



Parshat Pinchas
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Believe Me When I Tell You Who I Am
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The other day, I was listening to an episode of *This American Life* titled “Save the Girl,” documenting all sorts of crazy stories of people swooping in to save damsels in distress, when I heard the most unbelievable story. Yong Xiong grew up in Laos, part of the ethnic Hmong minority. A few years ago, she met the man of her dreams at a New Year’s party. They fell in love. They decided to get married. Because the love of her life is a naturalized US citizen living in Minneapolis, their love story involved lots of government appointments and official paperwork. After months and months of proving their relationship, filing all of the correct forms, and waiting for the appropriate government officials to grant them permission, Yong received a fiancé visa and found herself on a plane to meet her beloved.

Yong lands in Chicago. All 4’7” of her is brimming with excitement. She thinks about how close she is—only a few hours until she is reunited with her beloved and his family waiting for her in the Minneapolis airport. She steps up to a customs desk and hands them her passport and fiancé visa. Then everything goes wrong.

The officer asks her how old she is. She shows him 10+9 fingers—nineteen. But the officer doesn’t believe her or her documents. They bring a Hmong interpreter. She answers all the questions, but still the officers are still dubious. They run through their trafficking checklist. She passes, checking 10 of 11 boxes that she is not a victim. Still they don’t believe her.

They keep her overnight and then take her to to have her teeth x-rayed to verify her age. Dental x-rays measure the development of the roots of your teeth and can determine age within a

range of 5 years. The dentist reports that she could be between the ages of 14.76 to 19.56. Customs officials change her birthday, making her 17 instead of 19, and take her straight from the dentist to a migrant shelter for children.

Over the next 14 months, Yong lives as an adult in a migrant shelter for children. She plays games, watches kiddie movies, and rooms with girls half her age. She is not allowed to communicate with her fiancé at all, ever. During that time, despite telling every official her true age and her true story, no one believes her. And every time she gets close to her fake 18th birthday, they change her birthday making her younger and younger.

Shortly after her 21st birthday, she is released to her aunt as a 15-year-old. She is required to go to school, and forbidden from communicating with her fiancé, whom customs officials have deemed a trafficker. In the end, Yong spends more than three years fighting to reclaim her true age. Just after her 22nd birthday, the immigration system gives her back her true birthday and allows her to reunite with her fiancé. Now, after years apart, they must marry within a short time frame or else Yong will be deported.

I couldn't stop thinking about this story. Can you imagine being Yong? Telling everyone who you are, who you love, and no matter what you say or what documentation you present, no one believes you? Think about the kind of inner strength it would take to survive 14 months in a detention center for migrant children. Think about the kind of relationship Yong and her fiancé had to have, in order to maintain it without any contact for years. About what it would be like to re-emerge from that experience and begin building the relationship again.

But there is another part that caught me. It's easy, in this kind of story, to blame ICE. To pin it up to some crazy customs official. To say this is a fluke. To say this is far from us, so

different from our day-to-day lives, and besides it's been fixed so no need to worry about it. But within this story is a deeply poignant and important lesson.

US Customs Officials are trained to recognize victims of sexual trafficking. It is their job to discern when young girls have been given fake documents and have been instructed to lie, and when people are telling the truth. It is their job to be suspicious, to uncover the realities that are sometimes obscured. There are times when Customs Officials have to trust their instincts. They have to step up and become heroes. It is because of their brave service, that young girls are protected every day. And yet, there is a fine line between protecting someone from being victimized and victimizing someone based on perception.

This was a case where these officers were so determined to protect Yong, that they caused her to suffer more than 3 years of separation and tribulation. It wasn't just one officer; it was every professional in the system. And this isn't just a case of Yong's botched immigration proceedings, this is a tendency that we all struggle with every day.

We are blinded by our own perceptions. We get people the gifts we would like, saying "you'll love this;" meaning, I love this, so I think you should too. When people come to our home, we ask them if they're hungry. They say no, and we bring out food anyway, sure that they are too polite to admit their hunger. Our children tell us what they want to do when they grow up. When their idea doesn't match our sense of them or their skills, we say *I thought that once too, but it was just a phase. You'll grow out of it.*

In Jewish tradition, there is a Psalm we say when we are in need of healing—Psalm 139. It's such an interesting prayer. The Psalmist doesn't talk about the God who heals bodies or inspires doctors to do their work. Instead, the Psalmist lauds the God who sees and understands

us. The God who recognizes who we are and who we want to be, and who affirms that. Judaism understands that for each of us to become our best, most complete self, we need to be acknowledged for who we are. When God and the world see us in the ways we experience ourselves, then we experience healing and wholeness.

This weekend, I was in Colorado. My beloved aunt, whom I was telling you about at Shavuot, passed away and I went out to be with family as we laid her to rest.

The funeral was held in this gorgeous mountain lake house. Outside, there were kids running around in bathing suits, and people doing paddle board across the surface of Evergreen Lake. I walked in and saw so many familiar faces. My preschool teacher, family friends, relatives from out-of-state, friends my aunt had described to me. Everyone looked familiar except for one very large man sitting in the front.

He was massive. Folded intimidatingly into a chair with tattooed arms crossed over his chest and a head shaved to reveal tattoos over every inch of his skull. Before the service, the room was abuzz with conversation. But he spoke to no one. He just sat there scowling. And no one quite knew how to relate.

This man disappeared after the service, and later that day, at the shiva, I asked my cousin about him. Who was that man?

My cousin explained that he was one of my aunt's dearest friends. He used to be in a gang, he dealt drugs, he was a big deal on the streets. But then he found mussar and Jewish spirituality. He turned his life around. He came to my aunt's mussar group, where she often taught, seeking more wisdom. It would have been so easy for that group to look at his menacing figure, his tattoos, his history, and to write him off. To tell him he didn't belong. But instead,

they listened when he told them who he was and who he was going to be. Through their regard, he found healing.

The truth is, every day we stand in a customs booth of our own. In every conversation, people hand over bits of truth, and ask us for validation. In every moment, we have a choice. Will we disregard what people say, who they are, in favor of who we want them to be? Or, will we accept what they share and allow them to move forward in peace?