



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון  
INSTITUTE הרטמן שלום

## Canada, Jewish Canadians, and First Nations Peoples

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*As part of the Hartman Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders, fellows were given a deceptively simple task: write a short persuasive essay or create a persuasive piece of multimedia that grapples with big Jewish ideas. The fellows proved themselves equal to the challenge and responded with an array of remarkable and powerful projects on a vast array of subjects, representing a wide array of political positions. We have highlighted a number of the pieces which showed particular originality or writing and production excellence below.*

## Canada, Jewish Canadians, and First Nations People

Many Canadian Jews (myself included) today are extremely occupied with occupation. As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues to make bold moves in the country, the Jewish community in Canada has become even more conscious and worried about the moral and political effects of the occupation. But while we sit around criticizing or commending the Israeli occupation of a country 9500 km away from us, we are ignoring the reality of the land beneath our own feet. Since before the founding of Canada in 1867, British and French Canadians have occupied land originally inhabited by First Nations people. As far as colonial, occupying countries go, we fit the description to the letter. Our country, which we are proud of for its morality and cultural freedom, was born upon land stolen through violent and manipulative means. Yet the Jewish community remains worryingly silent about this issue. It is much easier to make a judgment on the fate and faults of a country we do not live in than to come to terms with the hatred and discrimination which mars the very ground we stand on. The synagogues we pray in, the houses we eat in, and the offices in which we debate about Israeli politics are all on occupied land. The Jewish community of Canada needs to open a dialogue about how we, as immigrants to a colonial country, have benefitted from the continued discrimination against First Nations communities. We must connect not only through a shared understanding of trauma, but also through the important values shared by First Nation peoples and Jewish people, such as environmental responsibility, ancestral language, and a connection to land. At the same time, it is important that we also acknowledge that our experiences in Canada have been vastly different. The Jewish community has been afforded many privileges that First Nations people have not been given. Our histories are extremely divided, but that does not mean our futures have to be. We must join the fight to truly make this country the safe place many of us so desperately hoped it would be when we fled here.

One of the best ways to initiate genuine connection between two vastly different communities is to focus on a shared value. One of the values I believe our communities can connect on and share is the concern over the safety of the environment. The Torah consistently warns Jews against wanton destruction of the environment and reminds us of our responsibility to care for it. This responsibility to the land is instilled into the very essence of humans, going all the way back to Adam, the first human. In Genesis, it says, “וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּנְתְּהוּ בְּגַן־עֵדֶן לְעֲבֹדָהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ” (“and G-d took Adam, and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work and protect it”). From the beginning, we were made not just to use the land, but also to protect it. This conscientiousness towards the environment is found in many other passages throughout the Torah, including in the idea of the shmita, which is a practice of ceasing to farm every seven years and allowing the land to remain untouched for a year. Any crops that grow in those resting fields can be harvested by the needy, and any personal debts shared between people must be forgiven. This practice allows the soil to settle and regenerate its natural properties, while also reminding Jewish people to respect the land we work upon. First Nations traditions share a similar responsibility towards the land and the environment, perhaps even more so than the Jewish tradition. Traditions often remind First Nations people of their responsibility to be stewards and protectors of the land. These relationships between people and the land are generally more symbiotic than those imported by colonizers. Historically, First Nations peoples have used a strong scientific understanding of the land to best use its resources while continuing to protect it. One of the most well-known First Nations ideas which connects to the environment is the Seventh Generation Principle. This principle comes from the Iroquois Confederacy. The basic premise of the Seventh Generation Principle is that all decisions must be made with the next seven generations in mind. This principle relates to relationships,

laws, social rules, and increasingly importantly, the environment. One of the ways First Nations peoples have been able to keep such a respectful relationship with the land is through this concept of thinking seven generations into the future and working to ensure the quality of life for people in the years to come. While our approaches might be different, the Jewish community and the First Nations communities share this value, and can connect and learn from each other as our communities, and the rest of the world, to join the fight to save the earth and the unique, beautiful life that resides here.

