

Kol Nidre 5782: Empty Shoesⁱ

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom September 15th, 2021

It was the shoes that got me.

As a teenager, I went on the March of the Living, seeing the death camps of Poland firsthand. Of all the images I brought back, the piles of worn shoes are clearest in my mind. Shoes that were deemed more valuable than their wearers; shoes which were saved for profit, while people were consigned to the flames.

“We are the shoes,” Yiddish poet Moses Schulstein wrote,

...we are the last witnesses.
We are shoes from grandchildren and grandfathers.
From Prague, Paris and Amsterdam...

We shoes — that used to go strolling in the market
Or with the bride and groom to the chuppah,
We shoes from simple Jews, from butchers and carpenters,
From crocheted booties of babies just beginning to walk and go
On happy occasions, weddings, and even until the time
Of giving birth, to a dance, to exciting places to life...
Or quietly — to a funeral.
Unceasingly we go. We tramp.
The hangman never had the chance to snatch us into his
Sack of loot — now we go to him.
Let everyone hear the steps, which flow as tears,
The steps that measure out the judgment.ⁱⁱ

The children’s shoes hit me hardest. So you will understand, I hope, when I tell you that seeing the memorials of empty shoes, after the discovery of the remains of 215 Indigenous children at Kamloops Indian Residential School this summer, was something I could not ignore.

The first memorial was created by Haida artist Tamara Bell, in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Bell, the daughter of a residential school survivor, shares how she and her 12-year-old son,

...went from store to store buying shoes... [filling] six large bags with different sneakers, boots and moccasins... to represent the traditional and modern mores of Indigenous people impacted by the schools.

“I just kept thinking that I have to do something... as a people, we need to heal. We need to have a place to heal, and we can’t just be suffering alone,” Bell said.ⁱⁱⁱ

Let everyone hear the steps, which flow as tears/The steps that measure out the judgment.

This is a difficult sermon to give. For years, I’ve been waiting for the right time. But those shoes stopped my silence.

Richard Kool, past-president of the Victoria Holocaust Remembrance and Education Society and the child of a survivor, recently wrote: “It is hard and painful for me to say that the discovery of the graves of the children in Kamloops may be Canada’s Holocaust moment.”^{iv}

Maybe you, like me, are initially taken aback by those words. Of course, there are differences. “But for Jews,” Mira Miller writes, “a people that just barely survived our own genocide less than a century ago, the residential school specifics hit even closer to home.”^v And so I am asking us tonight to open our ears, and our hearts, and our minds.

And it is hard. We are, after all, still in the middle of a pandemic. Some things are better this year – we are not in an empty sanctuary, Joseph Kaiser is on Temple’s bima instead of recording in a church in Chicago, and Denis Brott, thank God, is with us in fuller health. But we are not where we hoped we would be. Believe me when I tell you that as your rabbi, I would like nothing better than to give a simple and comforting sermon this year. But the more I learn, the less I can keep silent.

Stick with me. Because before we can get to making things right, we have to realize we have been wrong.

Kathryn Schulz wrote an entire book about how we all are wrong much more often than we think, and yet our culture is terrible at finding ways to acknowledge our mistakes. With one exception: Religion. “Virtually every religious tradition,” Schulz writes, “includes a ritual for penitence and purification.”^{vi}

Now I want to acknowledge that this is fraught. Residential school survivors recount innocent children making up sins, to confess to priests who abused them.^{vii} The hands of religion are far from clean. But I can only speak as a Jew, with the insights of Jewish teaching. We don't believe in original sin. But we do believe we sin, and also that we can repent. Millenia ago, we would have needed a high priest and two goats to get it done. Our task today is less tangible, but essential nonetheless.

There is one line which the Talmud teaches is the essence of confession, and which enters our Yom Kippur prayers. *Aval anachnu chatanu* – But we have sinned.^{viii} Without these words, we have no way forward. With them, we have hope. But God, they are hard to say.^{ix}

Before those words comes this line: *Sh'ayn anachnu azay panim u'ksheh oref lomar lefanecha, Adonai eloheinu v'elohei avoteinu, tzadikim anachnu v'lo chatanu...* “We are not so arrogant and stiff-necked as to say before You, Eternal our God and God of all ages, we are perfect and have not sinned...”

