

The Jewish World Must Reject DEI

written by Lahav Harkov | 17.01.2024

Key Messages:

- DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) departments are the executive arm of an increasingly dominant ideology in American educational institutions and the business world, which reduces people to identity groups based on innate characteristics and ranks them by oppressor or oppressed status.
- Jews do not fit into the lines drawn by this ideology and are inevitably and erroneously categorized as “white.” This means that successes by individual Jews are inevitably viewed as a conspiracy to oppress the downtrodden, much like classic antisemitic tropes.
- The rise of antisemitism on college campuses and within major corporations, and the inability or unwillingness of administrations to respond effectively to such incidents, underlines the necessity of Jews disengaging from the DEI rubric.
- Jewish organizations, individuals and supporters of the Jewish people should refuse to engage with DEI, whether in word or deed, and withdraw funding or other forms of cooperation with institutions that mandate DEI practices or promote the ideology that undergirds it.

After the October 7 massacre, anti-Israel demonstrations proliferated in universities and cities across the West, complete with celebrations of the attack as “decolonialization” and chants of genocidal slogans such as “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” and “by any means necessary.” When the presidents of three of the highest-regarded universities in the world could not bring themselves to say that calling for the genocide of the Jewish people violates their campuses’ codes of conduct, there was widespread shock in Israel, in American Jewish communities and beyond.

This shock was a result of two factors. Firstly, due to the expectation that any moral person should be able to clearly and unequivocally oppose calls for genocide. Secondly, the unwillingness of these university presidents in particular to identify calls for genocide of Jews as unacceptable harassment was especially hypocritical and disturbing, given that North American college campuses have

become places where hyper-sensitivity, what social psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls “safetyism,” rules the day. Students on such campuses have protested undercooked rice as disrespectful to Japanese students and canceled yoga classes because of “cultural appropriation.” When “microaggressions” are quickly addressed, why is this blatant macroaggression against Jews on campus viewed as a “context-dependent decision”?

The ideology that DEI puts into action

The answer has many names - “wokeness” and “critical race theory” are popular with its critics, while its adherents tend to prefer “social justice” or even just “progressivism.” Whole books have been written about this ideology, which can be hard to define in part because its adherents conveniently refuse to accept any definitions. Writer Thomas Chatterton Williams explains that “wokeness” involves:

“the constellation of social-justice concerns and discursive lenses that have powerfully influenced institutional decision making...to sort individuals into abstract identity groups arranged on spectrums of privilege and marginalization...The idea that patriarchy, white supremacy, transphobia, homophobia, Islamophobia, and other ills inexorably saturate our lived realities and that the highest good is to uncover and oppose them is, I think, a central component of ‘wokeness’ as both its proponents and critics understand it.”

After this sorting takes place, Natan Sharansky wrote in a recent essay, this ideology:

“assesses the moral value of an action not on its own terms but based on the identity of the agent, asking not ‘Is this right?’ but ‘Does it help the victimized class?’ What is worse, if an action is thought to aid the downtrodden, it becomes acceptable to violate the most basic rights of those deemed to be their oppressors, including the rights of free speech and physical security.”

Put simply, instead of individual merit and color-blind opportunities, which were central to American liberalism, this ideology of the Left is a form of identity politics that categorizes people by race, makes far-reaching assumptions about them on that basis, and ranks them by level of oppression. The ideas about race and power are based on the American understanding of those terms even when exported to other countries whose reality is very different than that in the US.

The more oppressed someone is by this ideology's metrics, the more morally superior they are and therefore deserving of "allyship."

Being an ally does not mean ensuring that the playing field is as level as possible for everyone to have a fair start; according to this ideology, different outcomes are indicators of racism. Put into action, the idea is to intentionally discriminate against some and favor others because of their innate characteristics.

This ideology is taught in varying ways in educational institutions from preschool through university. Its executive arm, that is, the way the ideology is translated into action in school administrations and the corporate world, is called "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" or DEI. As major business consulting firm McKinsey and Company says on its website, DEI "is used to describe three values that many organizations today strive to embody to meet the needs of all walks of life...Companies that are diverse, equitable, and inclusive are better able to respond to challenges, win top talent, and meet the needs of different customer bases."

That sounds harmless enough, but in reality, DEI professionals view populations through a collective lens based on immutable characteristics on a scale of oppressed to oppressor. The term "equity" does not mean equal opportunities.

DEI, as it is usually practiced, views oppressed classes as deserving greater benefits, such as lowering the standards of math classes that must be racist if fewer Black students succeed, or policing aforementioned "microaggressions." In DEI exercises and sessions, which are sometimes mandatory, employees, students, and even parents of students are required or encouraged to organize themselves by race into "affinity groups." Proponents say this creates a safe space to discuss issues related to identity, while opponents say this is a new form of racial segregation, in which white students are shamed and Black students are told they are victims.

Jews don't match DEI ideology's rubrics

Where do Jews fit into these ideas? Not very well. A Harvard CAPS-Harris poll from December 2023 found that two-thirds of those surveyed aged 18-24 believe that Jews, in general, are oppressors, though 73% of respondents of all ages said this is false.

