



Rethinking Intersectionality: Expanding the Progressive Tent

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INTRODUCTION

“Intersectionality” is a term that has popped up lately in Israel-focused media. It “refers to the way social identities and forms of oppression overlap and intersect,” as [Jay Michaelson](#) explains. Intersectionality is now “front and center in the way campus communities are engaging with Israel/Palestine, and linking it to other social issues.”ⁱ

Recently, BDS advocates have had some success in promoting the intersectionality of the Palestinians’ cause with other social justice movements. Relatively new recruits to BDS include activists who want to stop police violence against African Americans, sexual assault, homophobia, gender discrimination and others problems. New equations and linkages have become popular in some circles, including “Ferguson=Palestine” and “Palestine is a feminist issue.”

As we’ll explain below, we believe there are problems with the application of intersectional analysis to Israel/Palestine. But first, it’s important to acknowledge the positive contribution of this concept to progressive thinking on a broad range of other issues.

THE USES AND MISUSES OF INTERSECTIONALITY

“Intersectionality” was coined in 1989 by black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. She and others urged white feminists to acknowledge that people have multiple identities, and that African American women faced discrimination because of both race and gender. The concept can be a useful tool for studying the world and ourselves, one that prompts good questions. How do the institutions and assumptions that prop up different kinds of oppression relate to each other? What is their cumulative impact on people who are victimized by them?ⁱⁱ

We believe many people who’ve decided to embrace the Palestinian cause are motivated by a desire for justice, not academic theories of intersectionality. If those who are struggling against discrimination based on race, gender or sexual preferences are also energized to help end Palestinian suffering, that’s understandable and laudable.

However, [Cary Nelson](#) points out, “people are now calling on intersectionality to do the kinds of political work it hadn’t done before,” finding linkages between domestic injustices in the U.S. to Israeli policies, and using intersectionality as a “rallying cry.” Nelson argues persuasively that the “Ferguson=Palestine” equation is not based on sound critical theory or an accurate appraisal of either the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or American race relations.ⁱⁱⁱ So does [Yoav Fromer](#).^{iv} Their critiques are worth reading. But we have an additional concern: when intersectionality is invoked to mobilize support for BDS, it weakens progressive movements in both North America and Israel.

EXPAND, DON'T SHRINK, THE PROGRESSIVE TENT

It isn't easy to wage successful struggles for social justice in North America. Progressives need to unite around the causes and principles we share, and agree to disagree on other matters. But when it comes to Israel/Palestine, rigid ideological litmus tests ("Are you for or against BDS? Are you Zionist or anti-Zionist?") are increasingly being imposed on those who want to join social justice movements. That is splintering and hurting the American left.

One source of this problem is that, all too often, activists for other causes are buying into the anti-Zionist left's simplistic vision of a complex conflict. They take a binary, approach that wrongly holds one party entirely to blame: i.e., Israelis have always been vile, ethnic-cleansing, settler-colonialist oppressors; Palestinians and other Arabs have had little or no agency.v

As a result, those with more nuanced views, like liberal Zionists who oppose the occupation and are appalled by Israel's rightward drift, are told they have no place in the progressive tent. In [some settings](#), if you say that part of your identity is bound up with Israel and you care about the future of the Jewish state, you are reflexively branded as an "oppressor"... and then the conversation shuts down. That impedes the struggle for social justice on a variety of fronts.vi

EXCLUDING "WHOLE SELVES" IN THE LGBTQ MOVEMENT

On January 22, 2016, at the National LGBTQ Task Force's "Creating Change" conference in Chicago, BDS activists famously [disrupted a reception](#) scheduled for Jerusalem Open House, an Israeli gay rights group. The reception was to be hosted by A Wider Bridge, which fosters ties between LGBTQ communities in the U.S. and Israel.vii