While our communities do share some similar values and, to an extent, can empathize with our shared experience of genocide, it is vital that we acknowledge that our communities have received vastly different amounts of privilege in Canada. In this country, we have in no capacity experienced the destruction that the Canadian government has wrought upon First Nations communities, and any form of discrimination we might have faced has not hindered the ability of Canadian Jews to access our rich traditions and cultures in the way that residential schools, forced adoption, and other anti-First Nation acts have affected First Nations peoples. When Jewish people first moved to Canada, we enjoyed a relatively large amount of freedom. This is not to say we did not encounter anti-Semitism; rampant anti-Semitism can be found throughout Canada's history. I am not trying to make the argument that we have not suffered, but much anti-Semitism came in the way of excluding our communities while at the same time allowing those communities to form their own little societies. We were permitted to build our own schools when we were not allowed to attend the public ones, we were allowed to make our own banks when we could not be hired at the established ones. So, when Jews first came to Canada, we were able to build up our own communities. While we enjoyed this freedom, the British and French colonies of Canada were busy making treaties with the many of the First Nations people, trading their land for certain rights to hunt and fish on land unoccupied by the crown—land which had not previously been ours to begin with. Many of these treaties were fundamentally unjust, and many of them were not even honoured by the government.

While the Jewish community of Canada continued to grow and thrive as Canada drew closer to its official founding, the rights of First Nations peoples were being cinched tighter and tighter. In 1846, the first official synagogue was founded in Montreal, which has now become home to one of the most vibrant Jewish communities in Canada. This shul, a testament to cultural and religious freedom, was far removed from the acts that the government would release only 30 years later, whose policies were made to destroy First Nation cultures and traditions. In 1876, the Canadian government issued the Indian Act. Its purpose was to completely assimilate First Nations peoples into Canadian society. The act disenfranchised all First Nations peoples, required First Nations peoples to ask for permission to leave their reserves, made any cultural ceremonies illegal, began residential schooling (which is further explained below), and contained a plethora of other discriminatory and restrictive laws, all with the intent of destroying First Nation cultures forever. Meanwhile, the growing Jewish community of Canada went to our shuls, learned Torah, were able to form our own educational services, and, most importantly, retain our cultural identity.

Perhaps one of the greatest points of divergence in our peoples' histories in Canada is found in the creation of residential schools. In the Jewish tradition, education is one of the core values, and our dedication to educating the next generation is perhaps one of the main reasons we have prevailed as a community despite the obstacles we have faced historically. However, with the creation of residential schools for First Nations children, many First Nation communities lost this ability to educate their own children. Residential schools were funded by the government and run by the church. These schools' goal

was to, as our first Prime Minister said, “Take the Indian out of the child.” The Canadian government wanted to “get rid of the Indian problem” by assimilating children into Christian Canadian society. At these schools, children were forced to speak only English or French and were often denied the right to visit their parents at all. Over 2,800 children died in these residential schools from diseases and maltreatment, and even more went missing. The initial goal of residential schools was aided by what is generally known as “the 60’s scoop,” a term for a mass initiative in the 1960s where the Canadian government forcibly removed First Nations children from their homes and had them adopted by Christian Canadians to help assimilate them. Meanwhile, during this decade, Torontonians Jews celebrated the founding of one of Toronto’s best-known Jewish day schools, Bialik. While we enjoyed another step forward in our religious freedom, we ignored our government as they attempted to systematically reduce an entire people to nothing.

We must turn our gazes inward and to the land beneath our feet. While I am not suggesting that Canadian Jews do a total shift of interest from Israel and Palestine to Canada, I think it is important that we understand the reality of our own country before we move all our attention to another. We are Jews, yes, but we are also Canadians, and we are shirking our duties to our own country by ignoring the human rights violations we have allowed to occur in the past, continue to allow, and have benefited from in Canada. We are commanded in Dvarim (Deuteronomy) to help our kinsmen and the people in our settlements who are needy, and we must follow this command to the best of our abilities, even though we are not in Israel. First Nations communities are still fighting for rights and safety measures most of us see as basic, and they need every ally they can get.

There are many ways to get involved to help and support First Nations communities. My synagogue is currently doing a “Truth and Reconciliation Circle” with a First Nations group. If you attend a shul, you can ask your Rabbi what your community is doing to connect with First Nations groups. You can also do something as simple as educating yourself about the First Nations communities in your area. If your local institutions don’t do land acknowledgement, ask them why, and if they do, educate yourself about the communities they list. There are many courses available for any age range which teach the history of First Nations people in Canada if you wish to inform yourself.