

# Flipping the Script on Intersectionality



IN MAY 2021, nearly a dozen Princeton students—Jewish Americans living in Israel while attending Princeton classes remotely—hid in bomb shelters amid a flurry of rockets from Gaza. Shaken by the unfamiliar violence, some thought of turning to the University Health Services (UHS) for support. Such support, however, was apparently not for them: UHS had posted a public statement on social media offering resources for those hurting from the “suffering and pain occurring around the world, including the violence occurring in Palestine.”

When queried about the apparent exclusion of Jews and Israelis from their statement, the UHS director affirmed the students’ fears: Jews were being excluded because of their alleged privilege, even as rockets targeting civilians literally rained down on their heads. “Our role as...counselors is to support all students while at the same time actively supporting students who are marginalized

by systems of power and oppression,” the UHS outreach counselor wrote, grotesquely prioritizing certain groups of sufferers. Having your life threatened doesn’t rate if you’re a Jew on the wrong side of the American college-campus hierarchy.

For these Jewish Princetonians and for Zionist college students across America, this kind of treatment has become commonplace. We exist under a new, potent ideology that distorts reality and holds immense sway on college campuses: intersectionality.



Originally posited as a theory for understanding the ways multiple categories of identity-based oppression can intersect within a person or a group, intersectionality has mutated on campuses and activist movements into an ideology that splits politics into a two-tribe sport of the privileged and oppressed. The categories are defined simplistically. On one side are heterosexuals, males, and those born with the same pigmentation as historical oppressors (i.e., whites)—also, it turns out, anyone whose opinions do not align with the theory. On the other side is everyone else. All “oppression” is assumed to be rooted in the same political, sociological, and psychological power dynamics.

Privilege conferred through traits such as wealth or religion, though, are only subplots to the primary drivers: politics and race. For while Karl Marx’s Communism permitted a member of the proletariat to become a member of the bourgeoisie, intersectionality treats an individual as immutably bound to his origins. Hispanic conservatives and Asians protesting discrimination in education are accused of being coopted by their oppressors instead of capable of intellectual (or political) agency. Class, too, takes a back seat: Impoverished whites caught in cycles of poverty and in the throes of the opioid crisis are still “privileged” on account of their race; none of their other struggles matter.

Intersectionality demands that an individual “ally” with all of

the other ostensibly oppressed groups. “Communities of color” must stand up against privileged white people, in concert with one another, to prevent white oppressors from maintaining supremacy over fractured minority groups.

If this all sounds fantastical or like a strawman, I suggest spending a day on an American college campus speaking to university administrators or sociology majors. Intersectionality was concocted in the ivory towers of elite universities, and it has successfully spread to every aspect of the college experience.

Where do Jews fit in? If, once, Jews were capitalists to the Communists, now Jews are white and privileged to the intersectionalists. A rudimentary knowledge of history would reveal the absurdity of this notion. But it is precisely the misalignment of the Jews’ historical and current conditions that disrupts the intersectional binary.

Ever since Jews were exiled from the Land of Israel, they have lived as oppressed minorities. The identification of Jews as “privileged” in the current schematic rests on an ignorant extrapolation of a few anomalous elements of the contemporary Jewish condition. Israel, the young nation-state of the Jewish people, has managed to succeed despite all efforts to destroy it and now boasts a flourishing economy and mighty military. And although American Jews are still disproportionately victims of hate crimes, and while antisemitism has left an indelible impact on American Jewry, Jews disproportionately constitute the highest rungs of American business, academia, politics, and media. Most significantly, because so many American Jews are descendants of a persecuted *European* minority, American Jews are now deemed to be “white-passing,” which trumps any other factor.

Intersectionality leaves no room for the complexity of the Jewish condition; Jews are, simply, privileged. As intersectionality functions on American college campuses, such a designation yields anything but a genuinely privileged place in the campus hierarchy. Like white Americans, political conservatives, religious

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people, and heterosexual males, proud Jews are regarded as fundamentally sinful. Their perspective is unwelcome on controversial issues where reasonable minds might disagree, unless they are actively apologizing for their immutable characteristics or supporting progressive policies. They are expected to publicly declare their “anti-racism” according to its contemporary political definition, or else be complicit in oppression. In the Jewish case, “privilege” licenses polite society to excuse blatant antisemitism and excludes Jews from student groups, especially under the guise of anti-Zionism.

Yesterday, Jews were mocked for being oppressed; today, Jews are denigrated for being successful. We have lost the political lottery once again.

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Jews on campus tend to fall into three camps relative to intersectionality: those who accept the framework and try to win favor through self-degradation; those who accept it but try to place themselves into the “oppressed” category; and those who reject the ideology absolutely. Each of these strategies is morally problematic and doomed to fail.

