

What We Owe Indigenous People *Shabbat Chayei Sarah 5781*

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I recently learned that several of my rabbinic colleagues, particularly in Canada, open each service and program with a land acknowledgment statement. I didn't know what that was, so I looked it up. The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture—not a government entity, but “a people-powered department—a grassroots action network”ⁱ—says that, “In countries such as New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and among Tribal Nations in the U.S., it is commonplace, even policy, to open events and gatherings by acknowledging the traditional indigenous inhabitants of that land. While some individuals and educational institutions in the United States have adopted this custom, the vast majority have not.”ⁱⁱ

Closer to home, the University of Arkansas Fulbright College of Arts & Sciences, offers this land acknowledgement:

“The Indigenous history of the land the University of Arkansas campus sits on goes back to time immemorial, and across that expanse of time, many successive groups have lived here and created sacred legacies in this area. Fulbright College acknowledges Indigenous peoples were forced to leave their ancestral lands, including the Osage, Caddo, and Quapaw Nations with ties to Northwest Arkansas. We further recognize that a portion of the Trail of Tears runs through our campus, and that the Cherokee, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), Chickasaw, and Seminole Nations passed through what is now Arkansas during this forced removal...”ⁱⁱⁱ

Torah is replete with land acknowledgement statements. When Abraham and Sarah first arrive in the Promised Land, we are reminded, “At that time the Canaanites were present in the land.”^{iv} Then, when God promises the Land to Abraham and Sarah's descendants, God describes it as “[the land of] the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kasmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”^v

This Shabbat, we read *Parashat Chayei Sarah*, which begins with Sarah's death in Hebron. Abraham interrupts his grief to secure a grave for his wife. He approaches the Hittites, the native people there, describing himself humbly as “a foreigner living for a time among you.”^{vi} Abraham refrains from declaring the land to be his, promised by God. Even though the Hittites offer Abraham a burial place at no charge,^{vii} Abraham insists on paying full price for his chosen spot.^{viii}

The Hebrew Bible later records numerous occasions when, at God’s command, the Israelites make war, sometimes brutally, to take land from indigenous nations by force.^{ix} Never, though, is the presence of indigenous people denied. Indeed, history records no time when our people held the Land of Israel exclusively. Indigenous peoples have also been present.

One may well ask why my Canadian colleagues—alongside small but increasing numbers of U.S. Reform rabbis—are beginning services and programs with land acknowledgement statements. Nobody alive today is responsible for dispossessing American Indians of their lands. Moreover, “After World War II, Congress created the Indian Claims Commission to pay compensation to any federally recognized tribe for land that had been seized by the United States.”^x Unfortunately, the *New York Times* article describing these reparations goes on to acknowledge that “the government took a paternalistic view, and kept Native Americans from having direct control of the funds, in the belief that they were not ‘competent to receive such large amounts of money.’”^{xi}

Our Jewish values demand that we wrestle with the claims that American Indians have on us as beneficiaries of past injustices. In particular, I would lift up the soul-trait of truth from the Mussar tradition. Alan Morinis writes of a great rabbi: “Hillel says that we need to challenge ourselves to see truth not only through our own eyes but also through the eyes of another person who is tied to the situation.”^{xii}

Too often, American history has been told only through the experience of European-Americans. Most of us learned in school that Columbus “discovered America” in 1492, and that Vikings had likely done so some time earlier. The truth, of course, told not only through our eyes but also through those of American Indians, is that America was inhabited millennia before 1492. Sophisticated cultures had developed and flowered centuries before Europeans set foot on American continents. The “discovery doctrine”—that is, the notion that America was “discovered” by Europeans—is a form of white supremacy, which is the reason why the self-styled U.S. Department of Arts and Culture argues that land acknowledgement statements “support larger truth-telling and reconciliation efforts.”^{xiii} As we affirm our debts to American Indians, we may also increasingly sensitize ourselves to the often unacknowledged contributions that Black Americans and immigrants from throughout the southern hemispheres have made to this great country we have inherited.

Humility is another value we may practice as we acknowledge Indigenous people. When we recognize that the land on which we live is not ours alone, we

may approach American plains and mountains, rivers and lakes, with greater humility—taking less, and preserving more.

We may not be ready to begin each of our programs and services with a land acknowledgment statement, if for no other reason that doing so would single out one example of oppression and white supremacy, sidelining many others. Still, this Thanksgiving, as we gather around our pandemic-modified Thanksgiving tables, we can do better than to extol the mythologized first Thanksgiving.

What really happened? Voice of America News reports: “In the fall of 1621, the Pilgrims celebrated their first successful harvest by firing guns and cannons in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The noise alarmed ancestors of the contemporary Wampanoag Nation, who went to investigate. That is how native people came to be present at the first Thanksgiving...[P]aintings depicting Native Americans sitting down for a bountiful and harmonious meal with colonial families is basically a lie.” Native Americans today observe Thanksgiving today as “a day of mourning given the rapid colonization and displacement of their people;” or they “gather with their families, but the Pilgrims aren’t on their minds.”^{xiv}

We need not observe Thanksgiving as a day of mourning. We can, however, assure that American Indians—the real people, not the mythologized ones—are on our minds. We would do well to begin our Thanksgiving dinners with the University of Arkansas’ land acknowledgement statement. Then, may we approach this blessed land with truth and humility. Then, may we approach the land and the people who were here before us as Abraham did in his own Promised Land. Then, may we commit ourselves to being a blessing in America.

Amen.

ⁱ “Who We Are,” U.S. Department of Arts and Culture,” <https://usdac.us/about>.

ⁱⁱ “Honor Native Land: A Guide and Call to Acknowledgement,” U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, <https://usdac.us/nativeland>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Land Acknowledgement Statement, Fulbright College of Arts & Sciences, University of Arkansas, <https://fulbright.uark.edu/deans-office/about-the-college/mission.php>.

^{iv} Genesis 12:6.

^v Genesis 15:19-21.

^{vi} Genesis 23:3.

^{vii} Genesis 23:6, 11.

^{viii} Genesis 23:13, 16-18.

^{ix} See, for example, I Samuel 15.

^x Adeel Hassan and Jack Healy, “America Has Tried Reparations Before. Here is How It Went,” *The New York Times*, June 19, 2019.

^{xi} *Ibid.*

^{xii} Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, Boston: Trumpeter, 2007, 169.

^{xiii} “Honor Native Land: A Guide and Call to Acknowledgement,” U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, <https://usdac.us/nativeland>.

^{xiv} Dora Mekoouar, "What Really Happened at the 1st Thanksgiving," *VOA*, November 22, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/all-about-america/what-really-happened-1st-thanksgiving>.