

Indigenous Land Acknowledgement

A Drash by Rabbi Kunitz

During the last weeks our Torah has focused on the lives of our patriarchs and matriarchs, as they wandered largely up and down the Promised Land, then called Canaan. This land, promised by God, was to be the homeland and focus of Jews for the next four thousand years. Interestingly, the rabbis note that among our patriarchs, Isaac along with Rebecca were notable as the only ones who never left what was to be the land of Israel. From that time to now, even during our long exile and diaspora we have always looked back to the land, with longing to return to our ancient home. We have also demanded that the world recognize our ancient connection, and our desire to rebuild Zion. We also continue to echo “Never Again” as we remember the Holocaust and other genocides, demanding that they not be forgotten, and that such events never happen in the future.

These thoughts were at the center of my mind as I began to consider our Thanksgiving observance this year. Like Columbus Day, the events commemorated are not without controversy. While the Pilgrims and Wampanoag may have celebrated 400 years ago, it is clear that for the First Nations (the indigenous people of North America) the next 400 years were a period of mourning and dispossession. These years were a period of genocide, almost continued persecution and many forced migrations. I was also reminded that as we celebrate, we too sit on the traditional lands of the Onondaga Nation.

Yet, there is a way to pay respect and acknowledge the original possessors of the lands of North America. While living in Canada, and also while attending conferences and events in Australia there were consistent reminders of the First People (the term that Canadians use for the indigenous peoples of North America). Every major civic and communal event, be it a performance, speech, conference, gala dinner or political convention began with a “Land Acknowledgement,” a formal statement that pays tribute to the original inhabitants of the land. The purpose of these statements is to show respect for First People and recognize their enduring relationship to the land. Practicing acknowledgment can also raise awareness about histories that are often suppressed or forgotten.

Currently, SUNY Oswego utilizes the following language, “The State University of New York at Oswego would like to recognize with respect the Onondaga Nation, the “people of the hills,” or central firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Indigenous peoples on whose ancestral lands SUNY Oswego now stands.” SU also utilizes similar language, “The Syracuse University College of Arts and Sciences would like to acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee, the indigenous peoples on whose ancestral lands Syracuse University now stands.”

Such acknowledgements also ask each of us to confront what it means to live in a post-colonial world. What did it take for us to get here, and how can we work to redress the past and work for reconciliation in the present? It is, therefore, my hope that our synagogue community will consider adopting such an acknowledgement for our major events (not our weekly services) throughout the year. I would also hope that we could add it to our website. I also hope that this can be a first step in building strong relations with members of the Onondaga nation, as together we work to create a fairer and more inclusive vision of America for the future.

Notes

By now, many know that the colonization myth we learned in school doesn't tell the whole story of how the Americas were settled. In 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue, but what he discovered was not a "New World" — it was one inhabited by millions of indigenous people.

Living in villages, bands, and confederacies, their traditional territories spanned the entire continent. Indigenous people still live among us, yet how many of us could name the specific tribe or nation whose land we live on?

In Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, it's harder and harder to not be aware. That's because school days and meetings — and even hockey games — often begin with a "land acknowledgment," a formal statement that pays tribute to the original inhabitants of the land. Indigenous peoples have acknowledged one another's lands for centuries, but in the past decade, some Western governments have begun to promote the practice. An acknowledgment might be short: "This event is taking place on traditional Chickasaw land." Or it might be longer and more specific: "We are gathered today on the occupied territory of the Musqueam people, who have stewarded this land for generations."

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To recognize the land is an expression of gratitude and appreciation to those whose territory you reside on, and a way of honoring the Indigenous people who have been living and working on the land from time immemorial. It is important to understand the long standing history that has brought you to reside on the land, and to seek to understand your place within that history. Land acknowledgments do not exist in a past tense, or historical context: colonialism is a current ongoing process, and we need to build our mindfulness of our present participation. It is also worth noting that acknowledging the land is Indigenous protocol.

The acknowledgment process is about asking, What does it mean to live in a post-colonial world? What did it take for us to get here? And how can we be accountable to our part in history?

Offer your acknowledgment as the first element of a welcome to the next public gathering or event that you host. If . . . you've built relationships with members of Native communities, consider inviting them to give a welcome before yours . . .

Acknowledgment should be approached not as a set of obligatory words to rush through. Consider your own place in the story of colonization and of undoing its legacy. Contrary to the way it's framed in textbooks, colonization is an ongoing process. Indigenous people are still here, and their lands are still occupied. In learning to acknowledge this, we can take a first step on the long road toward reconciliation.