

Vance Dingfelder makes the best chocolate chip cookies. Especially if they are fresh out of the oven, I will often push other members of the staff — or even the B'nei Mitzvah kid's grandmother — out of the way to get to one of these treats. Invariably I will eat a second one, and, in the sanctity of this communal confessional, I will usually eat a third. Being something of a slow learner, I never seem to remember that continually adding more of something that seems so good doesn't actually work out, and the rest of my day is shot before I realize the fourth cookie was a terrible idea. Don't pretend that you don't know what I'm talking about. Rabbi Shulman, allow me to share a bit of advice with you that my predecessors never thought to share with me: the “Freshman Fifteen” is real at Temple De Hirsch Sinai. We all over indulge from time to time, and it doesn't take an economist to recognize the phenomena of diminishing returns. Too much of a good thing, it turns out, can actually have terrible results.

We, the Jewish people, are constantly preoccupied with food — especially on Yom Kippur, when it's all we can think about despite currently feeling satiated — so I first illustrate this point with cookies, though the same conclusion is reached in our sacred text. The prophet Micah, writing before the destruction of the first Temple some 2,600 years ago, also realized that too much of a good thing would have disastrous consequences. He wasn't writing about cookies but about a commitment to ideology untempered by reason, about extremism that leads to absurdity.

“With what shall I approach the Lord,” Micah wrote, “do homage to God on high? Shall I approach God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?”<sup>1</sup> While this doesn't sound like the worship we know, an early Israelite would be nodding along in agreement. This is exactly how Torah commanded them to approach the Divine; it sounds pretty good.

“Would the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with myriads of streams of oil?” Well, if one ram is good, thousands of them must be better, right?

“Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for my sins?” Wait a minute. Here the dark sarcasm of Micah's text is revealed. While a natural progression of the desire to please God, human sacrifice is demonstrably not what the God of Israel wants. Too much of a good thing is a bad thing: an escalating adherence to ideology untempered by reason actually creates a situation lacking in the very moral clarity it was meant to foster.

Even the best idea, if left unchecked, has the potential to become deleterious. So it is with a modern concept that has taken root in our society: intersectionality.<sup>2</sup>

This important concept, first coined by Columbia Law School Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, suggests that the many forms of discrimination existing in our world often overlap and cannot not be taken in isolation. A black woman faces discrimination on the basis of both her race and her gender; a poor gay man faces discrimination based on both class and sexuality. Professor Crenshaw's labeling of intersectionality opened our eyes to the many ways in which powerful forces in our society systematically oppress individuals who are standing at the intersections of race, religion, gender, gender expression, age, disability, sexual orientation, and more. “Intersectionality,” in her words, “has given many advocates a way to frame their

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 6:6-7

<sup>2</sup> [http://socialdifference.columbia.edu/files/socialdiff/projects/Article\\_Mapping\\_the\\_Margins\\_by\\_Kimblere\\_Crenshaw.pdf](http://socialdifference.columbia.edu/files/socialdiff/projects/Article_Mapping_the_Margins_by_Kimblere_Crenshaw.pdf)

circumstances and to fight for their visibility and inclusion.”<sup>3</sup> It has, and American society owes Professor Crenshaw a collective debt.

At its best, intersectionality is both a concept that raises the visibility of those subject to a multiplicity of oppressions and a strategic tool that has led to the development of coalitions seeking to fight these injustices. If overlapping oppressions or shared concern about oppressions can be found, forces can be combined to create stronger, larger, more durable movements for social change. The social justice efforts of our time are led by intersectional coalitions, and we must get on board if we wish to contribute to the fight against injustice. This much is good.

Too much of a good thing, however, can be a very bad thing. At its worst, an escalating adherence to the ideology of intersectionality, untempered by reason, has turned this important concept into an exclusionary hierarchy of oppression, one that marginalizes the voices of the very people who would be allies. The mainstream Jewish community, in particular, has reason to look with concern upon the ways intersectionality has been corrupted, for a new two-fold double-standard has been created to exclude the Jewish community from modern day social justice work. Which is very, very bad.

That double-standard looks something like this:

First, too many in our society, including many of those leading today’s efforts to create a more just America, have internalized a key tenant of anti-Semitism. By portraying the Jewish community as privileged and powerful beyond its numbers, we are type-cast into the role of oppressor rather than accepted as allies who have faced, and continue to face, oppression. There is indeed tremendous privilege in many parts of the Jewish community, but privilege alone does not an oppressor make. It feels particularly ironic in the wake of the events in Charlottesville that the same anti-Semitism that makes us especially attuned to the truths of intersectionality is being used to exclude us from intersectional coalitions.

