Navigating Diversity and Identity in Jewish Organizations: An Interview with Edith Pick

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School of Arts and Sciences (A & S): Can you share your educational and professional background and what attracted you to Brandeis?

Edith Pick (Pick): I am an organizational researcher, with a particular interest in identity, diaspora, and contemporary Jewish life. I wrote my PhD at Queen Mary University of London's School of Business and Management, where I looked at the construction of diversity in Jewish organizations. I previously worked in the non-profit world in Israel and in the UK, mainly in the field of education. As an Israeli Jew, moving to the Jewish diaspora in the UK and then in the U.S. was an eye-opening experience for me personally, professionally, and academically. It revealed how differently Jewishness is thought of, experienced, and approached in the diaspora than within the Jewish State. I became interested in what this means for organizational practice, and how the complexity and diversity of Jewish identity fits into organizational theory, discourse, and practice.

Brandeis offered a wonderful environment for exploring these issues. It is not only a leading institution in Jewish Studies but also one deeply rooted in Jewish values and ethos. At the same time, as a community, it includes national, religious, ethno-racial, and ideological diversity that extends well beyond the Jewish community. As a social agent that shapes public discourse, it navigates its commitment to advancing Jewish concerns with a broader vision of social justice. This intersection brings tension, as we have seen since the painful war in the Middle East started over a year ago. So, for me, Brandeis is a stimulating environment to think about Jewish identity and organizational life.

I am currently a Postdoctoral Associate at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management and at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute. I also teach a course on Israeli civil society at the Near Eastern and Judaic Department, and courses in organizational behavior and non-profit management at the Hornstein Program. So, I found my academic home as a researcher and a teacher at the intersection of organization studies and Jewish contemporary life.

A & S: Your recently published chapter in *The Elgar Research Handbook on Inequalities and Work* explores the intersection of diversity and politics across several Jewish organizations in the United Kingdom. Can you share a bit about this chapter and what drew you to this particular subject? In conducting your research, did you come across anything that surprised you?

Pick: In this paper, I examine the relationship between diversity and politics in Jewish organizations by analyzing organizational messaging such as diversity statements, mission statements and guiding values. In my PhD, I also drew on interviews with employers, employees, and volunteers to deepen this analysis. My interest in this topic developed through my work with Jewish non-profits in the UK, where I encountered several issues and enigmas around how these groups approach diversity. For

example, when Jewish organizations talk about political difference, issues related to Israel-Palestine often take center stage. In many cases, this type of politics is much more present than local British politics. It was also fascinating that many organizations emphasize and celebrate political and ideological diversity as a core value, but at the same time they are strictly Zionist, and strongly advance ideas of unity and loyalty to Israel. Another puzzle was around ethno-racial diversity. It was clear that in Jewish spaces, white-presenting Jews are sometimes constructed as White and sometimes as non-White. This made me wonder what diversity management can possibly mean in a space where identity is so elusive. There were also questions around the inclusion of non-Jews in a Jewish workplace. So for example, does an employee who is a White British man become a minority within that space? So diversity has very interesting politics in those spaces that I wanted to explore.

In my work on this paper, I conceptualized Jewish non-profits as diaspora organizations. This opened a new world of meanings because it shifted my attention to the Jewish space as a place where relationships with homeland are formed. Homeland not necessarily as a real place, but as an idea. Those relationships can be complicated: diaspora organizations can be a space where the homeland is celebrated but also where it is contested. It can be a space where nationalist narratives are reproduced and also challenged. In this in-between, transnational, space members can question issues of belonging and loyalty. There is politics of funding as well, which often constructs diaspora organizations as advocacy groups for the homeland. So those transnational spaces became fascinating for me as an organizational researcher.

Also, there is something puzzling about DEI and politics. On the one hand, DEI is seen as a highly political field, especially in the U.S. We often see DEI language being used as a slur, to ridicule and attach progressive agenda. The pushback against "diversity" became even more politicized than "woke", because there are real policies to roll back and defund, real people to fire, and real priorities to change. So, in this sense, diversity is an inherent part of how we talk and think about politics today.

On the other hand, DEI has been professionalized and, in many cases, de-politicized over the past decades. It has become an organizational practice, a field of expertise, an industry even. In that sense, it really diverted from its roots in the social movements of the 1960s. Today, employers manage diversity primarily for business benefits, in order to optimize their workforce. Not because they are particularly interested in advancing radical social change. So is diversity political or not?

We see DEI being criticized from right and left. The pushback from the right accuses DEI initiatives of unfair discrimination, of unjustly robbing people, mainly white men, from positions of power and influence. But diversity management is also criticized from the left, as a tokenistic liberal paradigm that sustains the status quo, sustains whiteness, and prevents from a deeper change in power relations to occur in society and organizations.

Trying to fit Jewish identity into the DEI framework makes things even more complicated, because of its own politics and intricacies. Jewishness doesn't seem to fit into clear binary positions of whiteness and otherness, dominance and marginality, that the field of DEI often emphasises. Indeed, many Jews doubt or reject the DEI paradigm and claim that it cannot accommodate Jewish concerns. Still, Jewish organizations emphasise the language of DEI and use it quite unusual ways that I thought should be studied.

A & S: You cover four types of relations between diversity and politics in your chapter: "(1) the politics of diversity; (2) the political case for diversity; (3) managing political diversity; and (4) diversity across political boundaries." Why are these concepts important for understanding the concept of diversity within Jewish communities? Are there any similarities that can be drawn between the UK and the US?

