

When Land is More Than Earth

Trauma, Memory, and Healing Among Peoples Spiritually Grounded in Place



Territorial Acknowledgement

I am speaking to you from Treaty Six Territory, O-day'min, amiskwaciwâskahikan, the traditional gathering place for many Indigenous Peoples, including the nêhiyaw, Dené, Anishinaabe, Nakota Isga, and Niitsitapi Peoples. We also acknowledge this territory as the Métis homeland and as home to one of the largest Inuit communities south of the 60th parallel. We honour and respect the histories, languages, ceremonies, and cultures of the First Peoples who call this territory home.

The First Peoples' enduring relationship with this land teaches us about our inherent responsibility to protect and respect Mother Earth. Through this acknowledgement, we honour the ancestors and children buried here, remember missing and murdered Indigenous women and men, and recognize the ongoing work of collective healing.

We are reminded that we are all treaty people and that we carry responsibilities to the land and to one another. It is a privilege to meet with you virtually from this place, and we thank the generations of people who have cared for this land for thousands of years.

Recognition of the historic importance and ongoing contributions of Indigenous Peoples must be matched by our commitment to make the promise and the challenge of Truth and Reconciliation real in this place and throughout all our communities.

Learning Objectives for Today

1. Describe the reciprocal relationship between people and land as a form of custodianship.
2. Articulate the significance of the land in shaping individual and collective identity.
3. Discuss the roles of language and ceremony in healing intergenerational trauma.
4. Explore shared themes linking Indigenous and Jewish experiences of trauma and their culturally grounded healing practices.

Just as we attend to our own well-being when working with clients who have experienced trauma, I encourage you to do the same during this presentation. Some of the material we will discuss may be upsetting. Please take care of yourself in whatever way you need.

Trauma: A Few Key Terms

1. Trauma
2. Complex Trauma
3. Intergenerational Trauma
4. Second Generation Survivor Syndrome

The Journey of the Webinar

Personal disclosure and archival recordings: locating the perspective from which I approach this work

Community-engaged Indigenous research: what Elders and participants taught us about land, language, ceremony, and culture.

Not a comparison of experiences, but reflections that arose while learning about the healing of others when relationships to history, land, and culture had been severed.

The relational processes that arose in the context of my engagement with Indigenous communities have implications for clinical care, community programming and policy.

Understanding these processes and possible resonances is more important than ever now, as antisemitism reaches tragic new heights around the world. More than ever in the lifetimes of many of us, we may be called to address this current and intergenerational trauma in various ways.

Three Registers

RESEARCH — what participants shared and what the studies support

PERSONAL — my family history, my father's voice, and my own experience

RESONANCE — connections I perceive and invite you to consider

Comparison does not require equivalence. No two peoples or histories are interchangeable.

Who Are You? Who Are Your People?

Working in Corrections in the early 2000's met disproportionate number of Indigenous offenders

As a child, I was diagnosed with what was then called "second-generation survivor syndrome."

My father, Cantor Louis Danto, became a shaliach tzibur (representative of the congregation) after catastrophic loss. He survived while his family and community were murdered, and he devoted his life to ḥazzanut (Cantorial artistry) carrying inherited ceremonial knowledge, language and melodies forward.

Im Hupalnu

<https://rsa.fau.edu/album/36099>

(Track 4, Louis Danto Salutes Israel, Songs of Zion)

What I Learned by Asking About Strength

My research became focused on strengths in particular communities and what people were doing to support mental health and positive outcomes.

Across the studies we started to see patterns: land, cultural identity, language, Elders, spirituality, family/community, ceremony and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

A recurring synthesis: culturally grounded healing often works by repairing disconnections.

Land: More Than a Setting

Ecocentric identity — L. Kirmayer (Kirmayer & Velaskakis, 2009)

RESEARCH:

Land was interwoven through physical, spiritual, mental and emotional well-being.

Land connected people with tradition, food, spirituality, family, history, identity and community.

RESONANCE:

Jewish relationship with the Land of Israel: what does it mean when place is constitutive of peoplehood and identity?

Reciprocity: Cared For and Responsible

“If you take care of the land, and respect the land, the land will take care of you.” (Danto, Walsh & Sommerfeld, 2020)

“If you don’t take care of the land, the land won’t take care of us. And you make the land sick, we get sick” (Sommerfeld, Danto & Walsh, 2021)

RESEARCH:

stewardship, gratitude, restraint and respect for animals were described as part of health and spirituality.

RESONANCE:

Jewish traditions of responsibility toward land and living things

What Does Relationship to a Land Sound Like?

Resonance:

Yerushalayim: An experiential expression from my own tradition.

