Beyond the Checklist: Using the "4 I's" Framework for LGBTQ+ Belonging in Jewish Communities

We are living in a moment of intensifying hostility toward LGBTQ+ people. Across the country LGBTQ+ individuals face harmful legislation, cultural backlash, and threats to their dignity, safety, and basic human rights. In response, many Jewish communities are asking a vital question: How can we better support and affirm LGBTQ+ people in our institutions?

At Keshet, we're encouraged by this surge of interest — but we also caution against quick fixes. Often, communities seek out a checklist of actions to become more inclusive. While checklists can help organizations and leaders identify gaps and opportunities, checklists can fall short when they are the only or main tool for change. They often reduce the complexity of inclusion to surface-level tasks and miss the deeper cultural work that true belonging requires. More than adopting pronoun stickers or updating a form (which are both fabulous steps to take!), belonging means addressing the deeper beliefs, norms, and systems that shape our communities.

When we train and educate Jewish institutions, we offer a framework, not a checklist — one that helps communities dig beneath the surface to foster meaningful, lasting change.

Moving from Surface to Systemic: The 4 I's of Oppression

To guide this deeper work, we draw on the 4 I's of Oppression, a framework articulated by Cheyenne E. Batista. This tool helps communities understand how barriers to belonging often operate across multiple levels simultaneously — and how to respond with clarity and purpose. This framework has relevance to many kinds of equity work, and is being presented here with an emphasis on how it can be applied to LGBTQ+ belonging.

This framework starts by understanding how oppression functions at various (usually overlapping levels). We can apply it to specific systems and incidents to better "diagnose" a barrier or challenge. We can use it to identify tools for change that address the layer/s of oppression at play in a specific situation. We can also deliberately use this framework to think about taking proactive steps across various levels to build cultures of belonging and dignity.

1. Ideological

These are the foundational beliefs or ideas in a society that suggest that certain identities or expressions are more "normal," "valuable," or "deserving" than others. In many cases, these ideologies go unspoken — but they still shape behavior and decision-making.

- For example, a person or community might explicitly believe that being straight or cisgender is "right" while ascribing moral "wrong" to being LGBTQ+, or cite certain Jewish texts to argue that Judaism/religion as a whole opposes being LGBTQ+.
- Or they might never state these ideas explicitly, but relate to straightness or cisgender identities as a "norm" while thinking of LGBTQ+ identities as "less usual" or not thinking of them at all.
- Conversely, many individuals and organizations actively believe that being LGBTQ+ is a part of human diversity, and is positive, sacred, and good, and that communities are at their strongest when LGBTQ+ members (and all members) can show up with dignity and bring their unique perspectives, insights, and strengths to the table.
- When encountering barriers with ideological roots, we counter them by ideologically affirming LGBTQ+ dignity and cultivating communities of respect and mutual care.

2. Institutional

These include the policies, practices, and norms of an organization that result in unequal outcomes or experiences for LGBTQ+ individuals. Dress codes, hiring practices, signage, and forms are all examples of institutional structures that can either reinforce exclusion or promote belonging.

- For example, in an organization where volunteer leadership roles are most commonly attained through a "men's group" or "women's group," nonbinary members are likely to find fewer opportunities for such leadership. In a school with only "boys" and "girls" restrooms or that limits access to restrooms based on sex assigned at birth, nonbinary and some transgender students might find their learning and sense of safety overshadowed by barriers to meeting basic physical needs.
- Other times, the institutional barriers can be part of a cascading effect. For example, in workplaces with strictly gendered (and binary) dress codes, many employees with less stereotypical gender presentation might find themselves facing explicit barriers related to the dress code, or may find themselves implicitly and interpersonally left out.
- All institutions are built with a "default user" in mind. When thinking about how things are done, we can ask ourselves "Who is this built for? How well does it work? Is there anyone whose access is not being addressed right now?"
- By pausing to think about the wide variety of stakeholders in our communities, we can adjust our structures to promote equity rather than unequal outcomes.

3. Interpersonal

These are the everyday interactions — comments, microaggressions, or behaviors — that communicate exclusion, discomfort, or bias. They often emerge from unexamined ideologies or internalized beliefs.

