

Yom Kippur 5782  
Rabbi Carey Brown

One of the most affirming things I have been able to do this summer is officiate weddings again. I empathize so deeply with the many couples who have postponed and postponed their weddings because of this pandemic. The ability to gather family and friends together for a simcha has been really something to celebrate.

The most recent wedding I officiated was just a few weeks ago for a wonderful couple, Ma'ayan and Aaron. In the course of our preparatory meetings, they approached me with a request. They wanted to know if I would be comfortable including an Indigenous land acknowledgement in the text of their ketubah.

As I thought about it and went back to study some of the traditions around ketubot in Jewish law, I realized that it was not at all an incompatible idea. After all, the rabbis teach that it is important for the ketubah to be specific in its details to make sure that the identities of both partners are easy to confirm. For example, some ketubot include all of the nicknames, or other monikers by which a person is known. Other ketubot include in addition to the name of the location of the wedding, a reference to any specific geographic features that might help identify it,

such as a nearby mountain or river. In that spirit, acknowledging the many ways in which this land is called, is not so far removed from the intentions of the rabbis. I don't know if theirs was the first ketubah in Vancouver to include such language, but in any event, I found it to be a meaningful acknowledgement and I'm grateful to Ma'ayan and Aaron for suggesting it.

Though Land Acknowledgements have become quite commonplace in Canadian society over the past five years or so, our work on reconciliation and in the pursuit of justice for the Indigenous peoples of this land remains unfinished. It was this summer's news of the discovery of the unmarked graves of more than 1500 children on the grounds of residential schools that shook many of us to the core. For us at the shul, the announcement of the discoveries in Kamloops was the impetus that caused us to write a new prayer for Canada that you heard in our Torah service this morning:

We acknowledge and express gratitude for the land on which we live,  
pray and serve our community which is the traditional, ancestral and  
unceded territory of the Coast Salish People whose presence here  
reaches back to time immemorial.

We are grateful to have the opportunity to freely worship on this territory, and we ask your blessings upon it, and upon us— and let us say: Amen

The discovery of those graves caused us to look once again to the painful truth of Canada's history. As Jews, we know too well the trauma of unmarked graves, of generations lost to genocide. There is no doubt in my mind that Canada is in so many ways an exceptional and remarkable country. Certainly, for us as Jews, we have found a home which may be the safest and most welcoming place to be a Jew anywhere, in any time. I think it is important for us to be able to hold two truths at once: We can at the same time be grateful for the tremendous opportunities that Canada has provided for us and be critical of the depth of the moral stain of Canada's history with its First Nations. And within that paradox, we sit with discomfort, recognizing that our opportunities and successes were built upon the remnants of someone else's oppression.

It is easy for us as Jews to say that the repercussions of residential schools are the churches' problem to deal with. Or that it is up to the federal government to take care of this. But each of us as citizens and residents of this country are also responsible, even if our families were not even living in this country when these

horrific acts were sanctioned and perpetrated. As one of the most inspirational voices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, taught us, “In a free society, some are guilty; all are responsible.” That is the call of our day. We are all responsible.

My responsibility extends beyond the things I do or say, and includes the things I do *not* do, and do *not* say. If I participate in community and ignore its faults and injustices, *I* am responsible.

The prayers of Yom Kippur hammer this point home. Today we are asked to confess sins we didn’t commit. In the Al Cheyt, in the Ashamnu, and in the Vidui, we confess in the collective for the things that we, that all of us have done.

עַל חֵטָא שֶׁחֲטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ

We have sinned against you by taking bribes

עַל חֵטָא שֶׁחֲטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ

We have sinned against you by resorting to violence

עַל חֵטָא שֶׁחֲטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ

We have sinned against you through baseless hatred

Even if I have not taken a bribe, I beat my chest. Even if I have not resorted to violence, I beat my chest. Even I have not been hateful, I beat my chest.

Why?

Because my community *has* taken bribes. My community *has* done violence. My community *has* been hateful.

And I am responsible for my community. I am responsible for the times I looked away. I am responsible for my silence. I am responsible.

In the Mishneh Torah<sup>1</sup>, the Rambam writes that we are judged by God not only as individuals but collectively as well. Countries are to be judged too; their collective sins weighed against their merits. At first glance, such a thing does not appear to be fair, for what country in the world can claim to be truly righteous? If so, some sort of collective teshuva is our only option, yet the Rambam gives us little guidance on how this is to take place and we are left wondering if and how a country is supposed to repent and repair its wrongs.

Yet, there is a place in our tradition that presents us with a roadmap for collective teshuva (repentance). It involves the repentance of an entire city and that city is Nineveh, which we will visit this afternoon as we read the Book of Jonah.

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<sup>1</sup> Mishnah Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:1

A quick recap: Jonah was told by God to go to Nineveh to tell the people to repent for their wicked ways. Jonah didn't want to do it. Afterall, it's hard to get one person, let alone a whole city, to repent. So he fled to Tarshish on a boat. After a terrible storm came upon the boat, the sailors discovered it was Jonah who was the source of God's anger that had brought a tempest upon them. Jonah was thrown overboard and swallowed by a giant fish. Jonah did his own teshuva inside that fish and came to some self-actualization:

Jonah realized he was swallowed by the fish because he was running away from his responsibility for *others*. He did not create the sins of Nineveh: he didn't even live there! It wasn't *his* fault that they behaved so terribly.

But it *was* his fault that he chose to be silent. It *was* his fault that he stepped back instead of stepping up. It *was* his fault that in his fear of being "uncomfortable," he turned away from injustice and said nothing.

