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“With great power, comes great responsibility.” While this concept has been taught for more than 2000 years, it is probably most famous as a key component of Spiderman’s origin story. Peter Parker, an orphan who was picked on at school, is bitten by a radioactive spider and suddenly has powers and strengths that he had never before experienced. In processing how to navigate this new reality, his Uncle Ben teaches him, “With Great Power Comes Great responsibility.” This teaching becomes essential to Spiderman’s origin story and will define his life moving forward.

While most of us, I’m guessing, have never and will never be bitten by a radioactive spider, this origin story continues to resonate for so many of us. Larry Hill of the Seneca People shared that a good origin story is, “told to remind us of our responsibility, to instruct, and to entertain.” And these stories need to be repeated and shared again and again. As Leland Bell of the Anishnabee taught, “As you grow up, you learn different things from the legends at different stages. It stays with you all the rest of your life. You learn something out of each story each time it is retold because if you are growing as a person, you are ready for a new truth each time. You learn something new from a legend each time, just as you learn something new from a painting each time.”

These stories are designed to remind us of who we are and all that we are capable of. Who we were, makes us who we are, and sets our path for who we will become. In the Jewish tradition, we have many origin stories and many core teachings of what it means to be a Jew. But if we search the Torah for what singular idea is expressed more than any other, that idea would be “remember you were a stranger in the land Egypt,” a phrase that appears at least 36 times over the course of the Torah. Much like, “with great power comes great responsibility,” “remember you were a stranger” serves as the explanation for the practices that we are called upon to do as Jews. Shabbat, service of the Almighty, and the way we treat others all return to this core idea and our origin story as a people.

What is fascinating to me about this core value, this Jewish origin story, is that the focus is not on the experience of slavery, nor is it about the moment of our liberation from Egypt. It is about an acknowledgment that a time has come and will come where we have control over not only our own destiny, but the destiny of others, and in those moments, we need to remember to treat those people with honour, dignity, and respect, because we know what it is like to not have that experience. In this story we ourselves are no longer “the other,” we are the ones with the power, and we are tasked with using it responsibly and meaningfully.

I could not help but reflect on this idea as I read the recent book, “No Better Home: Jews, Canada, and a Sense of Belonging” edited by David Koffman. In this tome, the question is asked, “Has there ever been a better home for Jews than Canada? As Koffman argues that by certain measures, Canada might be the most socially welcoming, economically secure, and religiously tolerant country for Jews in the diaspora, past or present.” Now, this does not mean that anti-Semitism does not exist in Canada, it most certainly does, but what does it mean to simultaneously reckon with the fact that Jews have also experienced amazing opportunities for engagement, participation, and advancement within this country as well. Are we as good at recognizing the opportunities that we have to advance change and utilize the power that we have within this society as we are at pointing out the continued persecution and Anti-Semitism that exist within this country?

Remember you were a stranger, calls us on us to hold both of these truths at the same time. We know what it is like to be persecuted, oppressed, and killed for being Jewish, but because we have experienced that, we are also called upon to assure that no other human soul has that experience again.

An example of the challenge and importance of holding these two truths simultaneously arose this past year as all of us continue to reckon with the past and present treatment of the indigenous communities of this country. In response to the discovery of the unmarked graves

at the site of the residential school in Kamloops, the rabbis of Hamilton, Ontario authored a statement in solidarity with the indigenous peoples of Canada. In their statement, they shared,

“Along with all other Canadians, Hamilton’s Jewish community reacts with horror at the discovery of the remains of 215 children buried in unmarked graves on the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School...

The Jewish community remembers only too well the en masse forced removals and displacement of our children from their parents and families, as well as the inhumane conditions in which these children were kept until they met untimely, violent deaths and were buried in unmarked graves, unreported.

Our people were killed in the name of enlightenment as the Final Solution to the Jewish Question, not at all unlike the Indian Problem spoken of by the Canadian, Duncan Campbell Scott, who ran the residential school system from 1913 to 1932. His stated goal was “to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department ...”

We similarly cannot forget the many centuries of attempts of the Catholic Church to forcibly convert us and our children to Christianity and to eradicate our religion, heritage and culture, identical to the self-stated goals of the Catholic and Anglican Churches, who ran Canada’s residential schools designed to “Christianize and Civilize” the Indigenous peoples, to make them “intellectually, morally and religiously elevated” and not allow them to “perpetuate the manners and customs of their ancestors.”

In that statement, the Rabbis of Hamilton appropriately and passionately express their solidarity with the indigenous communities and share that we understand their sad past because we as a people have suffered similarly. In this statement, these rabbis are certainly remembering the core value, “Remember you were a stranger,” but at the same time, I would argue, they are missing the fact that while persecution may be in our past, we can and must and are able to do more in the present. In addition to being a persecuted and oppressed

people, we are also immigrants to this land, and as largely white and European of origin, are heirs to and benefit from the Eurocentric Christian white colonizers who came and took the native peoples land and culture from them. We are also a people with amazing privileges and opportunities that all too many within the indigenous communities do not possess. We have a greater responsibility than showing solidarity, we must also be among those working towards specific actions to assure a better future for the first nations of Canada.

We were slaves in the land of Egypt and we know what it means to be unwelcome and excluded and so we are called to assure better conditions for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the poor, and all who are in need of our help.

The reason we are called to be a light unto the nations is because very few people know what it means to be persecuted and also have the opportunity to utilize our power and our privilege. We as Jews are among the few to truly know what it means to be treated as a stranger, but also be able to exert meaningful influence. It is our challenge to utilize that power with great responsibility. To remind the world of the persistence of Anti-Semitism while also using our power to support those communities that may not possess the same access to the levers of power. That is why we continue to tell our story, that is why we gather every year on Passover and tell it again. We must remember what it means to be "othered". But we also must do the hard work of recognizing our privilege and harnessing it to make sure that no one else is made to feel that way as well. That is our story, that is our birthright, and that is our mission.