Jews do not match DEI's facile categories - Israeli Jews even less so than their American counterparts - yet they are inevitably and mistakenly viewed as white, powerful, and wealthy. That power and wealth is seen as the result, in the best case, of benefitting from systemic racism, and in the worst case, of an outright conspiracy of white, powerful people against less fortunate groups. A conspiracy to empower and enrich Jews by oppressing the downtrodden? Sounds familiar.

This ideology is what brought us to the point where American college professors celebrated the October 7 massacre by saying that the murder, rape, assault and abduction of thousands of Israelis was an "exhilarating...[and] energizing" act of "liberation and...living with dignity."

Despite the glaring problems this ideology long posed for Jews, some organizations embraced it over the years. The Anti-Defamation League published a document in early 2023 saying that "addressing Jewish concerns as a part of DEI is essential." DEI strategies should include the needs of Jewish employees "regardless of their perceived status in a society or organization," the ADL writes, even though "perceived status in a society or organization" is, in fact, what DEI is all about. The ADL also emphasized the truth, that "Jews are a diverse and multiracial community," but instead of that being a jumping-off point to explain why the boxes into which DEI seeks to put people do not make sense, they followed it up with the ideology's jargon about "intersectionality."

Senior Vice President of the ADL, Adam Neufeld told *Jewish Insider* in December 2023- after the response on campus to the October 7 massacre and the university presidents' testimony to Congress - that DEI is part of the solution to antisemitism on campus. It only needs to be fixed to include antisemitism. American Jewish Committee Director of Academic Affairs, Sara Codin said in the same article: "We tend not to take an overly divisive approach when it comes to DEI...We hope we can create initiatives that actually work within DEI structures." While ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt noted that, "The failure of many of these DEI offices to effectively respond to the crisis right now is quite an indictment," it appears that the organization remains committed to working within DEI frameworks.

This approach taken by major Jewish organizations like the ADL and AJC for years has clearly failed. Their former CEOs called for an end to DEI, recognizing that it is structurally and irreparably antisemitic. Influential Jewish-American journalist

Bari Weiss has launched a campaign against DEI, saying that abandoning the ideology will go a long way in reducing antisemitism and addressing many other ills on university campuses.

Jewish institutions must reject DEI

Jewish organizations and institutions, Israeli government bodies and civil society groups, and all opponents of antisemitism must reject DEI. There are a number of concrete steps that can be taken towards dismantling DEI.

- **You can't beat DEI with DEI:** "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." This quote from black, lesbian, and feminist writer Audre Lorde about overthrowing a "racist patriarch" is closely associated with DEI ideology — but it is a helpful idea to remember for those who oppose it.

Inserting the consideration of antisemitism into an essentialist, illiberal ideology is doomed to fail because Jews do not fit into its simplistic boxes. Such an effort continues to legitimize the very ideas through which antisemitism has been cultivated on many quarters of the Left. Caution must be taken not to use the language of DEI and the ideology undergirding it.

It is fine to fight antisemitism by pointing out the truth, that Jews are not "white" by the American or European idea of the word, and are indigenous to Israel. It is fine to take pride in diversity and the success of members of minority groups in Israeli society. And it is great for Jews of different backgrounds to be proud of where their families came from and to educate others about it. However, to speak about Ethiopian or Mizrahi Jews as though they are somehow more legitimate than their Ashkenazi counterparts ultimately lends credence to false narratives and does more damage than good.

- **Focus on instilling pride in Jewish identity on its own terms:** Jews are not only a nation and not only a religion and not only white or only "people of color." Jews are Jews, and Jews are one People. The unique nature of Jewish identity should be a source of pride. Jewish institutions and organizations do not have to contort themselves into new shapes to fit

the boxes promoted by ideologies like DEI. When fighting antisemitism, this message and approach must be made a priority.

- **Disengage and divest from DEI:** Beyond the messages and words used, organizations, officials, activists, donors and others should not associate themselves with DEI and institutions that use it, just as any fair-minded person would not intentionally associate him or herself with racism. When Jewish organizations look for partners and when the government looks for service providers, they should be clear that DEI principles cannot in any way be part of the process.

Jewish philanthropists and foundations should divest from organizations that promote DEI or put it into effect - venture capitalist Bill Ackman has been a prominent example of this policy.

- **Rejecting DEI must not mean an end to Black-Jewish engagement:** Finally, attempts to engage positively with the African-American community should continue, and Jewish communal organizations who pride themselves on fighting racism should continue to do so. The American Jewish community has a history of partnering with African-Americans to fight racism. The principled belief that discrimination against one group is an opening for injustice against all, which has long animated Jewish-Black cooperation, is also a good reason to dump DEI.

What should be clear is that this activism and cooperation are meant to advance what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “a nation where [children] will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” There are plenty of African-American organizations, activists, writers and thinkers who believe this, including ones who provide alternatives to the usual DEI training.