Pick: When we look at the diversity discourse, or how employers discuss identity and manage differences, we can identify similarities and broader trends, but we also identify contextual elements, that make each organizational, sectorial, and national context unique. For example, while race and ethnicity are central to how diversity is conceptualized in the U.S., these categories are less prevalent in Israel, where religion and nationhood play a key role. In this sense, diaspora organizations are fascinating in-between spaces that are positioned between different national contexts. Now, compared to the Jewish community in the U.S., the UK community is much smaller, more centralized in its organization, and generally more politically conservative. Still, we can find much similarity in terms of the complex nature of Jewish organizations, as spaces where open and covert discussions about Israel and Zionism take place. My paper offers theoretical and analytical tools to explore issues relating to diversity and politics across diasporic contexts, and in organizations more broadly.

In the paper, I identify four types of relationships between diversity and politics. The first, termed "politics of diversity" examines how socio-political and historical contexts shape the construction of identity and the meaning of diversity in organizations. In the case of UK Jewry, I explore how themes such as the security of Jews, fear of assimilation, ethos of giving to Israel, unity in Israel support – shape the diversity discourse. So this frame establishes a basis for understanding how diversity is shaped.

The second element, "the political case for diversity", is focused on what drives organizations to manage diversity. Here I argue that diaspora organizations may reveal a unique impetus. Diversity literature emphasizes two main motivations: the social justice case and the business case for diversity. The moral-legal rationale assumes that advancing diversity is the right thing to do; the utilitarian motivation seeks organizational benefit. The Jewish context may suggest a third motivation – a political case, where diversity is managed as means to re-unite the fragments of the community, and advance national unity. Eventually, this serves the Israel advocacy project.

The third element is the "management of political diversity". Political-ideology is different than other diversity dimensions, like gender and race. It is not a protected characteristic, and organizations are not expected to equally celebrate all political ideologies, let's say white supremacy. Organizations do have ideological boundaries. In Jewish non-profits, political difference is quite central to the diversity discourse, and I explored how political debate is controlled in those circumstances.

The fourth point was that diversity travels across national borders and boundaries. Here I argued that Israel-Palestine shapes the diversity discourse in Jewish diaspora communities, and to some extent, the diversity discourse in diaspora shapes the reality in the Middle East. This is important because DEI literature talks about how organizations are rooted in a particular national context. Diaspora groups enable us to expand that view and explore wider implications of organizational discourse and practice, beyond a single national context.

A & S: Have you noticed any new themes or shifts in how Jewish organizations in the United States (or in the United Kingdom) talk about diversity since the 2023 October 7 attacks by Hamas?

Pick: October 7 was a moment of rupture, a breaking point, not only for Israeli society but also for Jewish life more broadly. I think that across the Jewish world we see how various social issues, agendas perspectives, and identities that were part of community life, give way to issues relating to October 7 and its aftermath. We see that reflected in programs and projects, in fundraising efforts, in advocacy agendas, in partnerships and allyships. We also see the war shaping diversity debates and how organizations think and talk about Jewish difference.

We know that when there is a sense of emergency or threat, or during intensified conflict, collective identities tend to organize more strongly around familiar boundary lines that seem to promise some stability and order. So in organized Jewish communities, we see categories and binaries such as Jewish/Arab, Israeli/Palestinian, or pro-Israeli/pro-Palestinian – taking center stage and becoming extremely dominant. The national conflict becomes the filter through which Jewishness is thought of, even more than before. This narrowing of the complexity and diversity of Jewish identity sidelines other agendas and inequities around gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic issues, and more. Alternatively, those identities and issues become relevant insofar as they enable us to make a point about Israeli politics. As a critical diversity researcher, I am interested in how differences and identities re-organize in this new reality. Which groups can participate in the Jewish organizational and communal space, which ones are excluded, and what enables or prevents from cross-community solidarity and allyship to occur, beyond Jewish/Arab, and Israeli/Palestinian divides.

A & S: What advice do you have for undergraduate students at Brandeis as they navigate religious or political differences in and outside the classroom this year?

Pick: I suggest to consider two points. First, I think we need to adopt a broader understanding of what it means to be Jewish, and what Jewish concerns are and can be. We can see how on U.S. campuses today, Israel and Palestine carry different meanings to young diaspora Jews. Some Jewish groups focus on a more particular Jewish agenda around protecting Jewish lives, safety, lands. Some Jewish groups organize to protect life and human rights in a broader sense. Other Jews may be disconnected and alienated from Israel-Palestine altogether. I would encourage us to accept all positions as genuine and legitimate. There is a challenge for some Jewish mainstream organizations to accept that protecting Palestinian lives is, and can be, a Jewish concern too. This act of expanding what Jewishness means also occurs when we challenge the construction of Jewishness as Whiteness, when we challenge Eurocentric perceptions of Jewish culture, and when we challenge the notion that Jewishness is only a matter of faith or ancestry. So, enabling a plurality of Jewish voices and the many ways of being Jewish is one point.

The second point is more of a cautious warning when delving into the DEI world. Creating inclusive and safe spaces on campus is important, as this allows people to feel a sense of belonging and to voice their opinions. But the discourse of inclusion can also be limiting. When we focus too much on ensuring that everyone feels comfortable, that discussions are balanced, and we keep emphasizing what we have in common – we lose something. Democracy is about disagreement, not unity. Sometimes it is actually intellectual confrontation that we need to encourage. Also, the idea of inclusion is often focused on the inter-personal level. As if, if only we held respectful and civilized debates – we would live in a better society. Mutual respect is vital, but definitely not enough. In this

sense, we need to remember the historical roots from which the field of DEI emerged – social justice and repair. We need to shift our focus from the individual to the structural level. So, as guiding values for discussion on campus, I would embrace not just inclusion, but also critical thinking, involvement and action, curiosity, and self-reflection.