The protestors claimed that A Wider Bridge engaged in "pinkwashing" --a charge the organization [deniesviii](#) -- but many leaders of the LGBTQ community insisted it was wrong to deny Israelis the chance to describe their experiences. In response to this fracas, Rea Cary, the Director of the Task Force, [wrote that](#) "we are experiencing some of what happens when we ask people to be their full selves, to bring their whole selves to Creating Change...and those whole selves come into conflict."ix

The notion of "whole selves," the idea that we have multiple identities – e.g., white, male, queer, Jewish, Israeli – is a key component of intersectionality and modern identity politics. Israeli and American Jews who are actively confronting homophobia – many of whom actively oppose the occupation – did not deserve to have their whole selves assaulted by anti-Zionists who refused to allow them to speak. It is hard to see how this helped one Palestinian in the occupied territories; it is easy to see how it harmed the cause of LGBTQ rights.

SHRINKING THE ACTIVIST TENT IN FERGUSON

In August 2014, amidst protests over police violence in Ferguson Missouri, BDS advocates developed new alliances with African American activists in the U.S. While this was happening, St. Louis-based rabbi [Sharon Talve](#) worked closely with the black community in Ferguson, supporting their struggle against racism and police violence. But she was castigated by a small group of people for being pro-Israel. Her chief “crimes”? Taking a tour of Israel organized by AIPAC. Calling for a halt in rocket attacks against Israelis during the second Gaza War. And participating in an AIPAC-sponsored event in her synagogue.

The fact that she had also spoken out against the treatment of Palestinians, and had invited the pro-BDS group Jewish Voice for Peace to her synagogue, was of no consequence to her attackers. They just wrote her off as someone who supported “genocide” and “apartheid” and therefore deserved to be excluded from a vitally important social justice movement.

In contrast, [KB Frazier](#), who was at her side in the Ferguson protests, said that “calls to exclude Talve and supporters of Israel from the protests serve only those seeking to divide the movement,” the Forward reported. “Frazier, like other activists, did not rule out a tie among Ferguson, Palestine and other battlegrounds. But [he said] the only way to discuss what he views as ‘systematic racism’ is to create a respectful dialogue within the movement.”x

That makes sense. It doesn’t mean passionate opposition to the occupation should stop; on the contrary, the opposition needs to grow stronger. It does mean that left-leaning activists should stop boycotting Jews who are fighting against a variety of injustices, but won’t express obligatory revulsion at everything that is connected to Israel.

HAMPERING WORK AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT

In 2014, “[No Red Tape](#)” an anti-sexual assault group founded at Columbia University, decided to align itself with Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine, which is pro-BDS. As a result, Jewish women were reluctant to join No Red Tape. According to columnist [Lizzie Crocker](#):

No Red Tape has conflated geopolitics with sexual-assault activism—and distanced victims with pro-Israel views in the process...In trying to be inclusive of other oppressed groups, they’ve alienated victims that their group is dedicated to advocating for.

...The implication is that to be anti-sexual assault at Columbia, one must also be anti-Israel. Conflating those issues under a larger umbrella of oppression waters them both down individually.xi

BROADEN INTERSECTIONALITY: INCLUDE ANTI-SEMITISM

American Jews are mostly white (although 7-10% are [people of color](#))^{xii} and privileged. So when they describe Jews as an oppressed people, it is sometimes hard for progressives to take them seriously. But anti-Semitism didn't stop being a problem after the Holocaust. It is very much alive.

We're not talking about anti-Zionist rhetoric, which some right wingers automatically -- and often wrongly-- equate with anti-Semitism. We're talking about what is inarguably the real thing. Vicious hate crimes against Jews are increasing [throughout Europe](#).^{xiii} In [Malaysia](#),^{xiv} [Poland, Ukraine](#),^{xv} and other countries with tiny Jewish populations, Jews are now scapegoats for economic problems.