Jews who seek to work within the intersectional framework cede crucial moral ground and, frankly, fight for something not

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worth fighting for. The *apologetic position* insists that if Jews confess their sins, then they can win forgiveness. This group harps on Jewish (really, Israeli) faults as a way of demonstrating their enlightened sensibilities. Dara Horn calls them the “cool Jews.” They host “Breaking the Silence” events and hold innumerable lectures exclusively focused on false notions of Israeli “settler colonialism,” “genocide,” and “apartheid.” Sometimes, their points veer into outright anti-Zionism, and their selective presentation of Israel too often crafts a narrative for anti-Israel activism. They dump Jewish pride for Jewish self-criticism.

The other group that works within the system takes a *victim position*. They accept the intersectional binary but revolt against their placement in it. Per the historian Salo Baron, they support a lachrymose conception of Jewish life, and just as Baron argued, their focus on the low points of Jewish history weakens the Jewish people and its understanding of itself. They spotlight the existential threats posed to Israel and to Jews worldwide, paying no more attention to the country’s strengths and miracles than does the first group. Jewish pride is here replaced with Jewish victimization.

The Jews who hold themselves up as proof of intersectionality’s incoherence take a different approach—the *critical position*. This group, too, labors under a misunderstanding. Intersectionality is an outgrowth of 20th-century critical theory, and it functions on campus as an ideology that philosopher Karl Popper would label “unfalsifiable.” No matter how strong a case is made that

the complexity of the Jewish condition refutes the validity of the black-and-white framework, proponents of intersectional ideology will not be convinced. Moreover, too often, this critical position concedes the basic tenets of intersectionality but asks for a Jewish “exception” to it, jilting other “privileged” groups. “We might look like those white people, but we’re not like them” is an ugly argument that will fail to convince fellow Jews, let alone anti-Zionist activists.

In addition to their inherent problems, each of these strategies is also futile on the college campus. They all try to exist outside the formalized intersectional framework, either attempting to reorder the social hierarchies or to reject the system outright. But intersectionality has already triumphed on campus. The system cannot be dismantled. If Zionists hope to stay relevant and build allies in this brave new world, we must accept that the battle is not being fought on our own turf.

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I propose a new strategy for confronting intersectionality: tactically embracing it. Whether justly assigned or not, we Jews must accept our place in their model, or our arguments will be completely written off. We must make arguments on the prevailing ideology’s terms, stop chasing after the groups that vilify us, find new friends and allies among those we are lumped in with, and double down on our uniqueness. “We are what we are, we are good for ourselves, we will not change, nor do we want to,” wrote Ze’ev Jabotinsky.

While not ignoring the real oppression that Jews have experienced and, in some cases, continue to face, we should not shy from celebrating our accomplishments. Israel is a magnanimous, successful state (in spite of its internal and external challenges), offering its services and resources to struggling peoples around the globe. Jewish Americans are blessed to have thrived (in spite

of antisemitism, past and present), including through high levels of engagement with American civic and philanthropic life. Where we can use our “privilege”—our strengths, our assets, our blessings—to do good for ourselves and for others, we have done so and ought to continue to do so.

We can also join with our intersectional “bedfellows”: political conservatives, religious people, and other groups, such as Asian Americans, that find themselves, often bizarrely, locked into privileged status. Good luck trying to convince any “marginalized” individuals to break with their intersectional communities. Our “privileged” tribal brothers will be our best bet at making allies. In turn, we should stand up for them when they are unfairly attacked or discriminated against. If we are going to be designated as privileged, we might as well take stock of the new possible allies this affords.

Consider how this new approach might manifest in a response to a campus BDS vote. Jewish groups have tended to argue that BDS marginalizes an already marginalized group and seeks the collapse of the vulnerable Jewish state. These arguments are non-starters with the intersectional mob, as we have seen on campuses time and time again. The idea that Israel should draw sympathy as an “oppressed” entity is scoffed at. Jewish groups, then, ought to argue from a different angle: They should own Israel’s successes and strengths. BDS is wrong because Israel is a fundamentally *good* project and is being unfairly targeted. Stop apologizing for and victimizing the Jews, and stand on the side of justice—real justice—based on fact, history, context, and fairness. This is an argument that will sidestep intellectually lazy intersectionalists and appeal to those who are similarly subject to unfair characterizations. This latter group is our natural ally; it is the audience we need to reach in moments when we need friends. This is our winning path forward.

It may well be that this new strategy won’t open University Health Services to Jewish or Israeli students in need, but neither

will the other three strategies. It will, however, empower Jewish students to stand with their heads held high and make new friends. Intersectionality is dominant on American college campuses, but that does not mean that it needs to dominate us. Jewish students can accept our position in the privileged/oppressed divide, look around, and hold our friends close—embracing who we are and what we have to offer. For our own good, we cannot continue submitting to regressive conceptions of morality. \*