The original version is different, reading, “we are so arrogant,” not, “we are not,” suggesting that we are even so sinful as to deny that we sin. ^x “Consciously or subconsciously,” Rabbi Elie Kaunfer writes,

...we spend so much time living the lie that we are blameless, that we are righteous, that we have not sinned. The turning point comes only when we say the word *aval*, “but.” We like to say we haven't sinned, but, in fact, we have... We pretend to be someone blameless. But we are not the person we pretend to be.^{xi}

We are not the country we pretend to be. Like many non-Indigenous Canadians, I am only now beginning to understand that even though there are things we are rightly proud of, there are things of which we should be ashamed.

Let me illustrate from four years in my own life: 1974, 1996, 2012, and 2020.

I was born in 1974. That same year, Bev Sellars – a residential school survivor who later became a chief – gave birth and was handed papers to sign while still in her hospital bed. When she asked, she was told they were for adoption. “We just thought you might want to give the baby up,” the nurse said. “*At no time*,” writes Sellars, “had I indicated to anyone that I was thinking of giving up my baby. It

makes me wonder how many other Aboriginal girls lost their babies this way.”^{xii} I can guarantee you that no one handed papers like that to my mother.

In 1996, I graduated from McGill. And in 1996, the last residential school in Canada closed its doors. Despite my excellent education, I did not know about residential schools. I did not know that children were torn from their parents’ arms “to kill the Indian in the child,” taken to institutions with mortality rates of 40-60%. “If we want to understand residential schools,” Deborah Corber told us at Temple last month,

...we need to begin by acknowledging that the Canadian government of the day knew that many Indigenous children were dying in these schools and chose to ignore that evidence in pursuit of their overarching goal of assimilation. They weren’t aiming to kill the children; they were just agnostic to the fact that they were dying.^{xiii}

We did that for over 120 years.

In 1996, I left Canada. In my years in England and especially the United States, I often boasted about our health care, our gun control, our multiculturalism, our kindness. I returned in 2012, to come here to Temple. 2012 was the year of the Sandy Hook massacre, when twenty children and six teachers were murdered at an elementary school in Connecticut. Thank God I am back in Canada, I thought, after the initial grief and shock. Thank God my kids will be safe. I still did not know how many children in this country never came home from their schools. That same year, Idle No More was founded, a grassroots movement for Indigenous rights and environmental protection.^{xiv} Over ten years later, in both countries, I ask myself what has changed.

Then, 2020. Last year, when I was constantly in and out of the parking lot at the Montreal Children’s Hospital, taking my kids from one Covid test to another; a year in which I was so grateful for the care we received. That same year, in another hospital, less than an hour away in Joliette, Joyce Echaquan, an Atikamekw woman, died abused and neglected, leaving seven children without a mother.^{xv}

And then this summer came. 215 unmarked graves found in Kamloops, BC. 751 in Cowessess, Saskatchewan. Over 160 more in BC. Over a thousand graves – and this is just the beginning.

Aval anachnu chatanu – But we have sinned.

For us as Canadian Jews, this is both painful and complicated. Do we see ourselves within the *anachnu*, within the “we” of Canadian society and its sins? My grandparents and great-grandparents, like so many, came here as immigrants and refugees. They had, in American Jewish poet Marge Piercy’s words, “The courage to abandon the graves dug into the hill/the small bones of children and the brittle bones/of the old whose marrow hunger had stolen.”^{xvi} Others shared the experience of Canadian Jewish poet, Isa Milman, who writes of, “My murdered family, some buried alive, others in unknown mass graves, forbidden to leave a trace. Robbed of their lives, robbed of their deaths. And me, robbed of both.”^{xvii} How can we Jews be settlers? How can we be accountable for others’ awful, unmarked graves?

Whether it was Eastern European Jews fleeing pogroms; or Holocaust survivors emerging from the ashes; or Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews no longer welcome in North Africa; we came here bearing our own traumas, looking for a safe place to land. We found more than a refuge, creating one of the strongest, most diverse, and vibrant Jewish communities in the world. My own great-grandfather came from the Pale of Settlement to the fur trade in Northern Ontario. I have no idea what relationships he had with the people with whom he traded, but I do know that without him, I wouldn’t be here. Decades later, some Jews built their families through what we now call “the Sixties Scoop,” adopting Indigenous children without knowing that many were taken unwillingly from their original communities and homes.^{xviii} We are still learning about all the intersections between Jewish and Indigenous lives.^{xix} But, as the Yom Kippur confession tells us, ignorance is also a sin. It is our responsibility to learn.

