

# A CALL TO CONVERSATION

## Majority/Minority Relations at Brandeis University

### March 2001

Can Brandeis fully and meaningfully honor its commitments both to its Jewish roots and diversity? How can we engage with these two imperatives imaginatively and creatively, in ways that enhance the experiences of our students, our faculty and our staff?

These are among the questions raised in this "Call to Conversation" -- an invitation to members of the Brandeis community to listen more deeply to each others' experiences of majority/minority relationships here at the University.

Members of the Campus Coexistence Project developed this 'call' based on stories we shared with other and stories we heard from Brandeis students, faculty and staff. We would be happy to assist any club, residence hall, office or department to plan and facilitate conversations on the issues raised here. Please contact Sara Zenlea at x65001 or [szenlea@brandeis.edu](mailto:szenlea@brandeis.edu) to share your reactions to the 'call' and to find out how you can get involved.

Brandeis has long been committed to both its Jewish heritage and the embrace and inclusion of different religions, cultures and ethnic groups. The university has done much from its inception to make good on this two-fold commitment and there is much in its first fifty years that serves as a reminder

and demonstrates the depth of its commitment to both ideals. There is much in which the University can take great pride. But Brandeis is also facing a number of challenges.

Today as we enter the new millennium, Brandeis has the most diverse student body in its

history. There are more than 100 cultures now represented among the graduate and undergraduate student population. Yet we hear dissatisfaction among students about the quality of community life on campus — expressed for instance in responses to surveys. Paradoxically, at a time when Brandeis is probably more diverse than ever, disappointment about diversity and the quality of social interaction can be seen in graduating seniors' expressions of discontent.

At this very moment, too, the American Jewish community is undergoing one of the more "fractious" periods in its history. Issues ranging from conversion standards and the role of women in worship to the peace process in the Middle East are heatedly debated. Traditionalist is pitted against modernist, liberal against conservative, denomination against denomination, and secularist against believer. In informal

conversations among Jewish students, faculty and staff, the debates currently taking place within the American Jewish community are reflected, not unsurprisingly, in the dialogue and concerns of members of the Brandeis Jewish community as well.

In fact, all of us who live and work in the United States, are living through a period in which the country is undergoing a transformation in how the nation sees itself. As many have noted, minority experiences have acted

as a powerful force in the creation of America's self-image. Through the middle of the last century the Jewish minority was the "paradigmatic" minority, defining for other groups what it meant to be a minority in America. In the latter half of the last century, the African-American experience and its responses to segregation set the stage for a debate about race that changed the country's vision of itself again.

The country's image of itself as a "melting-pot" reached its nadir in the mid-50's when it was superceded by a vision of racial integration advocated in the early stages of the civil rights movement. But that vision was replaced, in turn, in the late 1960's by images of black separatism that laid the ground for a new vision, yet again, based on multi-culturalism. "Though it encompassed other minority groups, including women and gays," as the recent *Times* article

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also attests, "blacks gave the multicultural movement its key moral impetus." But now in the new century Hispanics and Mexican-Americans, in particular, may prompt a redefinition of what it means to be a minority in America. "For instead of simply adding one more color to the multicultural rainbow, Mexican-Americans may help forge a unifying vision. With a history that reveals an

## 12 Stories of Majority/Minority Relations at Brandeis

*A student born in Africa and raised in the country's Boston-area diaspora community, looking for the Catholic Chapel, by mistake entered the Synagogue during a service, only to have those gathered there stop what they were doing and turn to look at her as she stood at the back of the Synagogue a bit uncertain about where she was and where she needed to go. She stood still and the congregation looked. "The congregation seemed to be waiting," she said, "for me to leave before resuming the service." She left, feeling "isolated" and "alone."*

*A Hispanic student said she wished she could receive her mail on Saturdays. She said she was "under the impression" that the reason that the campus Post Office was closed on Saturdays was that Brandeis was a "Jewish school" and so Saturday was regarded as a holy day. She said "Saturday is not a holy day for me."*

*A member of the faculty whose surname sounded as if it were Jewish and was thought by his colleagues and other members on campus to be Jewish told the group that he was, in fact, not Jewish, but since he taught at Brandeis and because of the spelling of his last name many assumed that he was Jewish and for many years he had not felt the need to correct this misimpression.*

*A member of the faculty said that as far as he could tell the question of religious affiliation, in particular the question whether a teacher or researcher was or was not Jewish, was not an issue for most of the faculty at Brandeis nor should it be an issue. After all, he said, faculty research transcends any association with a researcher's race or culture or faith.*

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ability to accept racial and cultural ambiguity, Mexican-Americans could broaden the definition of America unlike any earlier immigrants.” (*New York Times*, Sunday, February 11, 2001)

