Academia, Racial, and Social Justice, and Abrahamic Coexistence

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As I write this essay reflecting on Dr Atalia Omer’s brilliant, and deeply principled, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians*, a petition is circulating among academics that touches on issues at the heart of Omer’s book. Over 600 scholars of Jewish and/or Israeli Studies have now signed the petition in support of Dr Liora Halperin, Associate Professor of International Studies, History, and Jewish Studies at the University of Washington. This came after news broke that the University of Washington had stripped Halperin of her endowed Chair in Israel Studies, as a result of objections from a right-wing donor. This donor expressed disapproval of Halperin’s critiques of the Israeli state, and therefore pressed for the return of the five million dollars she had provided for the Chair. Fortunately, Halperin retains her tenured professorship, and will continue her outstanding research, teaching, and service. But her allies insist that the university must honor the commitment they made to her chair and the resources that came with it.

This recent major controversy within the Jewish and Israel Studies worlds is merely the latest among a long history. Consider a different case from December 2020. *The Forward* (formerly known as the *Jewish Daily Forward*) reported on the standoff between Dr Marc Dollinger, Professor of Jewish Studies at San Francisco State University, and Brandeis University Press. After the murder of George Floyd earlier that year, Dollinger wrote an updated preface for his 2018 book, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s*. The preface included Dollinger’s statement on the increasing integration of white Jewish-American citizens in the United States and their consciousness of how that “reinforced elements of white supremacy in their own lived experience”. Brandeis University Press then received complaints about Dollinger’s words, and engaged the author so that he could edit the preface in order to print the new edition. He declined out of principle and the two parties decided to part ways, with Dollinger seeking a different publisher for his widely read book.

While these cases are high-profile and visible, and many are not, Halperin and Dollinger’s experiences are nonetheless emblematic of the pressures that
scholars of Judaism and/or Israel/Palestine in the American academy face. There are pressures from both within academic institutions and beyond to conform to hegemonic discourses on race and power. Even the most well-documented, nuanced, and sensitive explications of the complexities of Jewish subjectivities, in the past and present, face suspicion and policing, including against scholars like Halperin and Dollinger, who themselves are grounded in their own Jewish backgrounds and identities.

Given this fraught landscape, where do we, both intellectuals and civil society actors who are connected to Jewish, Palestinian, and Black communities, in the United States and in Israel/Palestine, go from here? *Days of Awe*, published in 2019, with immense reverberations ever since, provides us with invaluable answers. Omer’s positionality as a leading scholar, and as a Jewish-Israeli now living in the American diaspora, can speak with significant authority. Yet what makes her voice so unique and powerful is its clarity and courage. Omer recognizes Jewish vulnerability and experiences with antisemitism. She also recognizes the systems of domination that the Israeli state maintains, the Christian and Jewish enablers of that system in the United States and Israel, and how this connects to white privilege.

Omer also centers the experiences of the Palestinian people, who individually and collectively have had to bear the brunt of this oppression for over seventy years, as racialized and colonized subjects. She uplifts Palestinian resilience and resistance, while holding on to hope from the examples set by non-Zionist or anti-Zionist Jewish activists in the US (and to some extent in Israel/Palestine) who are deeply committed to Palestinian liberation. Omer amplifies the urgency of Palestinian and Black American pleas for solidarity and the Jewish tradition which enables individuals like herself, Dollinger, and Halperin to respond accordingly. It is faith-based embodied practices outside of the ivory tower where Omer focuses most of her attention in the book, whether shedding light on her non-Zionist synagogue in Chicago, or on the Jewish youth activists of If Not Now and Jewish Voice for Peace. Moreover, she lauds Jewish protests in Palestine as the Center for Jewish Nonviolence delegations continue to put their bodies on the line alongside Palestinians facing Israeli military occupation.

One could argue that we are saturated in academia and activist circles with research and discourses on Israel/Palestine. Yet *Days of Awe* is not only invaluable but indispensable. It is an archive of contemporary Jewish-Palestinian solidarity and a comprehensive resource on Jewish engagement that is so often suppressed and erased from the mainstream. Omer’s naming of hegemony and counter-hegemony, coupled with her book’s academic rigor, and its rootedness in the praxis of people on-the-ground at the grassroots level, is what makes it such a tour de force. Without attention to Omer’s analysis, our knowledge of Jewish
religio-political answers to the question of Israel/Palestine, and the related question of race in America, would be anemic.

One could also argue that we are saturated in academia and activist circles with research and discourses on intersectionality. Yet *Days of Awe* not only explicates the fundamental importance of intersectionality as a central modality of solidarity, but also reveals how interdisciplinary scholarship is critical to understanding the interconnectedness of humanity. In that way, Omer’s work demonstrates, through its sophisticated theoretical orientations, and its compelling and rich empirical data, how interdisciplinary scholarship is needed to discern the intersectionality of our lives, thus representing the best of intersectional and interdisciplinary research. This is not surprising given Omer’s doctoral training at Harvard at the nexus of religion, ethics, and politics, her tenured appointment at Notre Dame with a title combining religion, conflict, and peace studies, and this book being positioned for the fields of religion, violence, and peacebuilding (RVP) and religion and peacebuilding (RPB). As a result, this book is able to speak, with original insights, to scholars from so many domains, including peace and conflict studies, religious studies, Jewish Studies, Israel/Palestine Studies, Black Studies, postcolonial studies, sociology, anthropology, political science, and gender and sexuality studies.

One could, moreover, argue that we are saturated in academic and activist circles with research and discourses on decolonization. Yet juxtaposing texts that invoke decolonization as a mere platitude with *Days of Awe* reveals the overwhelming difference between the former and latter. Omer is invested in not only decolonizing our intellectual and political imaginations as scholars, but also in connecting the academic world to the pragmatics of everyday anti-colonial social justice work. Her ideas are grounded in the examples set by Palestinian and Black thinkers, from Edward Said to James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Frantz Fanon, and Cornel West, while also acknowledging Black and Palestinian activists in the present, from the BDS movement to Black Lives Matter and beyond. At the same time, *Days of Awe* approaches decolonization from a spiritual lens that is firmly empathetic, humanist, universalist, and Jewish. Omer walks the reader through Jewish rituals, liturgy, and ideas that are beautiful inspirations for the realization of solidarities across so many lines of difference, whether Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, Black, White, American, Israeli, Palestinian, or Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. I was particularly struck by Omer’s invocation of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s call for Jewish religious institutions to “interpret a Civil Rights movement in terms of Judaism”. Omer’s response is profound, namely that Palestine solidarity “offers the space for precisely such an opportunity” (Omer 2019: 123).

About a decade ago, during graduate school, I served as a lecturer in the Peace and Justice Studies program at Tufts University. The Jewish Voice for Peace student chapter there invited me to join them for a Passover seder. That
evening, they devoted the rituals and traditions to pray for Palestinian freedom. As a Palestinian, listening to the Hebrew rolling off their tongues and breaking bread together taught me the power of genuine solidarity. It was one of the most spiritually transcendent moments of my life. As I looked at these thirty-five Jewish souls, representing the future of their diaspora communities, I have often wondered when an academic text would be born to capture the religious and political trends that we continue to witness. And then, *Days of Awe* came to life. Atalia Omer has done a tremendous service to all of us who care deeply about the academy, racial and social justice, and about Abrahamic coexistence.

**References**