What is being carried here? Place • longing • memory • identity • prayer • return

Connection to Israel: ontological significance.

A love song to Jerusalem, sung as a relationship to a person; a song of intergenerational longing, return, and peace. A song about a living relationship, for example:

Track 11, Louis Danto Salutes Israel
<https://rsa.fau.edu/album/36099>

*For a hundred generations I dreamt of you,
to cry, to see the light of your face.*

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem
light up your face to your son,
Jerusalem, Jerusalem
from your ruins I will build you.*

*...Jerusalem, Jerusalem
I won't move from here...*

When a Language Carries a World

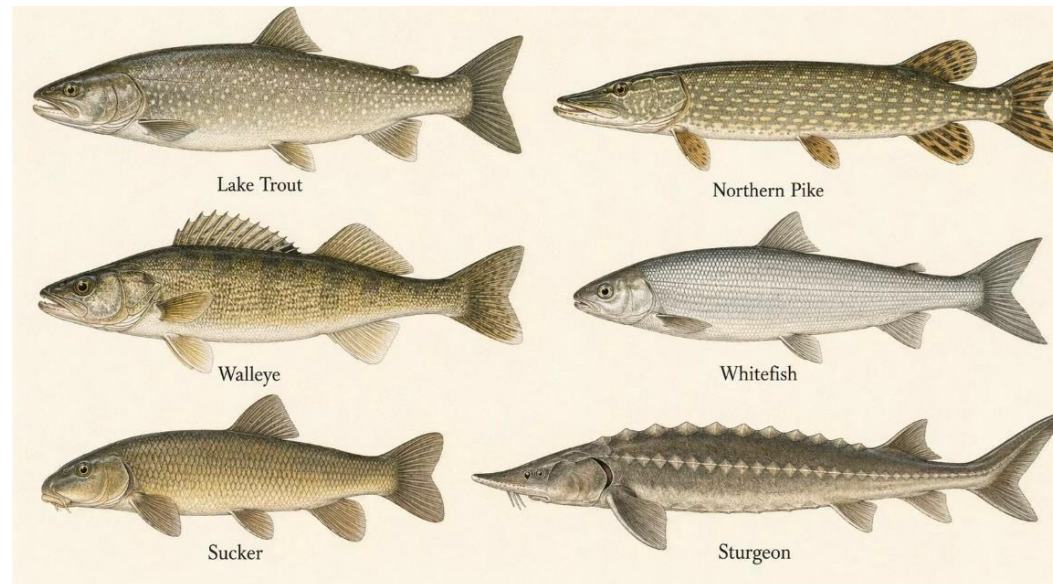
RESEARCH:

Language is connected to nature, seasons, activities, culture and traditional knowledge.

Language gaps between youth and Elders can interrupt intergenerational transmission.

Elder naming fish

What disappears when the word disappears?



Yiddish: Recognition, Memory, Belonging

PERSONAL: my father singing in Yiddish to survivors and immigrants.

What might be happening when a threatened ancestral language is heard again in community?

RESONANCE: distinct histories of language threat; a possible shared mechanism of cultural recognition and continuity.

<https://rsa.fau.edu/album/36892>

Musical Moments, CD 3 – Track Track 19 – Oifn Pripitchik

Melody as Carried Knowledge

MUSIC / VIDEO: Ve'al Yedei Avadecha Ha-Nevi'im

Nusach: inherited melodic patterns that locate prayer within ritual time and communal tradition.

Shaliach Tzibur: a relational (representative of the congregation) bearer and facilitator of inherited communal practice, not simply performer. Not closer to God than anyone else, but through knowledge gives voice to many.

RESONANCE : some knowledge is transmitted by participation, repetition and experience.

<https://rsa.fau.edu/album/36648>

(Track 11, Disk 3 - A Life of Music)

You Learn by Being There

RESEARCH:

watching, doing, working together, storytelling and repeated participation were central to knowledge transfer.

Knowledge emerged as situated in time, place, season, language and relationship.