So, too, in the world around us, the meaning and significance of religious and ethnic identity continues to undergo change. Amartya Sen, who recently received the Nobel Prize in Economics, spoke during the awards ceremony of his experiences as a teenager growing up in India when people’s identities “as Indians, as Asians, or as members of the human race, seemed to give way - quite suddenly - to sectarian identification with Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh communities. The broadly Indian of January was rapidly and unquestioningly transformed into the narrowly Hindu or finely Muslim of March. The carnage that

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followed had much to do with unreasoned herd behavior by which people, as it were, ‘discovered’ their new divisive and belligerent identities, and failed to take note of the diversity that makes Indian culture so powerfully mixed. The same

people were suddenly different.” Today, Amartya Sen says he finds it hard to envision himself as a person with anything like a singular identity, seeing himself instead as a citizen of a new global community with, as he puts it, multiple and shifting identities.

We live at an extraordinary time. What do these changes and revisionings taking place within the university, the Jewish community, the country and the world at large mean for the way Brandeis sees itself?

- Can Brandeis University honor its commitments to its Jewish roots and to diversity, a diversity both inside and outside the Jewish community, in ways that do not dilute or diminish one commitment at the expense of the other?

- Can Brandeis continue to be open and frank about both commitments without apology or excuse or fear of offending one segment or group?

- Can Brandeis honor both commitments fully and meaningfully? Can it find imaginative and creative ways, now and in the future, to make good on both commitments? What ways might those be?

- How can Brandeis’ commitment to its two other pillars — ‘social justice’ and ‘excellence’ — help the University navigate the cross-currents between the Jewish and the diversity aspects of its institutional identity? •

## Why a Call to Conversation?

This ‘Call to conversation’ is designed to enable members of the Brandeis community to chart a wise course of action for the future. A first step, we believe, is to talk among ourselves, to come to a deeper understanding of the meaning and value of the institution’s two-fold commitment: to its Jewish roots and to diversity. To address these issues fully and satisfactorily will require, or so we believe, the broadest possible participation. Indeed, the university is likely to make better choices and to be stronger if many voices from all segments of the university community speak up and are heard.

It is especially important for different segments of the community to listen openly and hear how others experience these commitments as they are embodied in University policy and the hearts and minds of members of the community. Later steps are to recognize and face the tensions that may arise as a result of efforts to honor both commitments simultaneously and fully, ultimately looking for and finding ways to deal with those tensions with imagination and creativity.

In our own conversations we have come to the conclusion that to make progress in this area we must learn to work together across traditional boundaries; different segments of Brandeis need to reach out to one another as members of a single community. Ultimately, to succeed in any one area, (to

succeed, for instance, in the area of majority/minority relations at Brandeis,) will require progress in all areas of the Brandeis community. Real progress, we have come to suspect, can only be made when the community recognizes its challenges as related to one another and addresses them systematically as a whole. So, too, the more candidly and openly we speak about these questions and the more capable we are of listening to one another without immediate judgment or censure, the more progress we shall make.

In this light this project is designed:

- to begin a series of conversations at Brandeis about the current state of relations among members of the community who identify religiously or culturally as Jewish and those who do not.

- to provide information about the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead as well as to assist future community planning and problem-solving;

- to re-examine the meaning of the university’s commitment to its Jewish roots coupled with its commitment to diversity;

- to bring home to members of the Brandeis community and the rest of the world the value of the university’s having made these commitments in the first place;

- to build relationships, during the course of this conversation, across conventional boundaries, divisions and sub-divisions within the university, among generations, ethnic groups, religions, cultures,

## 12 Stories of Majority/Minority Relations at Brandeis Continued....

*A parent of a student at Brandeis who was Jewish wondered why the university had abandoned its commitment to keep kosher, a commitment, he understood Brandeis had originally made at its founding and had kept for its first twenty-five years, but abandoned under President Handler. He wanted to know why the university had supported President Handler in her efforts to renege on this commitment. He spoke of Einstein College of Medicine which, he said, had a kosher kitchen and that faculty, students and staff, whether they were Jewish or non-Jewish, all ate kosher meals together. Why, he asked, did not Brandeis, a Jewish school, do likewise.*

*A student from East Africa shared her experience of going to Sherman for the very first time shortly after she arrived on campus, only to be yelled at by several of the other students, not to mix the food she had taken from one kitchen with food*

*from the other. “No, no, don’t do that! You can’t do that! Don’t put that there: it’s kosher!” She said she did not know what the word “kosher” meant and that she was, at that point, too embarrassed to ask. Now, she says, she knows what it means and she knows about the “two” kitchens, but, she wanted to know, why there had been no part of orientation where students like herself could learn more about such matters that are special or unique to Brandeis.*

*A non-Jewish student spoke about how “empty” and “deserted” the campus felt during a major Jewish holiday, adding that she wished she knew more about Judaism and how much she would love to be invited to a Seder or a Shabbat dinner.*

*A Jewish Orthodox student said she could empathize with the sense of isolation that a non-Jewish student might experience on*

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faculty, students, levels of administration, staff and between the college and graduate schools; and

- to tell the Brandeis story in a new and vibrant way.