When he was called once again by God to go to Nineveh and tell the people to repent, Jonah went and it worked! The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. (Jonah 3:5) Even the

King of Nineveh, himself, rose from his throne and put on the sackcloth and ashes. The people did it. God saw what they did and forgave them.

The rabbis wondered, however, about the sincerity of the repentance of the people of Nineveh. They asked, was theirs a deep or a shallow repentance? In the Talmud<sup>2</sup>, there is a disagreement among the rabbis about the teshuva that took place in Nineveh.

One rabbi, Shmuel, says that the people's teshuva was thorough and genuine. He says that it's right there in the text! God saw what they did, how the people had turned from their evil ways, and God forgave them (Jonah 3:10). It was through the acts of their very hands that Shmuel was sure that the teshuva was the real deal. He shares a midrash to make his point:

The king of Nineveh proclaimed: **Even if one stole a beam and built it into his building, he must tear down the entire building and return the beam to its owner.**

That is to say, even though the law might say that such a person only would need to pay restitution for the cost of the beam, the people of Nineveh wanted to repent

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<sup>2</sup> BT, Taanit 16a

so completely, that they were sure to remove any remnant of stolen property from their possession. It's not that God saw their sackcloth and ashes and gave them atonement, but rather that God saw their deeds, that they had turned, and forgave them. For Shmuel, the repentance wasn't about symbolism, but real change.

Another rabbi, however, didn't think as highly as the people of Nineveh as our friend, Shmuel. This rabbi, Adda bar Ahava, saw their repentance as being cursory and superficial. He compares the Ninevites to a person who goes into a mikveh, the ritual bath for spiritual purification, holding treif, a non-kosher creepy-crawly, in their hand (*tovel v'sheretz b'yado*). Rabbi Adda bar Ahava continues, **even if he immerses in all the waters of the world, his immersion is ineffective for him**, as long as the source of ritual impurity remains in his hand. However, if he has **thrown the animal from his hand, once he has immersed in** a ritual bath of the bare minimum amount of water required for a mikveh (**forty se'a**), **the immersion is immediately effective for him.**

These two ancient rabbis' ideas about deep vs. shallow teshuva are so relevant to our nation today. Canada feels a bit like Nineveh – a little bit in the middle waters between deep and shallow. We have begun to walk through a process of collective repentance; having placed our flags at half-staff, cried at the memorials of the



shoes and children's toys, introduced land acknowledgements in our meetings and Shabbat services and governmental briefings. This is all lovely symbolism, but it is incumbent upon us not to let things lie at the symbolic level. Rather, we must strive to achieve real reconciliation, a real deep teshuva like Shmuel's interpretation, that leads to true change.

Rabbi Adda bar Ahava gives us a prescription – when our repentance feels stuck at the surface, we must commit to throw that treif out of our hands. Let go of the scourge of the systemic injustice of which we have all been the beneficiaries. If we are still holding on to the way of engaging in our nation that ignores or suppresses Indigenous voices, then we are not really doing more than paying lip service with the gestures that we engage in. We must ask ourselves: what are we still holding in our hands? And how do we release our grip upon it?

Rabbi Donniel Hartman explains, “Yom Kippur is the ultimate expression of the belief that as human beings we are endowed with free will, with the freedom to shape our lives; to transcend past mistakes and build a better future... It is a process of self-empowerment, of learning from the past, so that you can move forward toward who you imagine your highest self to be. Our challenge is to use this gift of Yom Kippur as a lens on our lives both as individuals and as societies. As we

look to our individual and collective past, it is not about blaming ourselves or others... Mistakes are inevitable. The purpose of looking back is not to try to replay the past or to judge, but to try to learn from it and grow. Yom Kippur challenges us to ask a simple question: What can we do?”<sup>3</sup>

In a few weeks, on Sept 30, we will observe and acknowledge this country’s first National Day of Truth and Reconciliation. Just as we do for Remembrance Day in November, we need to determine a way to make this a true day of reflection, of listening and learning. Here are a few ideas to help us move forward in this process:

First, take time to learn – There are incredible online resources for learning, including the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on the history of Indigenous Canada offered by the University of Alberta. The actor Dan Levy has used his social media platform to promote it and share some of his learning from his participation. Over 300,000 people have already enrolled and learned from this free course.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hartman.org.il/no-32-yom-kippur-9-11-and-the-mistakes-of-the-past/>

I know many of you have seen the film or read the book “Indian Horse.” We ran a discussion on the film last November with Chief Dr. Robert Joseph, Ambassador for Reconciliation Canada and the former Executive Director of the Indian Residential School Survivors Society. That discussion between Rabbi Dan and Chief Joseph is still available to watch on our Temple Sholom YouTube [page](#).

I was deeply moved reading the recently published book “Five Little Indians,” by author Michelle Good. Her novel tells the story of 5 children who were taken from their homes and sent to residential schools and what becomes of them as adults. Most of the characters spend their adult years in Vancouver and their stories made me think with a more open heart and open eyes about the Indigenous people I encounter throughout our city.

And one more book, “21 Things You May Not Know About the Indian Act,” by Bob Joseph, is a very helpful and accessible non-fiction recommendation to better understand our history.

Finally, we can advocate: we can use our voices and advocate to our MPs and MLAs to continue to move forward on the implementation of the 94 Calls to

Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, specifically the action items regarding the missing children.

There continue to be pressing issues facing Indigenous communities, and it is our responsibility to work together to address them. With our actions, with our political voices, with our commitment to this process of collective teshuva, we can create a better and more just society for all Canadians. As our tradition teaches us, while it may not be upon us to complete the work, we are not free to desist from it. We have work to do, and it is sacred, important, and long overdue.