Yet, according to feminist scholar [Janet Friedman](#)^{xvi} "while professing the challenging of interlacing systems of oppression that must be addressed together, anti-Semitism is frequently unseen or excluded" by feminists at the National Woman's Studies Association. The same thing is true of others who view the world through the prism of intersectionality.^{xvii}

[April Rosenblum](#) (a self-described "anarchist") has a better idea. She urges the left to take the constantly mutating virus of anti-Semitism more seriously:

In a world that's very difficult to change, anti-Semitism makes things seem easy to solve. It lets us fix our gaze on an imagined group of greedy, powerful Jews at the root of the world's problems, and moves our eyes right past the *systems* that actually keep injustice in place: capitalism, weapons dealers, oil companies, you name it...A status quo in which anti-Jewish theories are 'common sense' in countries around the world is a serious thing.

That status quo ought to be more visible in progressive circles, not only because it's unjust and dangerous, but also because it is relevant to Israel/Palestine. In a world where anti-Semitism won't go away, we at TTN believe the Jewish people still need a place of refuge, a homeland. So do many other anti-occupation progressives, both Jews and non-Jews. More people on the left should start understanding and acknowledging the importance of preserving this refuge.^{xviii}

CONSIDER ALTERNATIVES TO BDS

Finally, many progressives have been persuaded that the BDS movement is the only option available for those want to end the occupation and support Palestinian rights^{xix}. That's not true. We won't repeat arguments for and against BDS^{xx} here, but will suggest that there are better, more productive alternatives. They are presented in The Third

Narrative's [Activist Guide: Progressive Action for Human Rights, Peace and Reconciliation in Israel and Palestine](#).”^{xxi}

The guide describes groups in Israel/Palestine and the U.S. that are working for an end to the occupation, two states, and equal rights for Palestinian citizen of Israel. They need and deserve support and should be better known to left-leaning people in North America. The BDS movement mistakenly shuns some of them because of its policy against “anti-normalization.” As Rabbi [Sharon Kleinbaum](#) notes:

While I share the outrage and frustration expressed by the BDS movement about the on-going injustice of the occupation, I disagree with the method. The only way I see to end the occupation and fight for the soul of Israel is to support Israelis who are working on the ground...to create change. Disengaging and boycotting them abandons them alone in their huge task to bring justice to Israel/Palestine.^{xxii}

It also makes the huge task of bringing justice to America more difficult.

i Jay Michaelson, “Why Do Activists Connect Israel to Campus Rape, *Forward*, Dec, 3, 2015 (<http://forward.com/opinion/326042/dont-be-surprised-when-activists-connect-israel-to-campus-rape/#ixzz3zPlykMJ8>).

ii Jarune Uwujaren, Jamie Utt, “Why Our Feminism Must Be Intersectional (And 3 Ways to Practice It) *Everyday Feminism*, January 11, 2015 (<http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/why-our-feminism-must-be-intersectional/>).

iii Cary Nelson, “The Intersectionality Muddle,” *Inside Higher Education*, February 15, 2016 (<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/02/15/concept-intersectionality-mutating-and-becoming-corrupted-essay>).

iv On the Ferguson=Palestine equation, Fromer asserts: “It is one thing to convey sympathy for oppressed people—and yes, in many ways Palestinians are oppressed. But comparing Gaza to Baltimore or Jerusalem to Ferguson isn’t just inaccurate or unfair—it’s insulting. African-American teenagers aren’t being shot in American cities by policemen because they are randomly attacking innocent civilians in the streets with knives, or shooting parents in front of their children. The entire point of the Black Lives Matter movement is that the victims are innocent.” Yoav Fromer, “How Israel Is Being Framed,” *Tablet*, December 3, 2015 (<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/195487/how-israel-is-being-framed>).

v As [David Hirsch](#) puts it, “Left anti-Zionism is often adopted by people who consider themselves to be anti-essentialist, yet it operates with a methodology that understands events as little more than the manifestations of Israel’s racist, colonialist and totalitarian essences.”

vi Mira Taichman, Danielle Rinat, “I Am a Jew, a Zionist, An Obie,” *The Oberlin Review*, March 15, 2013 (<http://oberlinreview.org/1963/opinions/i-am-a-jew-a-zionist-an-obie/>).

vii Deborah Nussbaum Cohen, “Liberal Jews Trapped in 'Terrifying' New World of Uncompromising Anti-Israel Views.” *Haaretz*, January 25, 2016 (<http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-1.699452>).

