



*Pesach, Day 1, 5778*  
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**The Power of Incrementalism**  
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For a while now, I have been very disturbed by what I see as a moral stain in our society: namely, the fact that our government is breaking up families when ICE deports adult immigrants while leaving their children, born in America and therefore American citizens, behind. Government policy therefore has the entirely foreseeable effect of ripping parents from children, and children from parents, and this strikes me as cruel. I felt that the message of Passover impelled me to do something about it, and when I inquired what I could do, I was told by experts in the field that I could meet with immigrants who were detained by ICE and held in the House of Corrections in Boston and were about to be deported, and separated from their children. I could do this because I was clergy, and prisoners are allowed to meet with clergy. While I could not solve their immigration problems, I could be with them, listen to their stories, and hopefully make them feel less alone.

And so on Monday, March 19, Aliza and I went to the House of Corrections in Boston to meet with an immigrant who was being detained by ICE and was soon to be deported. Since Aliza speaks fluent Spanish, she was going to serve as a translator if the person we were seeing did not speak English.

But when we got to the House of Corrections—for reasons that were never explained to us, and in jail you don't ask, you do as you are told—the guard led us to a 30-year old woman from Uganda named Jane Doe. She looked so gentle. What is she doing in jail? Why is she here? Then we heard her story.

She was born and raised in Uganda. She is gay. In Uganda it is not okay to be gay. Indeed, it is not okay to be different. In Newton our motto is celebrate difference. Not so the town where Jane Doe grew up. She was born left-handed. When she started writing with her left hand, her father and her teachers would whip her left arm and force her to write with her right hand. She bears the scars of those whippings, quite literally, to this day. She pointed to those scars on her left arm. Message clear: Be the same. People are righties. You are a rightie.

All the more so, it was not okay to be gay. The townspeople, the police, her own father, are all very against gay. Gay people in Uganda live in the closet. But as Jane Doe emerged into her adulthood, she came to understand that being gay was who she was. That was how she was born. It should be okay to be gay. She started talking this way, and she became a listening ear for the many closeted gay people in Uganda. They told their stories of life in the closet. She listened. She encouraged them to be who they are and to be at peace with who they are.

Not only did she listen. She discovered that she has a talent for public speaking. Her English is flawless. Her English is one of four languages she speaks fluently. After college she started using her fluency and eloquence to speak in public in support of LGBTQ rights. It became her mission to get her country to rethink its long-held, deeply anchored prejudices. Merely making these speeches was an act both of civil disobedience—she was violating the law in urging that gay was okay—and moral courage. She could be arrested—or worse—for speaking out.

She was featured in a prominent Ugandan magazine making the case that gay is okay.

This magazine article, coming after her years of making speeches in support of gay rights, turned her into a woman wanted by the authorities. Ugandan authorities argued that she was guilty of the crime of recruitment. She was recruiting people to become gay. No, she

responded, she was educating them that if they were gay, that was okay. To the authorities education *is* recruitment. Soon she was wanted, and she was on the run. She had three terrible choices.

She could submit to the mob of her townspeople. But she knew that if she did, they would kill her.

She could turn herself in to the police. But she knew that if she did, the police would kill her. The police in her town are part of the problem, not the solution. Any number of activists under their custody end up, in her word, “gone.” Gone means never heard from again.

Her third option was to submit to the will of her father. Her father’s move was two-fold. To kane her by day. And at night to subject her to a regime of what he called “corrective rape.” Every night she would be forced to have relations with a different man. Eventually she would become pregnant. When she had the baby, that would kill the lesbian demons within her.

Facing these three options, she fled for her life to America. Because Jane Doe was a human rights activist, she already had a visa to get into America. Her mother suggested that she come to Boston, because she had heard of other Ugandans that went to Boston.

