

Shabbat Pinchas

23 Tammuz 5781 – July 3, 2021

In honor of all who have served us so well this past year, the first year of our anti-racism initiative, leading our congregation toward the realization of our highest ideals as Jewish Americans, to bring about liberty and justice for all.

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In Jewish tradition, the very first question God asks is a query to the man in the Garden of Eden, *אֵינְךָ הֵרָא* – “*Where are you?*” (Gen 3:9).

Take a look around you for a moment. *Where are you?*

Some of us go immediately to the existential – this is, after all, Berkeley. Most of us, though, like Adam in the garden, are prompted first to identify a place.

Place is a recurring theme in biblical narrative – leaving it, traveling from it to the next one, naming it, sojourning in it, conquering it, (re)settling it, ending life and being remembered in it.

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So, where are we?

Our beautiful Netivot Shalom home and *we* in its sanctuary and on its grounds sit in the territory of xučyun (Huichin – pronounced Hooch-yoon), the ancestral and unceded land of the Chochenyo (Cho-chen-yo) speaking Ohlone people, the successors of the sovereign Verona Band of Alameda County. This land was and continues to be of great importance to the Muwekma (Muh-wek-ma) Ohlone Tribe and other familial descendants of the Verona Band.¹

Why does it matter that we recognize this? The easy enough answer is that our Ohlone neighbors and other indigenous peoples across the continent ask us to as allies in their ongoing struggle against historical erasure, misinformation, systemic and structural oppression, and injustice.

As Elie Wiesel (1928-2016), speaking at the Darfur Emergency Summit some years ago, explained: “*Lo ta’amod al dam re’echa* [Lev. 19:6] is a Biblical commandment. *Thou shall not stand idly by the shedding of the blood of thy fellow man*. The word is not *achi’cha*, thy Jewish brother, but *re’echa*, thy fellow human being, be he or she Jewish or not. All are entitled to live with dignity and hope. All are entitled to live without fear and pain.”²

Our teacher Rabbi Dorothy Richman powerfully clarifies *Lo ta’amod al dam re’echa*. Pointing out that it literally means, *Do not stand on your neighbor’s blood*, “it teaches that we are commanded to initiate intentional interventions. It is our duty to respond, but not to

control. Instead of swooping in to save the day, our aim should be to support grassroots leadership and initiatives.”³

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We make this land acknowledgement because our Ohlone neighbors and other indigenous peoples across the continent ask us to as allies in their ongoing struggle against historical erasure, misinformation, systemic and structural oppression, and injustice.

This explanation alone, I’m afraid, is sufficient but not complete for our land acknowledgement to mean something beyond superficial virtue signaling. For us to stand in solidarity, we must first understand and accept accountability for how narratives of deliverance and conquest shape our own history, worldview, and actions.

We must hear and internalize, however painful, Osage scholar Robert Warrior’s seminal critique of the inheritors of the biblical narrative of Israel’s emergence as a nation:

It is those who know these texts who must speak the truth about what they contain. It is to those who believe in these texts that the barbarism belongs. It is those who act on the basis of these texts who must take responsibility for the terror and violence they can and have engendered.⁴

I recognize that this is a process requiring individual and collective commitment and that it is hard, if not impossible, to succeed at on our own. Fortunately, we can begin together right now.

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Our Torah reading this week, from Parashat Pinchas, continues the account of our ancestors’ final encampment before entering the territory that we know as the Land of Israel. They are in a place identified as *on the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho*. (Num. 26:63b)

Every few verses, there seems to be another dramatic development.

With regard to gender:

In the first national census since the people stood at Sinai two months after the exodus from Egypt, Moshe and Eleazar have recorded 601,730 men of military age, that is individuals who are at least twenty years old, by ancestral clans. We learn that there are another 23,000 male Levites who are counted separately and valued differently than the Israelites. They are registered from the age of one month.

In the Levite genealogy, Yocheved is acknowledged in three ways, extraordinary for *anyone* - as the wife of Amram, daughter of Levi, and mother of Aaron, Moses, and Miriam who is also specifically identified as their sister. Yocheved’s birth in Egypt is also noted. In this way, she and Miriam, who has predeceased her, are elevated above hundreds of thousands

unnamed men and their male clan leaders. (On another occasion, we might explore whether the women's appearance here serves to underscore the feminization of the Levites who are set apart from other men-to-be as soon as it appears that they will survive infancy and, like women, are perpetual dependents not landholders.)

Five daughters of Zelophehad, third great-granddaughters of Joseph - Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah - are also named. They bring their land claim case, which is decided in their favor, albeit as a strictly limited exception to the universal rule on inheritance and intergenerational land transfer.

With regard to leadership:

In today's reading, we and Moshe learn his fate:

The LORD said to Moses: "Ascend these heights of Abarim and view the land that I have given to the Israelite people. When you have seen it, you too shall be gathered to your kin, just as your brother Aaron was." (Num. 27:12-13)

Moses entreats God to appoint a new leader. The Levite prophet of the exodus will be succeeded by the seasoned warrior, Yehoshua bin Nun, another descendant of Joseph, who with Caleb son of Jephunneh, will enter the new land as conquerors and the last living Israelite males born in Egypt.

