

Danny Richmond: Jews have a duty to native peoples

Jodie Shupac, The CJN, September 15



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Danny Richmond is director of community engagement at Ve'ahavta, a Jewish social service organization dedicated to promoting positive social change. Richmond, 30, has worked for more than a decade in youth leadership, community mobilization, interfaith engagement and international development. An activist and former campaign manager for the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, Richmond's role at Ve'ahavta includes working to engage the Canadian Jewish community in building partnerships with Canada's indigenous people. With Ve'ahavta wrapping up a new, four-session educational series called "Walking Together: Learning about Indigenous Culture, History and Struggles as Jews," The CJN spoke to Richmond about reconciliation, solidarity and tikkun olam.

Why does Ve'ahavta need a community engagement department?

At the core of Ve'ahavta's mission there's the value to engage the Jewish community in acts of repairing the world. The community engagement department is responsible for mobilizing the Jewish community through education, volunteerism, leadership development and supporting Jewish communal institutions to be agents of tikkun olam. This cuts across three priority issues for Ve'ahavta: homelessness, reconciliation and international crisis. The second refers to reconciliation with indigenous people. It means working in solidarity with Canada's indigenous peoples.



Danny Richmond, director of community engagement at Ve'ahavta.

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Ve’ahavta has had a longstanding relationship with First Nations communities in Toronto. Can you explain what that’s looked like?

Part of our founding story is that our outreach van, which distributes food and support services to people experiencing homelessness, was initially a partnership with the organization Native Men’s Residence (Na-Me-Res). We no longer have a formal partnership with them, but both Ve’ahavta and Na-Me-Res continue to have outreach vans that go out, and we continue to work closely with them. The shared van was one concrete manifestation of our partnership, but the real thrust of our involvement with First Nations communities has been expressed through two of our crucial initiatives – the first of which really made indigenous issues a focal point for Ve’ahavta. This is Briut Ontario, our health promotion initiative in partnership with the Kenora Chiefs Advisory (KCA). Three or four years ago, we were given an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant to work with the KCA advisory to do health promotional programming in that region.

The other big piece was that we helped draft a statement of solidarity and action in collaboration with the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA), the Canadian Council for Reform Judaism (CCRJ) and the Toronto Board of Rabbis at the national closing event of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada. The statement acknowledged that we have a responsibility to work in better ally-ship and partnership with First Nations, Inuit and Métis people in Canada. The reality is that it’s hard to look at any form of media these days and not see the social justice issues faced by indigenous communities. Part of the evolution of Ve’ahavta has been to work to tackle these issues. It’s now a core part of our strategy to engage the Jewish community to see how it can work in better relationship with indigenous communities.

What are Ve’ahavta’s priority areas with respect to this cause?

We have four key strategic areas: 1. providing opportunities to act alongside and learn from

indigenous communities; 2. providing educational resources to Jewish organizations to better learn how to work with indigenous communities – for example, we published a resource for synagogues, largely in response to their asking us to, to respond to the TRC calls to action; 3. leadership development; and 4. working with our Jewish communal institutions to support the TRC calls to action – for example, last year we ran a professional development day with Jewish educational institutions. The idea was to assist educators in better incorporating indigenous culture and history into their curricula. That program will run again this year.

We're also working with CIJA and CCRJ to create a Canadian Jewish Indigenous Reconciliation network to act as a hub to mobilize the community around these issues.

What responsibility does the Canadian Jewish community have to First Nations communities in Canada?

We have a responsibility to repair the world and address injustices where we live. Even though the Jewish community didn't perpetrate or organize the residential school system, as citizens of Canada and as people commanded to pursue a more just country, we have a responsibility to work in partnership with indigenous communities to repair damages done. We're not approaching it from a place of guilt or shame, but solidarity, especially because of our shared values and experiences.

What do you see as some of the shared values between Jews and First Nations people?

There are so many. Values like the importance and transmission of language, the family as a cornerstone and the importance of land. And both groups have unique experiences of recovering from genocides. That forms a powerful place from which to build solidarity.

