

When words are part of the healing

Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, says he takes no issue with the \$10.5 million compensation given to Maher Arar, the Canadian wrongfully deported and tortured in Syria. It is the apology Arar received that frustrates him.

So far, the Canadian government has refused to apologize to the First Nations peoples for their treatment during the residential school era. Not that the aboriginal leadership doesn't want the financial compensation they deserve, but you have to wonder what makes the leader of an economically beleaguered community focus on words instead of money.

Many may question whether this seemingly noble position is genuine. I have no doubt that it is.

A year and a half ago, I had the privilege of touring Israel with 16 leaders of the Assembly of First Nations in a visit organized by the Canadian Jewish Congress. The trip was arranged to build bridges between two communities that don't know each other well.

On a grey afternoon in January 2006, the group of us walked slowly through Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. The visit to the world-famous site, with its pictorial history of the destruction of European Jewry, its tree-lined commemoration of "righteous Gentiles" who assisted their Jewish neighbours, its monuments to the death camps where millions perished because of their ethnic identity and faith, was to be the centrepiece of the trip.

I have been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, and visited Auschwitz during the 2005 commemoration of the camp's liberation, but the serene atmosphere at Yad Vashem provides one of the world's most moving experiences. The memorial grounds are a meditative island in the heart of the Jewish state's bustling capital, and it was impossible for the First Nations leadership, like all thoughtful visitors, not to feel the weight of Holocaust history. This time, however, there was a new dimension to the place.

Yad Vashem wasn't crowded that day and our group had some of the more intense spots to ourselves. I expected the children's memorial, and its unforgettable hall of mirrors where the names of more than a million child Holocaust victims are endlessly read aloud in candle-filled darkness, to have a powerful impact. But as we exited the dark hall, something else happened. We experienced an outpouring of stories about children lost right here in Canada. We then formed a circle and heard traditional aboriginal prayers that gave me an

intimate glimpse at the tragic legacy of Canada's residential schools.

As one of the elders explained, there is no point comparing tragedies, and the plights of European Jewish children and indigenous Canadian children each stand on their own without any need to rank them in their severity. But there is something about the way the Jewish world has commemorated the Holocaust and honoured the memory of its victims that has allowed the survivors and their offspring to move on. In fact, it is for this reason that Holocaust denial is seen today as one of the most anti-Semitic of acts.

But for Canada's First Nations, the acknowledgment and commemoration of their own historic tragedy has not yet really begun.

It is not any experience I've had in Canada, but rather the experience I had at Yad Vashem, that has made me understand what national chief Phil Fontaine is talking about. Financial compensation for wrongs done to a person or community is, of course, helpful and necessary. But words and symbols go a long way. An apology on behalf of the nation for the residential schools travesty is really the least we can do.

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