

First Day Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5779  
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Jewish Responses to Intersectionality

If a message cannot be captured in a sound byte, or a Tweet, most people won't listen to it or read it anymore<sup>1</sup>.

And the attention span of our generation and our youth... is shrinking.

Who has time to expend the energy to read more than a one sentence bio? When you provide a one sentence description of who you are, then you leave a whole lot out. People assume a lot about what you believe in and what you may not.

Our world today assumes a simplistic, unilateral, binary identity. You are Jewish. *Therefore*, you are a wealthy right-wing Zionist.

But you can be a progressive and Zionist.

You can be Jewish and exist well below the poverty line.

You can be a doctor or a scientist and a person of faith.

You can be a black and Jewish.

You can be gay and Jewish<sup>2</sup>.

We all can be and most of us already are multi-faceted. Our sages teach us that we can hold multiple truths at once. But in today's climate, a strong message and agenda of intersectionality is being pushed at us that is trying very hard to dictate a different reality.

This morning I hope to explain to you what intersectionality is, why it is harmful and then offer Jewish language and textual responses to this dangerous approach.

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<sup>1</sup> I spent weeks ruminating over intersectionality, Rabbi Simcha Bunim's text and Rabbi David Hartman's writings in *A Heart of Many Rooms*. Then I came across a sermon Rabbi Sari Laufer wrote in 2018 and she nudged me forward.

<sup>2</sup> Inspired by Laufer

Not all of you may be familiar with the term intersectionality, but the college students you know are, as are many people who receive their news from liberal and progressive sources.

If you know anyone who attends Stanford University, it is very possible they saw a poster on campus sponsored by Stanford Out of Occupied Palestine, a coalition of 19 student organizations.

In Commentary Magazine, Stanford Senior Elliot Kaufman described a five-bullet point poster he saw on campus.

The first bullet point connected Israel to American police violence. "Israel trains U.S. police how to deal with black people the way its occupation forces deal with Palestinians."

The second bullet point explained that Israeli airstrikes deliberately target Palestinian women and children.

The third accused Israel of systematically sterilizing African immigrants to reduce its black population.

The fourth laid out religious discrimination against gays in Israel.

And finally, the fifth linked the technology behind the Israeli "apartheid fence" to U.S. efforts to "hunt down undocumented migrants."

Stanford might be far away in Northern California, but it is not unique.

Hopefully, this morning you will gain skills that you can share with younger people that you know who might be easily influenced or come face to face with propaganda like that displayed at Stanford. Intersectionality is very dangerous.

But first, let me share a true story.

One night in late June, at 11:12 PM, a colleague reached out to me on Facebook Messenger to see if I was awake and able to go to LaGuardia Airport. She wrote: "kids arriving without parents."

I asked her a few questions and she told me that the goal (of meeting there) was to be loving witnesses to children who had been separated from their families and then sent to other parts of the country due to overcrowding in Houston. After a brief moment of hesitation, I looked at my husband and told him I was going to LaGuardia, Terminal B. When I arrived, there was a massive group of people of different shapes, skin colors and nationalities waiting outside baggage claim, holding signs in Spanish that said: we love you and other nice ideas.

This is the portion story I have shared publicly. But today, I want to share a little bit more.

Again, there were people of different shapes, skin colors and nationalities. I could not remember the last time I had intentionally placed myself in such a diverse environment. On my head, I purposely wore my blue kippa with the words ICCJ RABBI on it. Another rabbi wore a tallis. Some pastors were wearing collars. Most people were speaking Spanish--a language I have not managed to make time to learn yet.

Senior activists and leaders from Jewish groups who lean much more politically to the left than I do, were among those that had gathered together that evening.

Also present was Linda Sarsour, the Palestinian-American feminist activist and one of the architects of the January 2017 Women's March. I did not want to stand near her in case any of the media that was present took photos with both she and I in a single frame. While I love her approach to women in America, our opinions diverge on an array of social, religious and domestic issues. I did not want you, my community, to think that I associate with her because you happened to see me in a picture with her.

This is the same Linda Sarsour who said in March 2017: *You either stand up for the rights of all women, including Palestinians, or none.*

*There's just no way around it...I would say that anyone who wants to call themselves an activist cannot be selective....*

*You can't be a feminist in the United States and stand up for the rights of the American woman and then say that you don't want to stand up for the rights of Palestinian women in Palestine. It's all connected.<sup>3</sup>*

I, Rabbi Robyn Fryer Bodzin am both a Zionist AND a feminist, and I will continue to fight for those two ideals. As Einat Wilf writes, feminism and Zionism are cut from the same cloth. <sup>4</sup>They are both part of me and are definitely not pitted against each other.