Irwin Cotler, human rights lawyer and activist, speaks of the plight of Indigenous Peoples as “the single most important human rights issue confronting Canada today.”^{xx} In this, as in many movements for social justice, Jewish voices stand out. Our stories have many sides. “Jews have contributed to Indigenous displacement as they have sought to make Canada their home,” writes scholar David Koffman, “and have fought against Indigenous disenfranchisement while seeking to make Canada a better home.”^{xxi} We did not build this house, but we do inhabit it, and we share

responsibility for its repair – even if the faults go down to the foundations, built long before we arrived.

Aval anachnu chatanu. But we have sinned.

“Confession,” says Rabbi Kaunfer,

means dredging up sins that were buried long ago. Confession means beginning to take responsibility for our actions. Confession means recognizing how people plead with us while we refuse to hear them. Ultimately, confession means recognizing the ugly truth and stating it out loud.^{xxii}

In Judaism, acknowledging our sin is the first, essential step. But it is not, in itself, enough.

In her book on land acknowledgments, Métis educator Suzanne Keptwo shares a skit from the comedy troupe, Baroness von Sketch. It begins with a theatre representative standing up before a play, and listing the First Nations upon whose territory the theatre stands. Then, she tells the audience to enjoy the show. An audience member asks: Since we are on someone else’s land, should we leave? No, the representative replies, the theatre is here now. Are some of the proceeds from the ticket sales going to the First Nations mentioned? No, all sales go to the theatre. Is money from the bottled water sold during intermission going to help fund clean drinking water? No, that money will go to Nestlé, the theatre’s sponsor. But, the audience member persists, how are we making right? “It’s a dialogue...” says the theatre representative, awkwardly, “and there’s a plaque you can read in the lobby.”^{xxiii}

Words are never enough. If you confess to a sin and keep doing it, Maimonides teaches, it’s like taking a bath with a creepy crawly in your hand and expecting to get clean.^{xxiv} Confession is essential, but it needs to be followed up by action: by apology, by reparations, and by not repeating our mistakes. We cannot get so stuck in confession and guilt that we don’t commit to change.

So, we are working on a land acknowledgment at Temple – but not just to get a plaque in the lobby.^{xxv} Rather, we are taking it as an opportunity to start a working group on truth and reconciliation, and expand our ongoing efforts. The National Day of Truth and Reconciliation will take place on September 30, offering many opportunities to learn. And in the meantime, we have an election coming up: Let the

people asking for your vote know that this matters to you. It's a new school year: Ask the children in your lives whether they are learning about these issues. Because those children who died? They are just as precious as our own. We cannot ignore those empty shoes.

Aval anachnu chatanu. But we have sinned. If we can say it, we can start to make it right.

ⁱ I am grateful to Deborah Corber, Jonathan Goldbloom, Suzanne Keetwo, David Koffman, Isa Milman, Nakuset, Lisa Rubin, Sarah Sookman, Jordanna Vamos, Shauna van Praagh, and Sue Ann Puddington for the various conversations and efforts which have contributed to my understanding. Any errors, insensitivities, or omissions are, as always, my own.

ⁱⁱ Moses Schulstein (1911-81), "We Are the Last Witnesses" (<http://www.70voices.org.uk/content/day36>).

ⁱⁱⁱ Maddi Dellplain and Jen St. Denis, "In Their Shoes: Community Creates a Symbol of Mourning for Those Killed in Residential Schools," *The Tyee*, June 2, 2021 (<https://thetyee.ca/News/2021/06/02/Shoes-Activists-Create-Symbol-of-Mourning-Residential-Schools/>).

^{iv} Richard Kool, "Comment: Is this Canada's Holocaust moment?" *Times Colonist*, June 12, 2021

(<https://www.timescolonist.com/opinion/op-ed/comment-is-this-canada-s-holocaust-moment-1.24329821>).

^v Mira Miller, "Canadian Jews Cannot Remain Silent About Atrocities Done to Indigenous Peoples," *Alma*, July 26, 2021 ([Canadian Jews Cannot Remain Silent About Atrocities Done to Indigenous Peoples - Alma \(heyalma.com\)](https://www.heyalma.com/canadian-jews-cannot-remain-silent-about-atrocities-done-to-indigenous-peoples)).