Led by Joshua, the military leader, this new generation, absent direct memory of their parents' birthplace or where they arrived after crossing the water from slavery to freedom, will soon cross the water as conquerors of a land that is already inhabited (cf. Gen. 15:13-14, 18-21; Ex. 3:17):

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Among these shall the land be apportioned as shares, according to the listed names: with larger groups increase the share, with smaller groups reduce the share. Each is to be assigned its share according to its enrollment. The land, moreover, is to be apportioned by lot; and the allotment shall be made according to the listings of their ancestral tribes. Each portion shall be assigned by lot, whether for larger or smaller groups." (Num. 26:53-56)

Only by having driven out and mercilessly destroyed the Canaanite population to dispossess them of their ancestral, unceded territories will the Israelites – except for the Levites – obtain these Divinely ordained, covenantal land grants for themselves and their descendants (cf. Ex. 23:31b-33; Deut. 7:1-2; Joshua 11:16-23).

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The indigenous people of this hemisphere have endured a subjugation now more than 100 years longer than Israel's sojourn in Egypt. Following Robert Warrior's call, we Jews, whether Native American or not, if we are to be involved, must learn how to participate in the

struggle without making our story the whole story. This is the path to preventing the sins of the past being visited upon all of us again.⁵

As Jews in Ohlone territory, our next step can be learning about the history of *this place* and the people living here today whose ancestors stewarded the land long before, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a Catholic priest and military officers whose careers were made on annihilating “Indians” claimed the East Bay for the Spanish Crown. In doing so, we might note echoes in their surnames – Crespi, Nieto, Peralta – of our people’s history under Spanish and Portuguese rule, too.

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I cede to the final words this morning to Robert Warrior:

No matter what we do, the conquest narratives will remain. As long as people believe in the Yahweh of deliverance, the world will not be safe from Yahweh the conqueror. But perhaps, if they are true to their struggle, people will be able to achieve what Yahweh's chosen people in the past have not: a society of people delivered from oppression who are not so afraid of becoming victims again that they become oppressors themselves, a society where the original inhabitants can become something other than subjects to be converted to a better way of life or adversaries who provide cannon fodder for a nation's militaristic pride.⁶

Shabbat Shalom and a meaningful 4th of July.

Citations:

¹ Adapted from “[Berkeley Sits on Ohlone Land](#),” UC Berkeley, Division of Equity and Inclusion, Centers for Educational Justice ND Community Engagement, Native American Student Development.

² Cited in Richman, Rabbi Dorothy A. “[Intentional Intervention: Commentary of Parashat Achrei Mot-Kedushim](#).”

³ Richman, “[Intentional Intervention: Commentary of Parashat Achrei Mot-Kedushim](#).”

⁴ Warrior, Robert Allen. “[Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, conquest and liberation theology today](#),” *Christianity and Crisis*, 49:12, 1989, p. 264.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Warrior, p. 264.

"Where are you?": Additional Resources

Akins, Damon B. and William J. Bauer Jr. "[We Are the Land: A History of Native California](#) (Excerpts)" *Boom: A Journal of California*, May 21, 2021.

Arkush, Brooke S. "[Native Responses to European Intrusion: Cultural Persistence and Agency among Mission Neophytes in Spanish Colonial Northern California.](#)" *Historical Archaeology*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2011, pp. 62–90.

Bowman, J. N. "[The Peraltas and Their Houses.](#)" *California Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1951, pp. 217–231.

California Consortium for Urban Indian Health (CCUIH). [Who Are Urban Indians?](#) and [American Indian Myth/Fact Sheet](#)

Indian Land Tenure Foundation. [Land Issues](#), [Land Tenure History](#), [Land Tenure Glossary](#)

Indigenous People Organizing for Change (IPOC). [Save the Shellmounds!](#) and [West Berkeley Shellmound](#)

The Cultural Conservancy. [Native California Resource Library Bundle](#) includes "*The 50th from the Perspective of this Place: A Workshop on Land Acknowledgment*" (39 mins.) featuring Corrina Gould (Confederated Villages of Lisjan), Kanyon Sayers-Roods (Coastanoan Ohlone/ Chumash), Gregg Castro (t'rowt'raahl Salinan/rumsien Ohlone), La Nada War Jack (Bannock Nation), Joanne Barker (Lenape; Professor and Chair of American Indian Studies, SFSU)

San Francisco Foundation, PolicyLink, and the USC Equity Research Institute (ERI). [Indigenous Populations in the Bay Area](#) and [Key Trends for Native Americans](#), *Bay Area Equity Atlas*

Winstead, Brock. "[On Becoming a Historic Resident of Oakland: When Knowing Your History Doesn't Help.](#)" *Boom: A Journal of California*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2014, pp. 37–45.