Zionism and feminism are both core parts of my identity. As a Jew, I was raised to love my Jewish homeland and to appreciate it as the only true sanctuary for my people--even if a lot of what goes on there causes me shame. And as a feminist, I value Israel for its progressive stances on women's and LGBTQ rights--even if those rights have been sliding back lately. Linda Sarsour's assertion is wrong. A person can be a feminist and a Zionist. Many of us in the room this morning see ourselves as both.

Now here comes the tricky part.

While I disagree wholeheartedly with Linda Sarsour's perspective on a whole slew of issues, we both saw the importance of caring for these innocent immigrant children who were taken away from their parents. And that is why we were both at LaGuardia Airport that night.

While she and I differ on the relationship between feminism and Zionism, there are growing numbers of people who think like she does, especially those who subscribe to the theory of intersectionality.

The word intersectionality, coined by a leading scholar of critical race theory, Columbia University Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, is defined as "the theory that the overlap of various social identities, as race, gender, sexuality, and class contributes to the specific type of systemic oppression and discrimination experienced by an individual."

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/can-you-be-a-zionist-feminist-linda-sarsour-says-no/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/252810/anti-feminism-and-anti-zionism>

Or simply stated: every form of social oppression is linked to every other social oppression.

It was because of intersectionality that Jewish lesbians were recently kicked out of a Pride parade while holding a rainbow Star of David. The organizers of that parade said that the women's Zionism "made people feel unsafe." The organizers didn't want anything "that can inadvertently or advertently express Zionism" at the event. According to the theory of intersectionality, to be a Jewish lesbian, let alone one who deigns to support Israel, is a categorical impossibility, to be an oppressor and oppressed in the same person.<sup>5</sup>

I could not disagree more. To be Jewish does not mean to live a life of this or that, it means to live a life of this and that.

To show how intersectionality works, let me share one more example. The Black Lives Matter platform includes the following:

*The US justifies and advances the global war on terror via its alliance with Israel and is complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people...Israel is an apartheid state.*

There definitely is a racism problem in this country and I firmly believe that Black Lives do Matter  
and

I do not believe that Israel is an apartheid state. The platform for this movement intentionally mischaracterized Zionism and maligned the State of Israel. And it did so for intersectional reasons. Using the label of apartheid to Israel is an affront to the people who actually suffered under apartheid.

This is the way intersectionality works: it is the belief that the suffering of oppressed peoples in one part of the world (African-Americans) is fundamentally linked to the suffering of oppressed peoples in other parts of the world (Palestinians).

In many situations, theory can provide clarity. And sometimes, our world is too complicated for one theory to define us all. I don't like the theory of

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/27/opinion/im-glad-the-dyke-march-banned-jewish-stars.html>

intersectionality, which at its core holds that if you believe in one thing you must believe in another. I find it to be regressive and it dictates an either-or approach to living. I prefer what F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote: we can be simultaneously enchanted *and* repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.

The Tosefta, a second century Jewish text, describes how not surprisingly, the house of Hillel and the house of Shammai were disagreeing on a matter of Jewish law. The text then asks: if the Torah is given by a single God, provided by a single Shepherd, how is it the case that there exist such differing interpretations?

And the text answers, “Make yourself a heart of many rooms and bring into it the words of the house of Shammai and the words of the house of Hillel.”

The students of Hillel and Shammai often disagreed, but this text teaches us to hold both of their teachings inside of us, in different rooms inside of us.

In other words, become a person in whom different opinions and approaches can reside together in the very depths of your soul. We need to use all our “inner storage” rooms to incorporate the many conflicting words, isms and beliefs that dwell inside of us.

We need to “make our heart a heart of many rooms” to absorb a multiplicity of arguments, ideas, opinions, because we are all complex individuals.

Abraham, the first Jew, whom we encounter in the Torah readings on both days of Rosh Hashana is an example of a person who can hold multiple truths within him at once. In both Torah readings, he is obedient. Sarah wants to throw out Hagar and his son Ishmael? Ok. He makes no fuss.

And after God says

שָׂרָה אִשְׁתְּךָ יִלְדֶת לְךָ בֵן וְקָרָאתָ אֶת־שְׁמוֹ יִצְחָק וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לְזַרְעוֹ אַתְּרִיו:

“Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac: and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come.<sup>6</sup>”

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 17:15

and then, when God asks Abraham to engage in human sacrifice with this beloved child-again, Abraham acts as the obedient servant.

