

DR. HASKEL GREENFIELD INDIGENEITY, IMPERIALISM, AND COLONIALISM – A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

More in depth version of speech given on November 23, 2023 at the Antisemitism in the wake of 10/7 on-line conference

By Haskel J. Greenfield



I would like to start by saying I am tired of being on the defensive; I'm tired of having to justify my existence; and I am tired of having to fight Antisemitism.

Instead of being apologetic for who we are, I believe we need to be stand up, be vocal, and be proud of who we are. One of the ways in which we can do this is to change our vocabulary.

One essential word that is missing from our vocabulary is Indigeneity. A very useful and more straightforward definition by an indigenous person from Alberta (Canada) is as follows:

"At its simplest, indigenous status stems from the genesis of a culture, language, and traditions in conjunction with its connections to an ancestral land, most commonly derived from ties to pre-colonial peoples. Once a people have such a cultural, linguistic, and spiritual genesis as well as a coalescence as a people, they are generally acknowledged as an indigenous people." [\[i\]](#)

By such a definition, we, the Jewish People, are indigenous to our ancestral homeland, the Land of Israel. We have been there since antiquity and have always maintained a presence in our homeland.

There were earlier inhabitants of the region, even before our ancestors arrived in the Land of Israel. These were the Canaanites. Our Patriarchs and Matriarchs interacted with them, fought with them, and sometimes were joined by them even *before* the exile in Egypt. The Age of Patriarchs is thought to have been sometime between 1750 and 1600 BCE [\[ii\]](#).

After the Israelite return to Canaan with Joshua around 1200 BCE, some archaeological sites show destruction levels that correspond to the ancient written texts, such as in the book of Joshua, or the Books of Judges. Other times, there is no evidence of destruction and the Canaanites joined and were absorbed into the ancient Israelite culture and political units. Thus, there was a fusion of the two peoples.

Our families have deep roots in the Land of Canaan and Israel. Jews are the original inhabitants of the Land of Israel who have kept continuous physical, religious, and emotional ties to it for almost 4000 years. Jews are the earliest remaining indigenous people and thus the last surviving indigenous inhabitants of the Land of Canaan (known today and through 3000 years of history as the Land of Israel).

There are no earlier examples of other peoples as being indigenous in the region and still existing today with the same culture, the same yearning, speaking the same language, and so on. This is why we are the indigenous peoples of the land of Israel. We, the Jewish People, are the last surviving indigenous peoples of the Land of Israel.

Now, let's first look at the original Palestinians and who they are. The original Palestinians are a people who came to the Land of Israel at the beginning of the 12th century BCE. They came as invaders from the Aegean region as part of a mass migration that we know historically as the Peoples of the Sea. After being thrown out of Egypt, they landed on the southern coast of Israel and captured the cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath. We know their name because it was

recorded in Egyptian texts as the Peleset. These became the Plishtim in Hebrew. The root word of Plishtim in Hebrew is Palash, which means to invade. The modern-day conjugation of the name Palestinian mean invaders in Hebrew. I participated in the excavation of the last of these – ancient Gath of the Philistines and the Hometown of Goliath.

The Philistines of antiquity were destroyed and dispersed as a people by the Assyrians and Babylonian invading armies in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. They did not survive and have no modern descendants in the region. While modern Palestinians often claim to be descendants of the Philistines, there no historical, cultural, genetic, or archaeological link between the two!

Similarly, the earliest historical record of Israelites in the Land of Israel comes from the Egyptian monuments from the 19th dynasty at about 1200 BCE. There, the Pharaoh Merneptah writes about smiting “Israel”. Soon after the Egyptian empire in the Levant collapses and we see the emergence of independent Jewish polities across the region that culminate in the United Monarchy of David and Solomon about 1000 BCE.

The name Palestine for the region was given to the land by the Roman Emperor Hadrian (in the 2nd century CE) after both the first and second revolts (in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE). He renamed the Land of Israel as the Roman province of Syria-Palaestina to delink any connection to Jews. The Romans tried to wipe away the Jewish connection from the land by deporting vast numbers of Jews. Yet, large numbers of Jews continue to reside across the land.