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- viii Arthur Slepian, "An Inconvenient Truth: The Myth of Pinkwashing," *Tikkun*, July 3, 2012 (<http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/an-inconvenient-truth-the-myths-of-pinkwashing>)
- ix Jonathan Capehart, "This show of anti-Semitism at an LGBT conference should bring change," *Washington Post*, January 27, 2016 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/01/27/this-show-of-anti-semitism-at-an-lgbt-conference-should-bring-change/>).
- x Nathan Guttman, Brit Lokting, "Can Jews Back #BlackLivesMatter Movement and Still Be Pro-Israel," *Forward*, December 21, 2015 (<http://forward.com/news/327466/can-jews-back-black-lives-matter-and-be-pro-israel/#ixzz40GgaxBIW>).
- xi Lizzie Crocker, "The Student Activists Connecting Israel to Campus Rape," *The Daily Beast*, December 2, 2015 (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/02/the-student-activists-connecting-israel-to-campus-rape.html>).
- xii The Institute for Jewish Community Research, "Ethnic and Racial Diversity: The Be'hol Lashon Initiative, 2011 (http://www.jewishresearch.org/projects_diversity.htm).
- xiii Jon Henley, "Anti-Semitism on Rise Across Europe `In Worse Times Since the Nazis'", *The Guardian*, August 7, 2014 (<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/07/antisemitism-rise-europe-worst-since-nazis>).
- xiv Robert Fulford, "Anti-Semitism without Jews in Malaysia," *The National Post*, October 6, 2012 (<http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/robert-fulford-anti-semitism-without-jews-in-malaysia>).
- xv Michal Bilewicz, Ireneusz Krzeminski "Anti-Semitism in Poland and Ukraine: The Belief in Jewish Control as a Mechanism of Scapegoating," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* (Vol. 4, 2, 2015).
- xvi Janet Friedman, For the Women's Studies Association, the BDS Vote Was Over Before It Began," *Forward*, November 30, 2015 (<http://forward.com/sisterhood/325637/for-the-womens-studies-association-the-bds-vote-was-over-before-it-began/>).
- xvii Unfortunately, [Jeremy Newmark's](#) take on the British left applies to some college campuses in North America: "If `Holocaust Denial' is a central motif of anti-Semitism on the political Right, `Anti-semitism Denial' is fast becoming a parallel on the Left. In Oxford, the refrain was that `most accusations of anti-Semitism are just the Zionists crying wolf' ... (I)t is almost impossible to discuss it in Labour circles without encountering this form of denial."
- xviii April Rosenblum, "The Past Didn't Go Anywhere," *Building Equality*, 2007 (<http://www.buildingequality.us/prejudice/antisemitism/rosenblum/the-past.pdf>).
- xix Two examples are the [National Women's Studies Association](#) (NWSA), which passed a pro-BDS resolution at its conference in 2015, and more than 1,000 African American scholars, performers and activists who signed a [statement of solidarity](#) with the Palestinian people in August, 2015.
- xx For a detailed analysis, see TTN's "[What The Problem with BDS? A Progressive Critique.](#)"
- xxi See <http://thirdnarrative.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/The-Third-Narrative-Progressive-Action-Guide.pdf>

xxii Sharon Kleinbaum, "The Hostile Protest That Shut Down Debate at the LGBTQ Conference Helped No One in Israel or Palestine," *Haaretz*, January 20, 2016 (<http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/1.700278>).