Jane Doe spent every last penny she had to buy a plane ticket to Boston. On January 14, 2018, she lands, all alone, at Logan airport, this 30-year old from Uganda, running for her life, for the sin of being gay. It is mid-January. She has never seen snow. She knows nobody in Boston. She has no network. She has no money and no credit card. She has nowhere to go and no way to get there. But being poor, cold, and alone in Boston in January was better than being killed by the mob, killed by the police, or kane and raped.

She lands in terminal E. Most of us have been there. She goes to Passport control. She meets with the officer who asks her the purpose of her visit. She explains that she is seeking

asylum in America as she would be killed back home in Uganda. The officer says wait a moment. The next thing she knows, an ICE officer comes and arrests her and takes her to the House of Corrections, where she has been held from January 15 until the present day. They took away her passport and her cell phone. She has no way to connect with her mother or her partner who lives in Uganda. She is all alone, a stranger in a strange land, locked up indefinitely for no reason. She wept for she had never been in jail before. Will she ever get out? Will she ever see her mother and partner again?

Though we do not read about Jane Doe at the Seder table, this is a Pesach story. The Pesach trajectory is *m'avdut l'cheirut*, from slavery to freedom. We were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt, and with ten plagues and signs and wonders God set us free. Jane Doe is in *avdut*, slavery, in jail, indefinitely, five miles from here, for seeking asylum. Jane Doe is waiting to be free. But God is not going to free her. The question is can *we* be inspired by our Pesach story to do God's work?

The Pesach seder challenges each of us to respond to *injustice in our own time*. In every generation we are to regard ourselves as if *we* went forth from Egypt. Not our ancestors. We. Ourselves. This is not history. This is now. This is not ancient oppression. This is oppression now. The point of the seder is of course family and friends coming together. Warm and loving memories that last a lifetime. Engaging conversation. Evocative rituals. Joyful singing. Great food, great wine, and killer desserts.

But the point of the seder is also to ask the question: what injustice is happening now, in our own time? And what are we going to do about it?

Jane Doe's story may not be your thing. But the seder asks you to think about what *is* your thing? What do *you* think is broken? What is an injustice that you care enough to do something about?

I recently heard a fabulous lecture by Yehuda Kurtzer of Hartman Institute talking about three different responses to injustice.

One response is: status quo. What is is. Let it go. There is nothing to be done about it.

A second response is: let's effect a messianic and total cure. This is Isaiah's vision of the lion lying down with the lamb. Historic enmities will just cease. Presto pronto perfect.

Doing nothing, accepting the status quo, is obviously not an ideal move. Nothing gets better. So too reaching for the messianic move is not helpful. The lion never *lies down* with the lamb. 100% of the time the lion *eats* the lamb. What is the point in reaching for the unattainable?

The third response is what Yehuda calls incrementalism. Make it better. Better than it was. Better than yesterday. Not perfect. Not solved. But better. This incrementalist approach channels the wisdom of Rabbi Tarfon, it is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from starting it.

Jane Doe's story was a story of incrementalism. Gay people have no rights in Uganda. She could have done nothing. She could have lived in the closet, denied her identity, ignored the problem. Instead she spoke about it. She wrote about it. She advocated for it. She did not get the lion to lie down with the lamb. Uganda did not pass a civil rights bill for gay people. But she did help some gay people in Uganda know that they are not alone, and that there is nothing wrong with them for being gay.

Even though Jane Doe is in jail now, her story is not over. Aliza and I spoke with a dear friend who is a prominent attorney at a prominent law firm in town. He connected us with a partner in his firm who has arranged for Jane Doe to have pro bono representation in her attempt to gain asylum. It is not going to be easy. It is not going to be fast. It is going to be hard, and it is going to be slow. And this team of lawyers will not be able to free *all the prisoners* who have heart-breaking stories. But hopefully, they will, in time be able to free Jane Doe. The power of incrementalism.

That is this team of lawyers, doing God's work. What about us? We find ourselves in between our two seders. The seders leave us with friends, family, food, wine, songs, rituals, memories. But the seders also leave us with something else. The seders also leave us with two questions. What big problem are you going to tackle? What little thing will you do to help?  
*Chag k"v's.*