Addressing such questions and challenges in the area of majority/minority relations at Brandeis inevitably involves us in the most fundamental question: what does it mean to be a member of the Brandeis community?

In his Inaugural Address on April 9, 1995 President Jehuda Reinharz said:

“Brandeis has a clear and unambiguous identity that rests on four solid pillars: dedication to academic excellence, non-sectarianism, a commitment to social action, and continuous sponsorship by the Jewish community.”

Each of the commitments served to support the others, although they may, on occasion, seem to conflict. As President Reinharz made plain, each commitment helps to define Brandeis' identity as well as lay the ground for creating a bridge between the university's past and future. This “Call to Conversation” shall focus on two of the four pillars: on Jewish sponsorship and the commitment to non-sectarianism.

## **LISTENING TO EACH OTHER'S STORIES**

In the course of talking among ourselves and sharing our own experiences, we discovered that one of the most simple and direct

ways that we were able to convey to one another what we were thinking and feeling was through the power of examples. These examples usually took the form of stories, stories that were often quite personal.

One benefit of our sharing our thoughts and feelings through stories was our discovery that we did not always know how a particular issue might be resolved or even how best to evaluate our current situation. By sharing stories we came to appreciate the range and complexity of a problem without feeling that we were under pressure to know all the answers or to be sure, absolutely sure, how best to frame the question. We also discovered that stories tended to open us up to each other's experiences, in contrast to the exclusive preoccupation with opinion and analysis, which can often lead to a clash of claim and counter-claim or to defensiveness.

Below we have included a sample of some of the stories that we heard, both from members of our own group and from others with whom we have met from key parts of the university community. The several “tales of majority/minority relations” at Brandeis that you find here are not intended to be comprehensive. They are intended, quite simply, to be illustrative. We have also included them in the hope that they will spark more story-telling, ignite more tales.

At the bottom of these pages, in no special order, are twelve of them.

## **RECENT EFFORTS AT COMMUNITY BUILDING**

There are many efforts already underway on the Brandeis campus that afford opportunities for expressions of distinct cultures as well as encourage meaningful interaction among members of different faiths and ethnic communities.

We note by way of illustration:

- the programming undertaken through the Hewlett Pluralism and Diversity grant and by the Hewlett Diversity Alliance;
- the work of the Religious Pluralism and Spirituality Committee;
- the work of the Intercultural Center;
- the Posse program and its extensions;
- the many clubs and academic departments on campus that nourish distinct religious, national, cultural and sexual identity groups on campus;
- recent revisions in the orientation program for first year students;
- Klal, an organization designed to facilitate exchange among the different Jewish communities on campus;
- the recent oral history project sponsored by the Office of Human Resources to honor the workers on the Brandeis campus;
- the Peer Perspectives program;
- campus-wide town meetings;
- the staff and faculty diversity committees;
- the cultural diversity initiatives at the Heller School; and
- Culture X which has become a model of vital, inclusive and interactive programming designed to bring members of the community together to build

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lasting bridges of learning and understanding.

Each of these efforts contributes in a substantial way to the quality of community life at Brandeis and serves to celebrate Brandeis' religious, ethnic and cultural diversity.

## **THE CHALLENGE THAT LIES AHEAD**

Much has been done and much is being done to make good on the University's commitment to its Jewish roots and diversity. That events and programs like those enumerated above are occurring is important. They are a key component of the Brandeis experience. But the stories we are hearing such as those set forth on these pages are also a part of the Brandeis experience. That members of the university community are thinking and feeling in ways that the stories reflect suggest a need for deeper conversation. Against the backdrop of changing self-perceptions in the nation and the world as well as within the Jewish community itself, new challenges lie ahead.

*the Jewish holidays and on certain days of the week at Brandeis, but that she, for one, would never invite someone who was not Jewish to a Shabbat dinner.*

*A non-Jewish administrator who led a discussion group for first-year students on James McBride's *The Color of Water* said she was somewhat startled and surprised by the response of the students to McBride's portrait of Ruth's father, an Orthodox Jewish rabbi in Poland. She was not prepared for the depth and the intensity of the charge of antisemitism that many in her group leveled against McBride for the way he had described the father in the book.*

*An administrator mentioned that during her nine years as a Brandeis employee, she had never once been invited to a Jewish religious or cultural event. Several Jewish students immediately asked her to join the Purim party, and she, clearly moved by their invitation to join them, thanked them profusely, .*

