standards that respected academic meritocracy. Then Brewster admitted women. Many alumni and traditional donors hated Kingman Brewster for taking their University away from them—like Roosevelt, academia's “that man in the White House.” A conservative alumni organization called “Lux et Veritas” (Light and Truth, the Latin of the Hebrew “Urim vetumim” on the Yale seal—the divine power of the mystical, oracular breastplate worn by the High Priest) was formed to oppose his changes. A legend is that donations to Yale rose when Brewster stepped down—from those who wished to honor him, and from those who hated him but were willing to give now that he was leaving. The university was not in good financial shape when he left. But it survived and prospered as a consequence of his leadership.

There are many diverse ways to honor the Jewish heritage of our institution. Some of the initial discussions that led to Brandeis' founding took place on Kent Street in Brookline, in the house of my uncle Milton Kahn, a Jewish philanthropist and community leader, who was renowned for gently extorting money out of Jewish businessmen to help Jewish refugees after World War Two. There used to be a chair of social work in the Heller School endowed in his name. His brother, my grandfather Benjamin Kahn, was honored on Founder's Day in 1960 for his gifts to Brandeis. A certificate he received then is in my office. *Friend of the University from the days of its founding*, it reads, *Whose imagination was stirred by the concept of Brandeis and helped bring a cherished dream to fruition. Who gave us Courage, Faith, and Confidence buttressing these with Generosity.* Together with colleagues from the Raytheon

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Corporation, my father, Theodore Mairson, approached Abram Sachar in the early 1960s with a proposal—they wanted to start a computation program at Brandeis. Academic politics being what it is, it didn't come to pass. Now I'm a professor of computer science, at Brandeis.

I happen to think that I can honor the Jewish heritage of this institution—my heritage, and it's yours too if you work here—without putting on a *kippah*. Without keeping kosher. And without giving Felix Mendelssohn a hard time. I can honor that heritage by being a good theoretical computer scientist, by doing a good job teaching, by interacting with students, and by getting grant funding. So we all honor Brandeis' heritage by making a better University, across the board, in all its diverse ways. My grandparents came from Lithuania. They went to shul, and they kept kosher. But their favorite holiday, like many immigrants, was Thanksgiving. They wanted acceptance—as Americans, as first-class citizens in their adopted country. Founding Brandeis was, for them, part of that desire for acceptance, as well as being their *gift* to this nation. Like eating a Thanksgiving turkey, it was their chance to be *just like the goyim*, in the very noblest sense of those words. We honor people like them by doing more of that accepting, right here, in our own University. 

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