

I am truly honoured and humbled to be asked to share a few thoughts at this event, so important for our ongoing project of reconciliation in our land.

I recognise the fact that I am speaking on sacred land, land that saw the banishment and punishment of indigenous people and activists since colonial times right through to our more recent anti-apartheid struggles, activists who would not accept injustice in our land. I honour those who have gone before me, and those who will come after me, by recognising that for us to reconcile in this country, so riven with hate and intolerance, we must introspect and find our common heritage, our common humanity and our common vision for a country that respects all who live in it and contribute to it.

So, if we are to honour our national motto, the motto that recognises we are a diverse people united, we have to own our diversity. I speak here, like many people, with multiple identities because people are products of many identities. I am an academic, a medical doctor, who has spent his life seeking healing not just for individual patients, but working with communities to advance population health; I am a white person who grew up during apartheid and benefited unfairly from the structural advantages that being white under apartheid bequeathed in so many ways – but undoing that inequitable benefit means working for redress so that the excluded become included; I was born Jewish to 1st and 2nd generation immigrant parents who escape intolerance and genocide in Europe and were able to settle here to give their children a different life; my upbringing and their values that steadfastly resisted the idea that you had to side with whomever had power at the time to protect yourself, gave me the moral basis to believe that we must work for justice; I am a civic activist and civic chairperson who has stood over the past years with Khoi and San leaders seeking to protect their intangible heritage resources at the Liesbeek River. In all these identities, I see how important it is for us to recognise sacred spaces as places of potential healing and therefore deserving of protection and valorisation. We need that for our healing – not just as individuals but as peoples, as a nation.

Because a wounded people presents unending kindling to spark cycles of revenge and retaliation. How often around the world have we seen victims turn perpetrators, who then later become victims again, including victims of genocide who themselves forget that power is transient when seeking to oppress others in the mistaken belief they are protecting themselves?

We stand here on an island, separated from the rest of Cape Town by the Atlantic Ocean. The sea, in Jewish mysticism, is a metaphor for the “concealed worlds” that hold our spiritual life. Yet one of the most powerful of Biblical stories involves the parting of a sea – the Red Sea – when the Jews escaped bondage leaving Egypt. They were enabled to see the spirits protecting them by this miracle. In the same way, we metaphorically need to reconnect with our spiritual being in a common humanity.

It is no coincidence that the Liesbeek River, a site associated with resistance by indigenous people, first against Portuguese invaders more than 5 centuries ago, and then later against Dutch land occupation, which led to a series of frontier wars, is now a site of a titanic struggle against powerful economic interests intent on destroying a sacred floodplain, notwithstanding SAHRA’s efforts to consider the site for national heritage status and as part of the National Khoi and San liberation trail. But it is this river that empties into the Salt River and discharges into Table Bay and shares its waters with Robben Island.

Water is a source of life. It is also a medium of irresistible connection. You can’t hold water back as we have learned with Climate Change. In Jewish prayers, we find a blessing for the rain in the fall and for dew in the spring. The Torah itself is compared to water – as a spiritual “life-giving force.”

Today, let us think about our connections as ways to affirm cultural footprints, not as isolated enclaves reserved exclusively for some people, but as a collective of mutual appreciation, where there is respect of diverse religions, cultures and identities. Lives are linked to memories of the past, we need to preserve and affirm those memories because they make us real.

Kai gangans.