There was always a Jewish presence in the Land of Israel despite the marauding armies of the various conquerors, whether they be Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Turks, Persians, and so on throughout our history. In contrast, the Arabs do not have a deep history in the land of Israel. It is a much more recent history. They only arrived in the region with the Muslim conquest under Caliph Umar in 635 CE – less than 1500 years ago. This does not trump the Jewish claims and rights that extend back almost 4000 years.

With the knowledge of our history and indigeneity, this knowledge becomes one of the tools that we can have in our arsenal to defend our rights. Language can be our spear to pierce through falsehoods and antisemitic rhetoric! To do this, we need to change our vocabulary. A prime example is the term imperialism with respect to Jews that is constantly thrown at us to negate our rights to exist and to destroy the State of Israel.

The State of Israel is not an empire, nor are Israelis imperialists. Imperialism implies being part of an empire. The Jewish people in the Land of Israel are not part an empire, and therefor cannot be imperialists. Empires are by definition sustained through act of colonisation and colonialism. Howe can we be accused of imperialism and colonisers when we have always existed on this land?

In contrast, the Arab and Muslims living in the Levant are by definition imperialists and colonists. They came as conquerors into the Land of Israel in 635 CE (or 638) when they pushed north, east, and west out of Arabia to expand the Rashidun Caliphate. Linguistically, we can see from both recorded history and their family names, they come from the Arabian Peninsula – Mecca and Medina are their places of origin. They came as conquering hordes who created a pan-Arab empire extending at one point from Saudi Arabia to Spain, Iraq, and beyond. They are the imperialists, and they are the colonisers of this land, they conquered our ancient cities, towns, and villages, renamed them, and now claim eternal ownership over them. Conquerors can never be indigenous, and the Arabs are clearly conquerors from Arabia!

A perfect example of this is the town that Jews in antiquity referred to as Shechem, the Arabs know as Nablus. The name Nablus originated under the Romans and is derived from their name for the city they built atop the ancient city of Shechem. They called it *Neopolis*, or new city, which comes down to us as Nablus. The reason that the Arabs use a post-Roman name to refer to this town is because they were not in Israel before the Romans.

Returning back to the issue of vocabulary and our use of it when defending our rights. We should never say that Israelis are *settlers* or live in *settlements*!

These are terms that simply give our enemies ammunition. As the indigenous people of the Land of Israel, Jews are not settlers. The Jews who live in Israel are not returning as part of an imperial adventure. Instead, some are the descendants of the deportees who returned many times over the past 2500 years to reclaim their ancestral land. Those who stayed in Israel, their ancestors were not among the deportees. Both are the indigenous peoples of that land who are claiming their birthright. By definition this means that Israelis are not settlers!

It is unfortunate that the European founders of modern Zionism used inappropriate words, such as settle and colonise. It was a poor choice of words for an indigenous people returning to their ancestral land and ignored the existing Jewish population that never left (but had become a persecuted minority in their own homeland).

Israelis lived and continued to live in Judea, Samaria (*Shomron*), and the Golan in villages, towns, and the cities where Jews were ethnically cleansed out of by the Lebanese, Syrians, Iraqis, Jordanians, Egyptians, and other Arabs armies that ethnically cleansed them during their invasion of the Land of Israel in 1947 and 1948. Since 1967, Jews have tried to reclaim the villages the towns, and the cities that were stolen from their Jewish inhabitants. After 1948, how many Jews lived in Gaza, Judea, Samaria and the Golan territories - None!

90% of Jews, including myself, can trace their genetic origins back to the region over several thousands of years. My Paternal paleo-haplogroup suggests that my roots extend even farther back in antiquity - to 40k years ago in this region! Jews are the clearly the indigenous peoples of the Land of Israel; we predate the later conquering Arab empires by tens of thousands of years.

If Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and others (and the Palestinian Authority) do not want to live with Israel in peace, then we see the result with the latest war in Gaza and their heinous acts. By creating false narratives and telling Jews that they should go back to Europe, New York City, and elsewhere, they continue to deny Jewish indigeneity to the Land of Israel. Forcing Jews to leave their homeland and disperse them once again to other indigenous peoples' lands is Antisemitism at its core! This is what the Babylonians, Assyrians, Romans, and others have done to the Jews for millennia. Yet, despite the repeated attempts at deportation, Jews continued to live in the Land of Israel and the deportees (and their descendants) continued to return to the Land of Israel generation after generation. Return to our homeland is embedded within Jewish culture and religion as it is part of the daily prayer.

As a Jew and professional anthropologist and archaeologist, who has conducted research in the Near East in both Jewish and Muslim countries for more than 25 years, I hope I have clarified some misconceptions and have provided you (the readers) with information that can be used as tools when dealing with Antisemitic diatribes and distortions of history, archaeology, and biology. I am never in favor of offensive war. I am never in favor of offensive violence. I believe we must defend ourselves both in words and in deeds when attacked. Stop being embarrassed about who we are! Stand up and be willing to fight for our freedom, as did our ancestors!

Anti-Semitism is a baseless evil hatred that has infected much of society around the world. If we don't stand up against Antisemitism, who will? Silence is complicity! Speak out!

Some other definitions of indigeneity useful for understanding Jewish indigeneity to the Land of Israel are as follows:

While there is no universally common definition of Indigeneity, Indigenous status has been historically defined in the following manner by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the United Nations Sub-Commission on Indigeneity - José Martínez Cobo. He wrote that

"Indigenous communities, peoples, and nations are those that, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present [or have in the past] non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems."

He writes further that

"a historical continuity may consist of the continuation, for an extended period reaching into the present, of one or more of the following factors: (1) Occupation of ancestral lands, or at least of part of them; (2) Common ancestry with the original occupants of these lands; (3) Culture in general, or in specific manifestations, (4) Language; (5) Residence in certain parts of the country, or in certain regions of the world; (6) Other relevant factors." [iii]

Cobo's definition became the basis for the UN's definition as outlined in the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples | OHCHR](#)[iv] and for the UN's fact sheet on Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Voices[v].

Amnesty International's definition's is very similar:

"Indigenous Peoples can be identified according to certain characteristics:

- *Most importantly, they self-identify as Indigenous peoples*
- *There is a historical link with those who inhabited a country or region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived*

- They have a strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources
- They have distinct social, economic or political systems
- They have a distinct language, culture and beliefs
- They are marginalized and discriminated against by the state
- They maintain and develop their ancestral environments and systems as distinct peoples.”^[vi]

While Cobo (for the UN) and Amnesty International were concerned with discrimination against minorities (including indigenous peoples), the definition applies to Jews, especially if the phrase “non-dominant sectors of society” (which Jews were and are in the Diaspora, and for 2000 years in the Land of Israel) is removed. Basically, a culture is indigenous if they have “unique traditions, retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live” (this is what comes up in a Wikipedia search). Despite the thousands of years of deportations to the far ends of the known world, Jews retained a unique culture, distinct from the societies in which they were dispersed.

In all cases where the above authors include “disenfranchised and persecuted minority” as an ingredient for indigeneity, this was also the case for Jews who remained for the past 2000 years in the Land of Israel. It is only with the formation of the State of Israel that the situation changed for Jews in their homeland. But this change does not deny the indigenous status of the Jewish people in Israel. In fact, indigeneity recognises the Jewish link to the Land of Israel that has existed for almost 4000 years of recorded history.

[i] (<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/bellerose-aboriginal-people>)

[ii] BCE=Before the Common Era; CE=Common Era – these are the modern neutral terms used for historical dates by archaeologists working in the Near East as the professional community recognises that AD (Anno Domini) and BC (Before Christ) are religious-based terms.

[iii] (<https://www.iwgia.org/en/news-alerts/archive?view=article&id=340:a-working-definition-by-jose-martinez-cobo&catid=143>). Source - Study of the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations, Volume 5, Conclusions, Proposals and Recommendations by José R. Martínez Cobo, Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities 1986 (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/133666?ln=en>). (UN Doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/1 987/7/Add.4).

[iv] <https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples>

[v]https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf

[vi] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/indigenous-peoples/>