

With Jewish Indigenous Rights, Definitions Are Important

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By Ryan Bellerose

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There cannot be any holes in the arguments so as to give our enemies the ability to undermine us



The Cave of the Patriarchs (Maarat Hamechpela) in Hebron is one of the key sites of significance for the indigeneity of the Jewish people to the land of Israel and a point of origin for the Judaism | Photo: Dan Rosenstein (Unsplash)

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I have been writing and speaking about the indigenous rights of the Jews since 2006, and have become so familiar with research and terminology, that it's almost as though I have my Master's degree on the topic.

So when I found out about a recent virtual lecture on the topic, I wanted to find out if the speaker had anything new to bring to the table.

Canadian Antisemitism Education Foundation (Toronto) presented a lecture last week from Dr. Allen Z. Hertz titled "The Aboriginal Rights of the Jewish people."

For some background, Dr. Hertz was a senior advisor in the Privy Council Office serving Canada's Prime Minister and the federal cabinet, including with respect to aboriginal issues. He formerly worked in Canada's Foreign Affairs Department, and earlier taught history and law at universities in New York, Montreal, Toronto, and Hong Kong.

My main disagreement with Dr. Hertz stems from precision of language, all too important when discussing something as nuanced as indigenous rights and proper terminology.

I do not believe Dr. Hertz is malicious in intent, and while some of his conclusions are incorrect, he clearly is a Zionist and loves his people and Israel.

However, I would be remiss if I did not clear up some of these issues. We are fighting a war of perception, a war in the media, and we are fighting it in the age of moral idiocy. We can no longer rely on media supplying us with facts and journalism.

To begin with, we need to break down the differences between using the "Aboriginal peoples" instead of "Indigenous Peoples." Etymology is crucial, to see where the words come from.

The word "Aboriginal" is an English word, but also has a curious etymological back story.

The "ab" in Aboriginal is a Latin prefix that means "away from" or "not." So in that sense, Aboriginal can actually mean "not original" – not exactly what we're trying to convey with the term.

Initially, it was used in a backhanded way by anthropologists, to infer that many native or indigenous peoples were not "original" either. In that way, it was easier to excuse modern colonialism, by inferring that it always happened, even in antiquity.

"Aboriginal" is also an oversimplification, that hides more meaning than it conveys. Just as one province differs from the next province, Indigenous Peoples and communities vary dramatically from coast to coast, in regards to culture, language, and traditions.

This is why we state that indigenous status is site-specific, and requires ancestral ties to a land, not merely living there a long time. This is an absolutely vital part of the argument, that is far too often overlooked.



Dr. Allen Z. Hertz giving a lecture entitled “The Aboriginal Rights of the Jewish people” for the Canadian Antisemitism Education Foundation (Toronto)

Dr. Hertz seems to use a different definition, one that I have heard from a minority of people in this field, where “aboriginal” means the original people, and indigenous means something else.

He seems to believe that the term indigenous in the context of Israel is dangerous because there are in fact two other groups who have a claim to being indigenous to the land in question: that is, the Samaritans, who have a population of about 760, and the Arameans, who number about 25,000.

Neither of whom would be an existential threat to a Jewish state on Jewish ancestral lands.

He fails to see how dangerous claiming to be “the original people” of the area is, when such a claim must, by its nature, be based on connection to previous peoples, who are no longer around.

(In fact, that’s exactly the strategy of the “Palestinians” who have switched from claiming to be Philistines, to Canaanites, to Nabateans and Edomites and Jebusites. They can show no manifestations of any of these things, no cultural or linguistic connection and even the genetic connection is non-existent to tenuous.)

By his own definition, the Jews would not fit this definition of original people, as they are far from the “original people” of the Levant, with several well-documented and well-known tribes such as Canaanites, Amalekites, the Tribes of Shem, and many others, who were there

before the ethnogenesis of the Jewish people took place in the land of Israel.

The two main reasons we do not use that word in conjunction with the Jewish claim to the Levant are simple.

First, the prefix “Ab” in the English language is negative, and the opposite of what we are trying to convey to other indigenous peoples. And secondly, Jews are not the “original people” of the Levant.

There are in fact several other tribes that lived there in antiquity, that have no extant connection to the Jewish people of today.

So the claim of being “the original people” of the Levant is demonstrably false, and easily debunked. Not something we can use in the climate of today. We must be able to use genetics, culture, history, anthropology and even sociology, to make our arguments. Dr. Hertz’s argument is problematic in that it does not.

Ryan Bellerose on Why the Jews Are Indigenous to Israel (Source: StandWithUs)

The argument for indigenous status uses all of those; they are factual, do not rely on semantics, and are beyond doubt.

The Jews are indigenous, demonstrably; they developed their entire peoplehood in the area, have demonstrated ties using the five criteria that I developed from using Martinez Cobo’s definition and the Cree people of Canada’s method of determining indigeneity.

The only other people in the area who meet those criteria are the Samaritans, who meet all five, and the Arameans.

I also take issue with something Dr Hertz claimed when he said aboriginal and indigenous are interchangeable in Canada. The words are *not* interchangeable in Canada, and have not been for some time. Beginning in 1997, groups started pushing back against the term. Aboriginal affairs changed its name several years ago, and only a couple of eastern nations even allow the word aboriginal to be used in that context.

The Metis do not meet the criteria of being aboriginal, according to Dr. Hertz, but they are indigenous, because they had a genesis of a peoplehood, and meet all the criteria because indigenous status has nothing to do with time.

Dr. Hertz also made a comment during the question and answer period, that he didn’t know anything about the Hebrews or Israelites. But those are the groups of people who were the proto-Jews, and from whom the Jews descended. It would be through *them* that the Jews would even have a claim of being aboriginal (being there first), as Jews did not exist in the Levant in antiquity.

In fact, if one wants to be a real stickler, Jews in the modern rabbinical sense developed as such in exile, as Rabbinical Judaism was a reaction to losing access to the Temple. So I am not sure how he can claim to be aboriginal, by his own definition.

Precision of language is vital; so is clear terminology, and being understandable to the average person is integral to this struggle.

In the simplest terms, indigenous status has a definite clear list of criteria, and far easier to comprehend than a nebulous claim of being “original,” using an outdated term that is no longer used by indigenous peoples, due to its actual etymology.

It’s a pretty big difference, but I do not believe it is an insurmountable one.



Ryan is Metis, was born in High River, Alberta, and was raised in Paddle Prairie, Alberta. Ryan was one of the first people to put forward the Indigenous Argument in regards to Jews in the Middle East. His many articles have helped change the discourse.