



Parshat Naso
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The People We Free
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Every Monday morning Aliza and I visit a woman in the House of Corrections in Boston. She is gay, and she is from Uganda, where it is not okay to be gay. She was persecuted for being gay, and she fled for her very life by seeking asylum in Boston. Every visit with her is emotional. The Monday after Mother's Day was no exception.

When our friend left Uganda, she left her mother behind. Unlike her father, who could not and would not accept her for being gay, her mother loved her and accepted her for who she is. They always celebrated Mother's Day together in Uganda. She really missed her mother. She wanted to talk to her. But she was locked up and could not connect. That day, May 13, also happened to have been her birthday. She was thinking about her mother and her siblings. She knew they were thinking about her. But again, she was locked up, they could not speak, and there was no one in jail to mark her birthday. 119 days after arriving in the United States, instead of celebrating with her loved ones and living her life, she was stuck in the House of Corrections, eating prison food, wearing prison clothing, waiting and praying for the day that might change her life for the better.

That is why this coming Wednesday, May 30, is so important. We have our Judgment Day on Yom Kippur when God decides our fate. This Wednesday is her actual Judgment Day. She will face a judge who will decide her fate, whether to grant her application for political asylum. Application granted, she can live as a free person in Boston. Application denied, she is deported back to Uganda to face unspeakable punishment and persecution. That is judgment day, for real.

What happens if she is freed?

She has no family or personal friends in America. The only people she knows are two rabbis and her team of lawyers.

She has no home. No money. No car. No job. If the judge grants her freedom and political asylum, where will she go, what will she do, what happens next?

When we got back from seeing her that Monday, we sent out an email to the congregation asking for help. Instantly, any number of people responded by saying: she can live with us. Some said she can live with us for a year. Others said she can live with us indefinitely. Within 24 hours, we had received *seven* sincere offers to house a total stranger.

But the offer to house our friend was just the tip of the iceberg.

She has no health insurance. Doctors offered to treat her for free.

She has endured trauma, loss, dislocation. Mental health professionals offered to counsel her for free.

She has no job. People offered to help her find a job.

She has no car. People offered to drive her around.

She has no money. People offered to give her resources to get her on her feet.

All for a total stranger.

The immediacy of the response, the intensity of the response, made me think about a prayer we say in the Amida, that God frees captives, *matir asurim*. Because it is in the Amida, we say that God frees captives three times a day, every morning, noon and evening. On Shabbat, counting musaf, we say it four times. It is a recurring motif of our daily and Shabbat prayer. *Matir asurim*. God frees captives. God frees captives. God frees captives. Every day. Forever. We say it. What does it mean?

I think it means that when we free those unjustly imprisoned we are doing God's work. In a deep sense, our community's instant and overwhelming generosity channels this core Jewish value.

We all won the lottery by virtue of when and where we were born. Most of us were born in America. Or we have been blessed to become citizens. That is winning the lottery. We did not do anything to deserve this lottery ticket. We were just lucky. We could just as easily have been born in another place and time. There but for the grace of God go I.

Recently, Aliza met with a 24-year old man from Honduras, also in the House of Corrections. Back in Honduras, he is married to the love of his life. They have a little daughter, the apple of his eye. He is far from home, far from hope, far from his wife, far from his daughter, stuck in prison in Boston, where he knows nobody. Why? Because in his village in Honduras, gangs rule. They extort money from people. This man paid the gangs as much as he could. He has witnessed what happens to people who do not pay the gangs as much as the gangs want to be paid. The gang harassing him wanted more, but he had no more to give. They told him they would kill him if he didn't pay. In desperation, he spent two months riding on top of trains to get to the US border, and then paid the last money he had to a coyote, a smuggler, who promised to smuggle him into Texas, where he would try to work, earn, and send back money to his wife and daughter. But the minute he landed in Texas, ICE arrested him, and since they have run out of jail space where he was arrested, he was sent to Boston.

Now I am not criticizing ICE here. Nations need laws and borders. The ICE officers are doing their jobs. But wherever you happen to fall on the immigration debate, what is clear is this man was forced to resort to desperate measures because of where he was born. He told Aliza that all he wants is to be home with his wife and daughter in his village, to be left to live in

peace. But because of where he was born, that is not to be. Because of where we were born, we won the lottery which allows us to build a life without worrying about things like gangs.

We won the lottery. Acknowledge it. Own it. Pay it forward. But how? What do we do to pay it forward?

The Torah's single most frequently repeated command is be kind to the oppressed and vulnerable because we were once oppressed and vulnerable. God just loves widows, orphans, and ex-slaves, and so should we. Which means that we should be asking ourselves questions:

Who lives on the margin? Who is invisible? Who does not have a friend? Who would be better off because we see them, we care about them, and we help them?

At a Facing History event in Chicago, Elie Wiesel was once asked by a teen-age student. There is so much heartbreak, where do I start? Wiesel said: it doesn't matter *where* you start. It matters *that* you start. Start somewhere. Once you do, once you start to care, and to repair, you will continue to care and to repair and to do and to be a force for good.

All of which leads back to this core phrase *matir asurim*, God frees captives. Turns out, I never got this until we met our friend from Uganda, that the phrase is a double entendre. It means God frees captives. But it also means God frees us from a life that is too self-centered, too all about me. God makes the captives free, and God makes the lives of those who help captives meaningful. That is why so many of us here offered to be helpful to a total stranger.

At the asylum hearing this coming Wednesday, the lawyers will do their part. Our Ugandan friend will do her part, sharing her painful story with the court. Our community will do its part. Help is lined up and is ready to go. May God now do God's part. May God set this fine captive free. And may God continue to inspire each of us start somewhere, anywhere, to care and repair, which will lead to a better world, and a life of meaning. Shabbat shalom.