



DVAR TZEDEK VOICES

Torah commentary featuring [globalvoices](#)

Parashat Toldot 5773

November 17, 2012

Welcome to Dvar Tzedek Voices! Produced bi-weekly, Dvar Tzedek Voices is a new feature that links this week's *parashah* to an article from [Global Voices](#), the blog of American Jewish World Service. A short *dvar* Torah precedes the article to spark critical thinking about a theme that's present in both the *parashah* and the blog. We hope that this format will offer you new insights and serve as a gateway to different areas of AJWS's work and thought.

Stay tuned for next week's standard Dvar Tzedek format.

Please take two minutes to tell us what you think of Dvar Tzedek Voices by completing this [feedback form](#).

Introduction

By Lisa Exler

Parashat Toldot contains one of the Torah's most troubling and dramatic scenes of deception: At his mother Rebecca's urging, Jacob covers his arms and neck with animal skin, disguising himself as his hairier brother Esau in order to fool their aging, blind father into giving Jacob the blessing of the first born. When Esau returns and the ruse is up, the emotional consequences of the deception become clear. Esau cries a bitter cry "*ad me'od*—to the utmost" and Isaac too trembles violently "*ad me'od*."¹ Isaac is so shaken by the trickery that, according to Midrash Aggadah quoting Rabbi Chama bar Chanina, "This trembling was even greater than his trembling when he was on the altar [at the Binding of Isaac]."²

Presumably Jacob and Rebecca thought that Jacob was entitled to this blessing and that deception was the only way to secure it. But the psychic toll described by the biblical text and the *midrash*, not to mention Jacob's need to flee Esau's wrath, make me wonder if Jacob's disguise was the only—or best—option, or if perhaps there might have been other, less destructive ways, to gain his father's blessing.

Unfortunately, for many people around the world today, especially those who identify as LGBTI, disguising their true identities is not a choice, or a means to an end—as it was in Jacob's case—but a necessity. Please read on to learn about the dangers faced by LGBTI people in Uganda and the risks they are taking to claim their rights. And may we soon live in a world where no one needs to hide his or her identity in order to receive the rights and blessings to which we are all entitled.



Risk and Pride in Uganda

By Gitta Zomorodi, August 14, 2012

Even though I live in New York, Uganda is often on my mind; especially the LGBTI Ugandan activists who are working to advance their human rights in an environment of violence, hostility and homophobia. Why do I think of Uganda and my LGBTI friends there so often? Because I work for American Jewish World Service, which supports grassroots organizations in Uganda that are fighting for the human rights of LGBTI people.

¹ Genesis 27:34 and Genesis 27:33.

² Buber, Midrash Aggadah, Genesis 27:33.

So, last week, when photographic images of Uganda's first-ever LGBTI Pride event began to circulate through emails and online, including in *The New Yorker*, my first reaction—and the reaction of many other allied activists outside Uganda—was one of alarm. We worried about the risks of this kind of exposure in a country in which tabloids are notorious for publishing photos, names and addresses of outed “homos.” The aggressive outing of LGBTI people by the local media has helped fuel homophobia in the country. A photo of Ugandan gay activist David Kato appeared alongside the headline “Hang Them” just months before he was murdered in his home.

Given this legacy of violence, the ongoing drive to pass a strict Anti-Homosexuality Bill and threats by the government to shut down organizations promoting human rights for LGBTI people, the timing of the Pride event seemed challenging to say the least.

My distance from Uganda and palpable worries aside, last weekend's LGBTI festivities took place outside the capital city of Kampala, on the shores of Lake Victoria. The celebration boasted a modest parade, which was the fulfillment of the bold vision of Kasha Jacqueline Nabagesera, a leader in Uganda's LGBTI rights movement. Only eight months earlier, Nabagesera had posted a message on Facebook calling for Pride in Uganda: “We are not going to wait for the ‘traditional’ street pride march... I am bringing PRIDE closer to you. YES, in the ‘world’s worst place to be gay’... If you can be proud of who you are alone why not join others and celebrate your pride together?”

The location of the event, far from Kampala's busy streets, was a nod to the very real security threats the community faces both from the government and from the public. In fact, over the past year, **two separate LGBTI rights meetings have been arbitrarily raided and shut down by police** with the blessing, and indeed encouragement, of senior government officials. Safety concerns have driven some organizations to relocate their offices. Individual activists face harassment, assault and threats on a daily basis.

Sure enough, **the police descended upon the Pride celebration as well** and demanded a halt to the festivities. They arrested several of the participants, later releasing them without charges. Interestingly, I found no coverage of the event or the arrests in the online versions of Uganda's top three daily newspapers. In the past, other police raids have been accompanied by eager journalists. At least once, this resulted from a tip off by Uganda's Minister of Ethics and Integrity.

This change could be a sign of the times. As one of AJWS's Ugandan partners put it, “Two years back, the thinking was ‘do these people really exist?’” Now, the existence of LGBTI people in Uganda is no longer subject to debate, and now that denial has been pierced, no one knows what the future will bring.

Our Ugandan partners are working for the day when they will be free from discrimination and violence. In that sense, Pride is an act of expression and resistance, a refusal to be intimidated or oppressed. I understand that these are the kinds of moments that can sustain a movement. At the same time, these moments also reveal the dangerous context in which activists are living. Yes, these people really exist. And yes, they may be arrested or attacked for asserting that.

Ugandans who support human rights for LGBTI people need our support, and that's why AJWS is involved. If you want to stand in solidarity with LGBTI people in Uganda, join us in supporting those who can make a difference for themselves.

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