The reason I got involved personally with this sort of work was that I was asked to speak on a panel at a TRC event about what it's like to be a grandchild of Holocaust survivors. A friend of mine also spoke as a descendant of residential school survivors. I was struck by what he said and the similarity of both Jews and First Nations groups being told to "just get over it." I think we have a shared understanding of the pain of that statement.

Are there dangers to drawing parallels between the experiences of Jews and First Nations people, particularly with regard to comparing genocides?

Absolutely. When I say we have shared experiences, I don't mean identical. But we're in a position to understand some of their challenges. By no means would I ever equate the residential school system and the Holocaust. They're very unique genocides with different contexts, timelines and crimes, but I acknowledge both of them as genocides. I don't think that takes away from the Holocaust, but gives us as Jews a good platform from which to empathize.

Does the work you do in terms of dialogue and education include examining historical encounters between early Jews in Canada and First Nations people, namely, the ways Jews may have been complicit in injustices against indigenous people?

The lens we look through is to see ourselves as Jewish Canadians. Although the Jewish community did not orchestrate the residential school system, we have a responsibility to help fix the damages it caused.

What is the goal of the “Walking Together” program?

The idea is for members of the Jewish community to learn about indigenous issues from indigenous educators as well as to reflect on our similarities, differences and how we can be better allies to the indigenous community. All of the sessions are led by indigenous community members, elders, teachers and educators and the ensuing reflections are done by some of our partner synagogue rabbis or by Ve’ahavta staff. Our purpose is to really listen to indigenous teachers and educators and then to reflect in a Jewish context. All the events, both for this program and others, which Ve’ahavta has put to build solidarity with indigenous people, have had such a positive response. There is such a desire among Jews to engage in these issues and we’re really trying to respond to that, as well as to acknowledge injustice and work toward repairing it.

This interview has been edited and condensed for style and clarity.



Ve'ahavta

A Jewish Humanitarian Response to Poverty

About Ve'ahavta: Ve'ahavta is dedicated to promoting positive change in the lives of people of all faiths who are marginalized by poverty and committed to engaging community members as volunteers to support our collective mission of repairing the world. www.veahavta.org

Initiatives bring Jews, First Nations closer together (The Canadian Jewish News)



Paul Lungen, Staff Reporter, Monday, March 24, 2014

More than 100 years ago, Winnipeg businessman Harry Henteleff used to make it a practice to get out of town and do some hunting and fishing in the dense forests and pristine lakes that were plentiful on the Manitoba-Ontario border.

Henteleff was usually accompanied by guides from local First Nations communities, and the friendships he struck up stayed with him for life.

More recently, Henteleff's grandson, Michael Dan, has been making his way into a nearby area in Northwestern Ontario, not far from the Manitoba border, which was ceded by Anishinabe-speaking peoples to the Crown in what is known as Treaty 3.

Like his grandfather, Dan respects Aboriginal culture, but it's not hunting and fishing that brings him there.

Dan, president and CEO of Gemini Power Corporation, is promoting a hydro-electric project that he believes will benefit his company, as well as pay handsome dividends for local First Nations bands for generations to come.

"My family has a connection to Treaty 3 [lands] that goes back 100 years," said Dan. "Now his grandson has come back with several million dollars and is [developing] a hydro station in the area."

Dan is far from the first contemporary Jew to take an interest in Aboriginal well-being. Late last year, the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ), meeting in Sand Diego adopted a "Resolution on First Nations" advanced by a committee of the Canadian Council of Reform Jews/URJ. The resolution recounts the

many social, economic, health and education challenges facing First Nations communities. It calls on Reform Jews to “continue to develop and strengthen relationships with the First Nations community.” It also calls on the federal government to urge provincial authorities to teach First Nations history and to work with First Nations to address the challenges facing Aboriginal Canadians.

Meanwhile, Ve’ahavta, the Canadian Jewish humanitarian and relief organization, is partnering with Aboriginal communities in the Treaty 3 area to improve the health of First Nations peoples.

With a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the support of philanthropist Larry Tanenbaum; Phil Fontaine, former chief of the Assembly of First Nations; and former Prime Minister Paul Martin, Ve’ahavta will send young people to communities in the Kenora area, near the Manitoba border, to support local community health programs.