If you only come to synagogue on the High Holy Days, then you might think that Abraham is one dimensional and that he does not care about his kids or his concubines. From Abraham's behavior in the two Torah readings for these high holy days, we can conclude that Abraham is a great listener. He listens to his wife and he listens to God.

But, the Torah scholars in the room know of a different side of this man. When God threatens to annihilate the cities of Sodom and Amarah, Abraham opens his mouth and yells out to God:

תִּלְלָה לָךְ מַעֲשֵׂת כְּדַבַּר הַזֶּה

Shame on you to do this kind of thing

לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע וְהָיָה כְּצְדִיק כְּרָשָׁע

to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike.

תִּלְלָה לָךְ הַשִּׁפּוֹט כָּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט:

Far be it from You! Shame on you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"<sup>7</sup>

Given this earlier plea to God because of the people of Sodom, one would have expected Abraham to respond by pleading for the life of his innocent children. But Abraham expresses no argument, or even a request for an explanation

Within three chapters in the book of Genesis, Abraham takes two different approaches to God, that stem from two different rooms within his heart.

Sometimes he argues with God and sometimes he is the silent obedient type.

It seems like he is motivated and sees the need to argue for one group and not another. He is multifaceted.

He is obedient and argumentative.

Not one or the other.

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 18:35

He does not see the need to be an activist for everyone.  
Not everyone is linked in his world view.

As Rabbi David Hartman explained, a Jew must strive to be a “person in whom different opinions can reside together...”<sup>8</sup>

The Jewish anti intersectionality message can also be amplified by Rabbi Simcha Bunim, in this classic Chasidic story.

It was said of Reb Simcha Bunim that he carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. On one he wrote: *Bishvili nivra ha-olam*— “for my sake the world was created.” On the other he wrote: *V’anokhi afar v’efer*— “I am but dust and ashes.” He would take out each slip of paper as necessary, as a reminder to himself.

Yes, this teaching is a paradox. As Jews, we are taught that it is ok to hold more than one truth. We approach different situations from different places within us.

We are mighty and weak.  
We are central and peripheral.  
We are both powerful and powerless.  
We are the oppressed and the oppressor.

We can be many things at one time--and contain these identities in different rooms in our hearts.

Rabbi Shai Held recently wrote that life is complex and often contradictory, and the religious life invites us to learn to hold seemingly antithetical truths and experiences simultaneously. The example I return to again and again is the capacity to hold gratitude and disappointment in one’s heart at one and the same point. Many of our lives are filled with blessing and with profound suffering. The truth of one does not cancel out the truth of the other. We learn, haltingly, non-linearly, to hold both this and that.<sup>9</sup>

I can be upset with my daughter’s behavior AND love her at the same time.

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<sup>8</sup> A Heart of Many Rooms, page 21

<sup>9</sup> With gratitude to Rabbi Laufer for sharing this text by Rabbi Held

I exercised today AND only exercised for 30 minutes.

I care about Israelis and I care about Palestinians.

For this new year I challenge you to embrace your multiple truths and sets of needs and wants.

For example:

Try: I am busy, I am parenting, grandparenting, I am tired, AND I need Shabbat.

Not, this week was so long and hard I just want to check out for a couple of days.

Try: I had a long day, I am exhausted from traffic getting home AND I should go to a Shiva minyan.

My family is so important, AND my synagogue family is important to me too. I am going to make time for both.<sup>10</sup>

The new theory of intersectionality is gaining traction, and it is damaging to timeless Jewish values. So many of our people are turning their backs to the values they were taught, and on Israel, because of intersectionality.

Our tradition teaches us that in different life experiences we can be complacent and argumentative like Abraham.

We can feel like dust and ashes and like the world was created just for us.

We can hold gratitude and disappointment in different rooms in our hearts all at the same time.

The world is not black and white. People are not black and white. We are shades of a wide variety of many colors – all beautiful. The modern theory of intersectionality is a simplistic understanding of humanity, and in concert with a world that is trying to diminish us into binaries--- that is in conflict with enduring Jewish wisdom.

As we get older, our hearts expand as we let in more people to love--special people, partners, children, grandchildren and if we are lucky great

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<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Sari Laufer, Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5778

grandchildren. If our hearts can expand to make space for more people to love, then kal vachomer, all the more so, our hearts can expand to hold more truths as well.

Shana tova umetuka.

May you have a good year AND a sweet year.