*Several minority students described incidents in which they believed that their professors, their white classmates, and other students of color related to them as less than fully qualified to be at Brandeis.*

*A Jewish graduate student, sympathetic to the development of more inclusive social spaces on campus, said she hoped, nonetheless, that non-Jewish members of the Brandeis community would understand, in historical and cultural terms, the importance of an institution committed to the development of various strands of Jewish religious and communal life.*

*These stories reflect the personal beliefs and feelings of those who told them. They have not been edited for historical or factual accuracy but are left to stand for themselves.*

In our conversation among ourselves, we found that the discussion would return, time and again, to questions that coalesced into three areas: there were questions about our understanding of the two commitments, questions about our own personal experiences, and questions about how we imagine the future. We invite you to continue the conversation in search of answers to the following questions:

1. What is your understanding of Brandeis' commitments to its Jewish roots? What is your understanding of Brandeis' commitment to diversity? What opportunities, facilities, policies and programs currently on campus, reflect, from your perspective, the university's commitment to each of the two pillars?

2. What are your experiences and opinions of Brandeis' current commitment to the two pillars? In what ways do Brandeis' programs, and policies, does its campus and social life, provide an intellectual, social and moral environment that is supportive of you as a student, scholar or worker and a person with your personal commitments? In what ways do present programs and policies, does current campus and social life, fall short of your needs and hopes?

3. Would you like to see Brandeis' commitment to the two pillars change? If so, how? How would you like to see the two-fold commitment operate ten years from now? What is your vision for the future?

If you decide to have a conversation or decide to devote a regular session or meeting of your group, club, residence hall, department, program, office or committee to a conversation on the three questions, please let us know so that we may at least make a note that such conversations are taking place. We are also prepared to help plan and facilitate conversations among groups on campus and so (again) please feel free to contact us. We also welcome any and every member of the community to meet with us either as an individual or as part of a small or large group.

In 2001-2002 we shall issue a report to the community based on the conversations that have occurred over the previous months. In this report, we shall do our best to provide a picture of the ways in which the community sees its two-fold commitment and the ways it would like to see that commitment work out in the future. Ideally, the report will serve as a mirror, reflecting back to the community how the community sees itself.

We welcome your presence in these conversations and your response to our 'Call.' If you would like more information or would like to learn more about opportunities to participate or wish, simply, to share your reactions, please feel free to contact Sara Zenlea at x65001 or brandeis.edu • [szenlea@brandeis.edu](mailto:szenlea@brandeis.edu) •

## Campus Coexistence Leadership Team

This "Call" grows out of a series of conversations. The first of these took place in the spring of 2000, among the undergraduate and graduate students and the members of the Brandeis faculty, administration and staff who comprise the Campus Coexistence Leadership Team.\* Members of the Leadership Team continued the conversation in various contexts with others throughout the Brandeis community.

This "Call to Conversation" is intended as part of a larger conversation that will contribute to on-going efforts at Brandeis to strengthen the community and to articulate a vision for our future. It seeks to emphasize what we take to be a dynamic, and potentially rich tension embedded within two of the four pillars that are the foundation of Brandeis University: on-going sponsorship by the American Jewish community, and the University's commitment to non-sectarianism or, as it is also understood, its commitment to pluralism and diversity.

This document has been put together with the help and support of members of the Leadership Team: Imran Habib Ahma, SID; Carol Barbera, Office of Equal Opportunity; Marco Barreto, '02; Maureen Fessenden, Human Resources; Ed Garcia, Facilities Services; Sue Kahn, International Research Institute on Jewish Women; Attila Klein, Biology; Roxanne Morel, '01; Keren Rosenbaum, '02; Michele Rosenthal, Undergraduate Academic Affairs; Andy Shugerman, '01; Moussa Sow, Romance and Comparative Literature; Eva Stern, '03; Andreas Teuber, Philosophy; Ghislaine Vode, GSIEF; Barbara Bamberger, Coordinator for AY '00; Sara Zenlea, Administrative Assistant; Belle Brett, Independent Evaluator; William Thompson, Facilitator; Jane Sapp, Artistic Consultant; and Cynthia Cohen, Director of the Brandeis Initiative in Intercommunal Coexistence at the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. Special thanks, too, to Dan Terris, Director of the Ethics Center, and Marci McPhee, Assistant Director; and Sarah Chandler, President of Brandeis Hillel.

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The Campus Coexistence Leadership Team is a part of the Brandeis Initiative in Intercommunal Coexistence, a three year initiative designed to develop scholarly approaches to the emerging professional field of intercommunal coexistence, to improve intergroup relations at Brandeis University, and to foster international exchanges. For further information about the Leadership Team or the Coexistence Initiative, please contact Sara Zenlea at x65001 or visit <http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/coexistence/>.