

**Judaism, Feminism, and this Intersectional Moment: Forging a Road Ahead for
Faith-rooted Feminism
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*The concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas. The need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing political agendas is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront. Indeed, their specific raced and gendered experiences, although intersectional, often define as well as confine the interests of the entire group.

For example, racism as experienced by people of color who are of a particular gender--male--tends to determine the parameters of antiracist strategies, just as sexism as experienced by women who are of a particular race-white-tends to ground the women's movement. The problem is not simply that both discourses fail women of color by not acknowledging the "additional" burden of patriarchy or of racism, but that the discourses are often inadequate even to the discrete tasks of articulating the full dimensions of racism and sexism. Because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color, and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, dominant conceptions of antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms.

...The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women. These mutual elisions present a particularly difficult political dilemma for women of color. Adopting either analysis constitutes a denial of a fundamental dimension of our subordination and works to preclude the development of a political discourse that more fully empowers women of color. ("Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color". In: Martha Albertson Fineman, Rixanne Mykitiuk, Eds. *The Public Nature of Private Violence*.)

*Last week, American Zionists were told they could not be part of the feminist movement — again. A number of pro-Palestinian groups, most notably the Palestinian American Women's Association, [boycotted](#) Saturday's L.A. Women's March. They wouldn't attend due to the fact that actress Scarlett Johansson, known to be a proud Zionist, was one of the speakers. Hardly a unique episode, the boycott of last week's march was reminiscent of events following last year's Women's March in Washington, D.C. Linda Sarsour, one of the march's organizers and a supporter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel, rejected the possibility of Zionists taking part in feminist struggles. [According to Sarsour](#), Zionism and feminism are mutually exclusive. Then there was the time that [three women](#) were ejected from the Chicago LGBTQ march simply for carrying rainbow flags marked with a Star of David. The women were told that the flags made people feel unsafe and that support for Zionism was,

again, somehow irreconcilable with the march's anti-racist agenda. Making matters worse, the parade organizers attempted to rationalize their decision by claiming that Zionism was "an inherently white supremacist ideology."

...Excluding a group of women from feminist struggles only because of their support for Zionism, delegitimizing companies which associate themselves with women who are proud Israelis, and expelling women of the LGBTQ community only for wanting to celebrate their Zionist identity are all actions which accomplish the opposite of intersectionality. They turn an inclusive platform that acknowledges diversity within a joint cause and that respects a variety of identities into a means of exclusion and marginalization. (Sharon Nazarian, "By Rejecting Jews, Intersectionality Betrays Itself" *The Forward*, January 25th, 2018)

*A similar example of connected but opposing struggles involves women, work and motherhood. Back in 1971, decades before *Lean In*, [a mere parenthetical](#) in Toni Morrison's "What the Black Woman Thinks of Women's Lib" essay hits on a key irony of Betty Friedan-style feminism: "It is a source of amusement even now to black women to listen to feminists talk of liberation while somebody's nice black grandmother shoulders the daily responsibility of child rearing and floor mopping and the liberated one comes home to examine the housekeeping, correct it, and be entertained by the children," she writes. "If Women's Lib needs those grandmothers to thrive, it has a serious flaw." That intersectional analysis, supported by dozens of economic, racial, and feminist activists today, informs current pushes for systemic change like universal paid leave, sick days, subsidized childcare, and even universal basic income that coalitions hope will help the low-wage childcare worker first, and also benefit the overtaxed mother who relies on—and exploits—her.

My guess is that the issue with intersectional discourse for many Jews, especially those with economic and skin color privilege, is that it does require us to take a tough look at how Jews at home and abroad have become oppressors, or enablers of oppression. It's painful and perhaps disorienting to see things that way, when so much Jewish self-definition is based on the historical atrocities we've experienced. It is so embedded in many of our personal myths to be the freed slaves or the former immigrants who have achieved freedom but not forgotten our roots (this is the meaning of the Passover story for many of us). Yet an intersectional analysis asks us to understand that in many ways, just by living comfortably in an unjust world, we *have* abandoned those roots.

Intersectionality can be most frustrating in discourse, especially online, when activists say things like, "I don't want to hear from you if you're not directly impacted by this issue." This can be tough to swallow. It contravenes a treasured romantic idea of our own social justice tradition and the mandate of tikkun olam which suggests that we speak out and *do* something. An intersectional framework often asks us to listen first, to follow others' lead. But Jews, whose tradition asks us hear the shofar before we make change, can embrace this approach. Rather than abandoning intersectionality, we should be leaning into discomforts and challenges as we

continue to fight injustice. (Sarah Seltzer, 'Intersectionality Is Not a Reason for Jews to Leave Our Movements,' *Jewish Currents* May 22, 2018)

*Intersectional feminism means not focusing solely on breaking the glass ceiling in corporate America, for instance, but in raising the minimum wage, as [nearly two-thirds of minimum-wage workers in the U.S. are women](#), according to the National Women's Law Center.

"I'm a bit over how the mainstream narrative flattens the feminist movement to try to make it into the Sheryl Sandberg-identity of feminism," McFadden said. "Not to say that she didn't have ideas that were helpful and on point, but there is a class conversation that gets lost." (Syreeta McFadden, professor of English at the Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York City)

*Some people look to intersectionality as a grand theory of everything, but that's not my intention. If someone is trying to think about how to explain to the courts why they should not dismiss a case made by black women, just because the employer did hire blacks who were men and women who were white, well, that's what the tool was designed to do. If it works, great. If it doesn't work, it's not like you have to use this concept.

The other issue is that intersectionality can get used as a blanket term to mean, "Well, it's complicated." Sometimes, "It's complicated" is an excuse not to do anything. (Kimberle Crenshaw, Columbia Law School blog)