In interviews with Dan, Sarah Zelcer, Ve’ahavta’s director of national and international programs, and Martin, the longstanding ties of the Jewish and First Nations communities were stressed.

“It wasn’t that long ago that we were like them, second-class citizens in the countries we live in,” Dan said.

The hydro project that Gemini is promoting – it’s still seeking bureaucratic approvals – will over time be turned over to local First Nations communities, providing an income stream while encouraging financial self-sufficiency, he said.

“It’s much more than just a business deal,” Dan continued. “It’s trying to help this community become more self-reliant. It’s taking all the smarts and knowledge we have on Bay Street and applying it to a community that was left to fend for itself without much success.”

“It’s much more than a project now. It’s a lifelong connection to the community,” he added.

Zelcer, of Ve’ahavta, said, Bri’ut (Hebrew for health) is a capacity-building program that will co-operate with the Kenora Chiefs Advisory to support community-led health promotion programming in seven Anishinabe reserves over the next 3-1/2 years.

The program will see seven graduate students studying public health or social work under the direction of their host communities to promote health.

“We see Bri’ut as our entry point into building meaningful relationships with Aboriginal communities which are based on partnership, collaboration, mutual respect and trust. Our goal is to develop more programs which focus on supporting Aboriginal communities in Canada in the areas of health and education,” Zelcer said.

Ve'ahavta is hoping to involve Toronto synagogues in "a movement within the Jewish community that seeks to better understand the issues affecting Aboriginal Canadians, to build partnerships with Aboriginal communities, and to work hand in hand toward promoting a more equitable Canada."

Contacted at his office in Montreal, Martin noted that "the Canadian Jewish community has for some time shown a great interest in the plight of Canada's indigenous people. This is very much to the credit of the Jewish community."

Martin, who spearheaded the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative, which includes a five-year pilot project funded in part by the Judith and Lawrence Tanenbaum Family Foundation, said Aboriginal Canadians are the youngest and fastest-growing segment of the Canadian population. He urged young Canadian Jews to "get involved with young Aboriginal Canadians. That will lead to better understanding," he said.

Tanenbaum said his involvement in Native issues can be traced back to a visit to the White Dog Reserve in northern Ontario nearly five years ago. Accompanying Martin at the time, he said he "was moved by what I saw and what heard that day.

"I take great pride that the Jewish community is engaged with and working on behalf of Canada's Aboriginal people in many facets.

"The former Canadian Jewish Congress was deeply involved in programming with First Nations [and] the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs... participated in the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation, as well as mentoring Aboriginal leaders in advocacy and leadership.

"I think we all view this work as part of our community's tradition of tikkun olam. It is very basic, but so essential. We seek to make our community, province and country a better place. It begins with helping others, and it is something that is rooted in the traditions of our people that were taught to me by my parents."

Martin will discuss his education initiatives at Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple on April 10, while Dan is scheduled to speak at Temple Emanu-El on April 6 on First Nations' traumatic memory and economic marginalization.

Read in online [here](#).

Ve'ahavta's Chair of the Board, Bernie Farber, noted: "First Nations and Jews share common bonds and have a strong sense of community and honour of our elders and teachers. We also share the experience of having faced trauma and discrimination. While we have travelled separate but parallel roads, we understand the need to stand in solidarity as we face the truth of Canada's historical treatment of First Nations people."

The statement symbolizes the ongoing support between the Jewish and Aboriginal communities and underscores the bond that exists between the two groups. The statement is the culmination of efforts by organizations like Ve'ahavta and CIJA to support Aboriginal communities through a multi-pronged approach that includes health care, education, capacity-building, advocacy and leadership training.

"We believe it is important for all Canadians to understand and recognize the long history of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada," said Jonathan Freedman, a member of the Jewish Federation of Ottawa's Community Relations Committee, CIJA's local partner in the capital. "CIJA is honoured to have collaborated with the TRC in Vancouver, Toronto and Ottawa. It is our hope that this document helps to educate and galvanize action from Jewish community organizations and individuals to work towards a positive shared future."