



Good evening ladies and gentlemen. My name is Rabbi Gersh Lazarow. I have the privilege of being one of the rabbis of Temple Beth Israel in St Kilda and I too am one of the co-convenors of Walking Together.

I have been given the honoured task of making it clear as to why it is that we are here tonight.

As Australians we pride ourselves on being part of the most successful multicultural nation in the world and how, for the most part, we happily coexist in this great land. But when we hear multiculturalism talked about, the conversation usually focuses on the enormous contribution of the more than seven million migrants who, like many of our families, have made their home here since 1945.

Almost always we fail to look deeper to the place and the primacy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the First Peoples in Australia's multicultural nation.

Put simply, our national inability to neither adequately recognise nor appropriately reconcile with indigenous Australia is what we Jews describe as an *avera* – a sin of the highest order, and one that I believe we cannot expect our political leaders or public servants to atone for unless we ourselves are prepared to go on that journey with them.

My friends, while apologies have been made, and statements have been offered, the time has come for us to recount the role that we have both actively and passively played in this indignity. The time has come for us to reconsider our individual and collective positions on the plight of our nation's first people and, hopefully, to find a path forward to real reconciliation and lasting recognition.

In his *Hilchot Teshuvah*, his laws of repentance, Rambam teaches us that while Jewish tradition accepts that we cannot and should not be held accountable for the mistakes and injustices of the past, neither are we fully absolved from them. There is, as Rambam notes, a significant difference between living with the past and living in the past.

So, what then is the past we must live with? Well, it needs to begin with a recognition that by the time most of our ancestors arrived in this country, Aboriginal Australians had already suffered 150 years of persecution that bordered on genocide; oppression that deprived them of language, culture and laws; and discrimination that treated them as something less than human.

Their land was abundant, their tradition was rich, and their people were flourishing. The spirit of the land lived in them in ways that we as Jews can strongly identify with, and yet, they were denied such basic freedoms as citizenship, the



right to vote, or even the right to choose where they lived.

And for those who were confined to living on a mission, the assimilation policy also involved the banning of ceremonies, the destruction of local languages and relocation from Country.

The grief endured by families whose children were removed is incalculable and is still felt today.

Having occupied the land for tens of thousands of years prior to 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have long maintained a physical and spiritual affinity with their homelands, and a deep-rooted connection to their heritage and identity.

Unlike many of us who have come to call Australia home in more recent generations, for our First Australians the struggle has never been about “fitting in”. It has always been about the pursuit of justice, land rights and self-determination – having the sovereign right to govern themselves, not as separate from the Australian nation, but as a respected part of it.

What makes their struggle even more difficult for me as a Jewish Australian is the enduring knowledge that at a time when Aboriginal people themselves were denied citizenship and other basic human rights in Australia, they, under the leadership of William Cooper, Secretary of the Australian Aborigines’ League and an elder of the Yorta Yorta people, stood up for us and our people as Nazism spread across Europe.

While world leadership watched in silent disbelief, William Cooper was so shaken by the events of Kristallnacht that on 6th December 1938 he marched on the German Consulate in

Melbourne to deliver a petition condemning the Nazi government. This was the only known private protest anywhere in the world against the Nazi regime, and an extraordinary, brave and noble gesture, and one that I don’t believe we have adequately reciprocated.

So, 80 years later we find ourselves standing here today as representatives of the Australian Jewish community, together with our friends and allies, looking to continue this process of reciprocation. By walking together today we resolve not only to acknowledge the painful mistakes of the past, but also to finally commit to doing everything within our ability to restore our First Peoples to their rightful place, not just as part of this multicultural nation, but as the cultural and spiritual bedrock on which it sits. This is what true recognition - true reconciliation - must look like!

The reality, however, is that no such change will come to this country or its First People until communities like ours engage, inspire and activate enough of our fellow Australians to care as much about the future of our indigenous brothers and sisters as William Cooper chose to care about our parents and grandparents in 1938.

My friends, that is why we are walking together - to remember William Cooper and recommit to his legacy.

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