^{vi} Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* (New York, 2010).

^{vii} Bev Sellars, *They Called Me Number One: Secrets and Survival at an Indian Residential School* (Vancouver, 2013), p.47.

^{viii} Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 87b.

^{ix} Much of my understanding here is based on Abraham Joshua Heschel's powerful essay, "Yom Kippur," in Susannah Heschel, ed., *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York, 1996; essay first published August, 1965). In it, he writes: "We are all failures. At least one day a year we should recognize it."

^x I first learned this from Alden Solovy in his "Mysteries of the Machzor" lecture, August 23, 2021. *Mishkan HaNefesh*, the Reform movement's most recent machzor, restores the original text. See also Lawrence A. Hoffman, "The Liturgy of Confession: What It Is and Why We Say it," in Hoffman, ed., *We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism* (Woodstock, VT, 2012).

^{xi} Elie Kaunfer, "Aval Chatanu ("But/In Truth, We Have Sinned"): A Literary Investigation," in Hoffman, op. cit.

^{xii} Sellars, op.cit., p.147.

^{xiii} Shared by Deborah Corber in her talk for Temple's Lunch Together Online, August 10, 2021 ([Lunch Together with Deborah Corber, August 10, 2021 on Vimeo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)).

^{xiv} <https://idlenomore.ca/about-the-movement/>.

^{xv} See the brief from the Council of the Atikamekw of Manawan, "Joyce's Principle," https://principedejoyce.com/sn_uploads/principe/Joyce_s_Principle_brief_Eng.pdf.

^{xvi} Marge Piercy, "Maggid," *The Art of Blessing the Day* (New York, 2007).

^{xvii} Isa Milman, "Grave House," *Prairie Kaddish* (Regina, 2008). With thanks to the poet for sharing her work and thoughts, and to Professor Norman Ravvin for making the connection.

^{xviii} On the Sixties Scoop, see Victoria Anderson-Gardner, "It's Like Opening a Bottle You've Worked Hard to Close for a Long Time," *CBC Docs*, January 15, 2021 (<https://www.cbc.ca/documentaries/short-docs/it-s-like-opening-a-bottle-you-ve-worked-hard-to-close-for-a-long-time-1.5873082>) and the film, *Becoming Nakuset*.

^{xix} See essays by David S. Koffman (on Jewish-Indigenous encounters) and Norman Ravvin (on Jewish immigrants to Saskatchewan) in David S. Koffman, ed., *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging* (Toronto, 2021). See too the description of Montreal Jews going to movies and seeing depictions of cowboys and Indians in Israel Medres, trans. Vivian Felsen (Montreal, 2000; originally published in 1947), *Montreal of Yesterday: Jewish Life in Montreal 1900-1920*, p.100.

^{xx} Quoted in David Koffman, "The Unsettling of Canadian Jewish History: Towards a Tangled History of Jewish-Indigenous Encounters," in Koffman, ed., p.98.

^{xxi} Ibid., p.103. With thanks to the author for his correspondence. These ideas are also explored in an interview between Koffman and Yehuda Kurtzer in the Shalom Hartman Institute's Identity/Crisis podcast, June 18, 2021 ([Episode 59: The Canadian Jewish Difference \(hartman.org.il\)](https://www.hartman.org.il/episode-59-the-canadian-jewish-difference)).

^{xxii} Kaunfer, *ibid.*

^{xxiii} Suzanne Keeptwo, *We All Go Back to the Land: The Who, Why, and How of Land Acknowledgments* (Toronto, 2021), pp.103-4. It should be noted that the Segal Centre, a cherished institution in the Jewish and anglophone community of Montreal, has made significant and thoughtful efforts involving education, and reconciliation. See <https://www.segalcentre.org/en/land-acknowledgement>.

^{xxiv} Maimonides, *Hilkhot Teshuva* (The Laws of Repentance) 2:3.

^{xxv} With appreciation to Suzanne Keeptwo for her guidance in her conversation with me and Sarah Sookman, July 5, 2021. Special thanks to Sarah Sookman, for her role in leading the new working group; Shauna van Praagh, for being our representative on the Tikkun Olam steering committee of the Reform Jewish Communities of Canada; and Jordanna Vamos, for being the liaison to Temple's board on this important work.