- For example, people may make negative comments to or about members of the LGBTQ+ community, either intentionally or out of lack of understanding. These comments are hurtful, and directly impact the experience of LGBTQ+ people in any space.
- Less explicit interpersonal interactions can also have an impact. For example, in a workplace a supervisor might "just feel less comfortable" around a supervisee with identities unlike their own. This intangible sense of distance or difference can have very tangible impacts on a person's access to stretch projects, promotions, and opportunities.
- We can all directly control our own interpersonal actions, take a moment to reflect before speaking, and do our best. We can also intervene when we witness someone mistreating another — even more so when we hold positions of power or communal sway.
- Even though we cannot always prevent interpersonal harm, modeling and expecting respectful and appropriate interpersonal behavior can help set communal norms and practices that minimize negative behavior and normalize learning and repair when mistakes happen.

4. Internal/Internalized

This reflects the psychological and emotional toll of navigating a world that marginalizes LGBTQ+ identities. LGBTQ+ individuals may internalize negative messages about their worth or safety, which can affect how they show up in community life.

- For example, some professional studies show that members of communities who face routine discrimination in a given field are shown to self-select out of that field, removing talent from the field at large.
- Some people may internalize negative stereotypes about their communities by policing their own behavior, expending effort to distance themselves from these stereotypes, or may even re-enact oppressive behaviors towards other members of their communities.
- No one can truly work through another person's internalized experiences. However, we can be supportive, empathetic, and caring, and create communities in which oppression is addressed and avoided.

Why This Framework Matters

Barriers to LGBTQ+ belonging rarely occur on just one level. Most often, they're the result of overlapping dynamics. And just as oppression operates on multiple levels, so must our strategies for change. Using the 4 I's framework, organizations can:

- Respond more effectively to incidents of harm or exclusion.
- Understand the broader context behind interpersonal issues.
- Create institutional policies that are rooted in equity, not just optics.
- Foster a culture where LGBTQ+ people can truly thrive.

From Theory to Practice: Utilizing the Framework

Example 1

A new employee who is nonbinary shares that their supervisor keeps commenting that they should "dress more professionally" — and from the context, these comments strongly imply "more like a woman."

- **At the Interpersonal Level:** The comments are a form of gender-based microaggression — even though the gendered implications may be implicit and the supervisor may not understand it as such.
- **Ideological:** The comments reflect a belief in binary gender norms as "professional" and/or a belief that this person's gender is somehow less real.
- **Institutional:** Is there a dress code that reinforces gendered expectations? Are there required trainings and resources about equity in supervision that could equip this supervisor to act differently? Are there meaningful structures for employees faced with interactions like these to seek relief?

Potential Actions: Address the comment and the pattern in real time. And work to Don't just address the comment. surface the assumptions behind what "professional dress" means, ensure that supervisors have training and tools to supervise across lines of difference, and review dress code and other relevant policies.

Example 2

Your organization updates two single-user restrooms to be all-gender. The next day, a donor calls, upset by the change and accusing your organization of "getting too political".

- **At the Institutional Level:** The change is a step toward structural inclusion! Many people, including nonbinary and some transgender people, as well as people requiring assistance in the restroom, those who need the additional privacy afforded by a single-stall space, and many others, can benefit from this change.
- **Interpersonal:** This structural change can also offer a layer of protection from some of the interpersonal aggression and harassment that transgender and nonbinary people too often experience in restrooms. The pushback you are receiving is also interpersonal and direct — and you can use interpersonal tools to navigate this conversation. You may learn that there are considerations you had not considered that you can take into account and make this change even stronger (for example, it might reveal anxiety about a shortage of accessible bathroom stalls that can be addressed, concerns about where in the building these restrooms are, etc).
- **Ideological:** The donor may hold beliefs about gender that see this change as a threat. You may not now (or even over the long term) change this one donor's ideological commitments, and that is OK. You can share the values that inform this change, listen to where this donor is coming from, and come to an understanding of what it means to continue to be in community together even if you disagree.

Potential Action: Prepare your community for change by explaining not just what you're doing, but why. Explain how steps that you are taking align with the values and mission of your organization and the many benefits that you see these changes bringing. Offer a clear and compelling vision of what you are hoping to accomplish. If individuals express anxiety or even disapproval, engage them in a relational conversation without jeopardizing the needed change.

Belonging is not a destination — it's a process. The 4 I's framework can help us move beyond reactive strategies and into sustained, thoughtful action. By recognizing how ideology, interpersonal dynamics, institutions, and internalization interact, Jewish communities can more fully live out our values of justice, compassion, and LGBTQ+ safety and dignity at a moment when those things are desperately needed