RESONANCE:

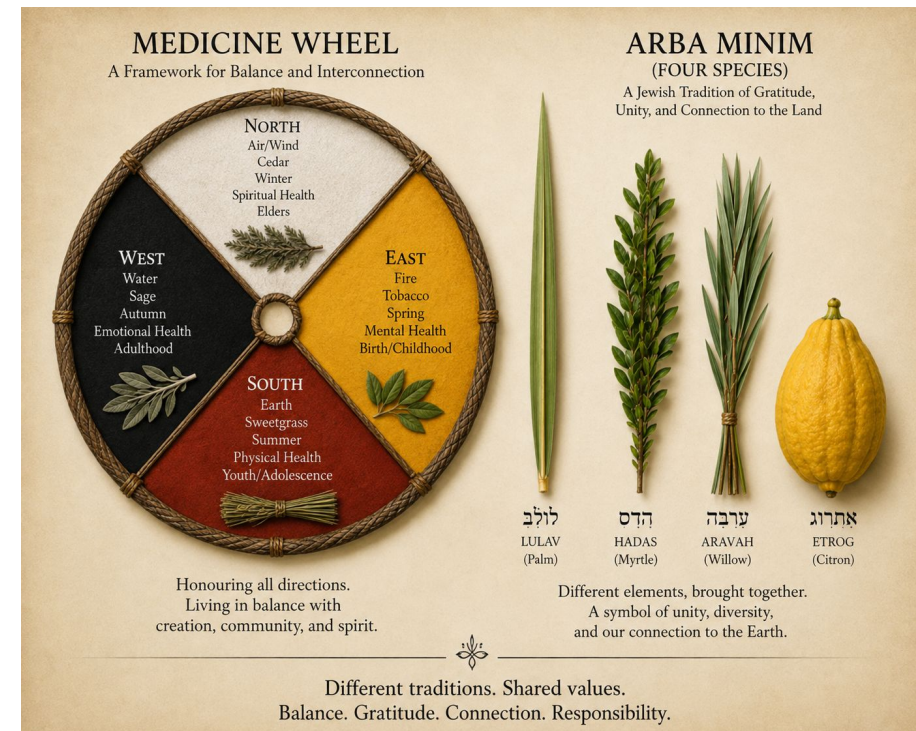
The Passover Seder: tradition can be carried as practice before it can be fully explained as proposition.

Land Enacted in Ceremony

RESEARCH: ceremony, prayer, songs and spiritual relationship with land were described as sources of strength and reconnection.

FOUR MEDICINES / ARBA MINIM: distinct meanings; resonance in plants, directionality, season, movement and ceremonial relationship with land.

The comparison is functional and relational: not an assertion that the ceremonies mean the same thing.



Culture as Healing

Land, language, ceremony and culture can strengthen identity, continuity, recognition, belonging and relationship.

Trauma may rupture relationships across generations; culturally grounded practices may help people participate again in a living continuity.

Music is one example: not a cure for trauma, but a vehicle for recognition, affiliation, memory and collective presence.

The shaputuan



What Might Be Healing Across These Distinct Contexts?

Identity — knowing where and among whom one belongs

Continuity — relationship across generations

Recognition — language, identity and history acknowledged

Embodiment — meaning carried through land, movement, sound, plants, food and season

Relationship — family, community, ancestors, land and the sacred

Agency / responsibility — participating in continuity rather than being defined only by injury

Culturally grounded healing restores disruptions not by erasing what happened but by restoring the relationships through which people know who they are and where they came from.

What Does This Ask of Psychology?

Clinical care — attend to relationships, culture, history and community rather than symptoms alone.

Community programming — recognize and resource healing knowledge already present within communities.

Policy — support culturally grounded, community-led approaches rather than requiring clients to conform to one-size-fits-all models.

The psychologist may be facilitator and supporter rather than sole bearer of treatment.



From Cultural Continuity to Healing

Antisemitism is a significant concern in our communities

Consider

Fit • Safety • Choice • Trust • Belonging • Agency

Cultural participation as a therapeutic resource, as appropriate

- Synagogues
- Study groups
- Language classes
- Cultural programs
- Community centres
- Trips etc.

Recognize the healing wisdom already within our communities.

When Land is More Than Earth

Healing is more than the reduction of suffering.

It may also be the restoration of relationship.

Every generation inherits—and every generation carries forward.

No Hay Como Nuestro Dios — Ladino Ein Keloheinu

<https://rsa.fau.edu/album/36096>

I Heard a Voice From Heaven, Track 4

Thank you.

Working Research Sources

<https://rsa.fau.edu/louis-danto>

Kirmayer & Velaskakis (2009) – Healing Traditions

Danto & Walsh (2017) — Mental Health Perceptions and Practices of a Cree Community in Northern Ontario

CPA & Psychology Foundation of Canada (2018) — Psychology's Response to the TRC Report

Walsh, Danto & Sommerfeld (2020) — Land-Based Intervention

Danto, Walsh & Sommerfeld (2020) — Learning from Those Who Do

Sommerfeld, Danto & Walsh (2021) — Indigenous Grassroots and Family-Run Land-Based Healing

Walsh, Sommerfeld & Danto (2022) — Land-Based Healing: Toward Understanding the Role of Elders