Second, a litmus test regarding international politics is being applied to the Jewish community and no other before we can be accepted into coalitions fighting domestic injustice. Our concern for the safety of family, friends, and coreligionists living in the State of Israel, regardless of personal feelings about the politics of their duly elected government, excludes participation in intersectional coalitions supporting racial justice, LGBTQ rights, and more. One need look no further than a march of LGBTQ activists in Chicago this summer for the clearest illustration yet: two Jewish lesbians were removed from the march for carrying a rainbow flag with a Star of David, a symbol that organizers felt was a trigger for other participants as it was a symbol of Zionist oppression.<sup>4</sup>

How are we to navigate this new social justice landscape when the very religion that is commanding us to be relentless in striving to make this world a more just, equitable place is the only one being excluded from the table? Rock, meet hard place. To throw up our hands and to walk away is not an option, for the very core of our religion demands that we constantly work to perfect God’s creation for all of its inhabitants. To make Shabbes for ourselves, to do our own thing, is out of the question, because true social change can only happen with, not for,

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/?utm\\_term=.63ba5b1afa84](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/?utm_term=.63ba5b1afa84)

<sup>4</sup> The following opinion piece contains important hyperlinks to the author’s source material documenting this discrimination: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/27/opinion/im-glad-the-dyke-march-banned-jewish-stars.html?mcubz=0&r=0>

marginalized groups. The only options left, then, are to clarify our own intersections, to remain steadfast in our beliefs, and to work to change the narrowness that has become de rigueur in intersectionality.

We should first seek to clarify our own intersections, through which we might better understand and embrace the language of our time. To begin, look no further than these walls: the people of Temple De Hirsch Sinai are people of color, gay and lesbian people, transgender people, economically struggling people, women, and also Jews. Each of us might face both conscious and unconscious oppression in American society for the traits that I have named as well as our religious identification. A lesbian in our community will face discrimination as a woman, as a lesbian, and as a Jew; someone with Asian lineage might face discrimination based physical features and religious identification. To understand these intersections — and how they only intensify through linkage — is to understand intersectional theory and the multiple oppressions we and others can face.

Here I must offer a word of caution. Those who take perverse pride in their number of intersections, who engage in the downward spiral of comparative suffering, subvert the beauty of intersectionality. Intersectionality allows us to see one another, to have a better understanding of one another, not judge one another nor enter into a suffering Olympics. Our seat at the modern-day social justice table will be more easily realized when we can understand and speak the language of our time while being cognizant of the privileges we do hold.

Second, I would encourage you to remain both steadfast and vocal in your beliefs about Israel. We must reject the ideological litmus test being placed upon the Jewish community as both anti-semitic and antithetical to intersectionality itself. Anti-semitic because it prejudices every adherent to Judaism as part of the problem rather than the solution, and antithetical to intersectionality because it actively subverts justice. The State of Israel has the right to exist as a safe and secure Jewish, democratic state in the land of Israel . So, too, should Palestinian aspirations to create a secure, hopeful future culminate in statehood. Two states for two people is our truth and the mantra of every mainstream Israel advocacy organization, the majority of American Jews, and the majority of Israelis. Yet we must continually defend this singular path toward peace from those with exclusionary visions of the future. One threat comes from Jewish extremists on the right who seek to delegitimize the Palestinian narrative and thus delegitimize the Palestinian state; another from Jewish extremists on the left who have been subsumed by the Palestinian narrative and who support efforts to delegitimize the Israeli state; and a third from those intersectional extremists who have been remarkably successful in shifting public opinion to equate Zionism with racism and oppression. Each of these efforts threatens the only viable pathway for both Palestinians and Israelis by undermining public support and the conditions that will enable peace, and we must be vocal in our condemnations while affirming the morality of our beliefs.

Finally, we must find like-minded partners who reject exclusive intersectionality's marginalization of the Jewish community and return to the moral clarity at the core of this concept. Intersectionality should create the space, whether at the discussion table or the protest march, in the court room or in the halls of power, for all people to be seen and all voices to be heard, including ours. It must allow full selves, complex and diverse identities, to be seen and explored to create a more nuanced understanding of our shared future.

Inclusion of the Jewish community will initially make tough work even more difficult. It will mean not accepting token Jewish support from those willing to set aside their own identity and throw Israel under the bus but wrestling to understand how the mainstream Jewish community supports the rights and dignity of both Palestinians and Israelis. It will mean asking coalition partners to confront their own prejudices to be able to sit with proud Zionists who also

understand systems of oppression and are heartbroken by ongoing racism, misogyny, and discrimination in America. It will mean asking people to hold multiple truths, including that intersections of oppression can be mixed with privilege within the same person without making them the enemy. Inclusive intersectionality will be difficult work, but when those extolling the virtues of intersectionality actually embrace those they, it will create far stronger movements for social change.

“With what shall I approach the Lord,” Micah wrote, “do homage to God on high?...With thousands of rams, with myriads of streams of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression...?” We all realize that too much of a good thing is a bad thing. It’s true of chocolate chip cookies as well as displays of fealty: escalating adherence to ideology untempered by reason actually creates a situation lacking in the very moral clarity it was meant to foster. Intersectionality, a concept creating visibility and inclusion for those facing overlapping oppressions, is **the** most important social justice concept of our time. Unfortunately, some have sought to pervert this ideology, wielding it as a weapon to exclude the mainstream Jewish community from the very coalitions working to fulfill our religious values. Intersectionality isn’t going away, and so I urge you to clarify your own intersections to better understanding the language, to remain steadfast in your beliefs that justice is not a zero-sum exercise, and to challenge others to embrace a more inclusionary intersectionality in order to fulfill the concept’s very purpose. Only then will we be able to join with all those seeking a better world in the fulfillment of the Prophet Micah’s teaching: “God has told you, O mortal, what is good and what God requires of you: only to do justice, to love righteousness, and to walk humbly with your God.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Micah 6:8.