

## **Immigration Rights in America**

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All the so-called “Abrahamic” faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – share the commitment to welcoming the stranger, housing the homeless, caring for the refugee, whether economic or political. It is so critical to the nature of these religions that the theme comes up in their literature over and over and over again.

Consider that Abraham, the founder of Judaism, started out as a refugee, as “a stranger in a strange land.” Jesus admonished his followers to feed the hungry, house the homeless, care for the sick and those in prison. Islam continues this, repeating the story of Sodom, the city destroyed because of its inhospitality to strangers, further emphasizing the obligation to care for those far from home.

America is necessarily a nation of immigrants, as Europeans and then people from other continents arrived seeking the good fortune of a new beginning. There have, of course, been exceptions to the rule of hospitality from the very beginning, such as the fate of the land’s first peoples, the true native Americans, who were systematically persecuted and destroyed, either by arms or disease. And then each wave of new immigrants faced the challenge of being marked as “outsiders,” to be feared and resisted more than to be clothed and fed.

But there have also been times of reconciliation, when Americans paused to acknowledge with pride and compassion their role in being the sacred refuge of the refugee. This was the feeling when Emma Lazarus wrote her poem, “The New Colossus,” for the Statue of Liberty. The full poem reads:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name

Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

There are thousands, if not millions of stories I could tell you this morning, but I'm going to tell you just one. It is the story of a Guatemalan woman named Lizeth Morales who came to the United States because she feared for her life. And it is the story of her American husband, Larry. I'm telling you this story in his own words because I heard it directly from Larry, himself, two years ago in Salt Lake City, Utah.

He began by saying, “The story that I'm going to tell was not mine but has become mine.

“In 2005 I started attending a Hispanic Latter Day Saints church, and I met this little boy when I was playing piano for his class. His name is Holsman and he has a beautiful mother. And I noticed her as well. And in the hallway a few weeks ago I went up to her and asked, ‘Would you like to go to dinner with me sometime?’ And she said, ‘No.’

“I was devastated and I was told you have to be a conquistador; you have to fight, fight. So I continued. I took flowers. I took chocolates. I sang to her at her workplace, blatantly embarrassed her.

“Then our stories became one, and I'll tell you how that happened. She came here sixteen years ago, pregnant. It took her a month to cross the border. And her story is just terrible, but I won't get into those portions of the story.

“But she came over and illegally crossed the border. And by the way, you need to understand this very, very important thing. When someone comes across

illegally, or they come and their visa expires, it is equivalent to a civil offense; a civil offense, such as a speeding ticket. That's what it's equivalent to. And if they're deported and they come back, it becomes criminal.

“So she came across and went and applied for political asylum right away, because of many things that were happening in her country. She applied for political asylum, which was later denied. It was denied. She had three American children here, citizens, living with her. It was denied and she went on working, because the options are this. In Guatemala, when you take an American citizen back to Guatemala with you, you pay thirty-four dollars a month to have that American citizen live there. Their wages are five dollars a day in her town. She could not even afford to have the kids. She didn't have the \$3,000 to fly them back. So her options, she got the letter, what can I do? I want to stay here. I want my children to grow up here. They're American citizens. So she ignored the order.

“When I met her, she said to me, this is the whole story. This is what happened. She didn't lie to me. We went to a lawyer and the lawyer said, ‘Don't do anything until the new president does something. Let sleeping dogs lie. Don't do anything.’

“So we didn't do anything. March 18, one day after my birthday, I heard this on my front door, 6:30 in the morning. [knock knock knock] It was loud like that, and it was scary. ‘Who is knocking on my door?’

“I opened the door and there were two ICE – Immigration and Customs Enforcement – officers at my door. And they said, ‘Have you seen this woman?’ And they pulled out a big 8x10 of this Hispanic woman. They said, ‘Have you seen this woman? She is illegally registering cars to your address.’ And I said, ‘No.’ And they said, ‘Can you have your wife look at this picture?’ I said, ‘Certainly.’ I called my wife. She was getting ready to go to work and looked at the picture and she said, ‘No, I haven't seen that woman.’

“And he said, ‘We're not here for that woman. We're here to arrest your wife on this writ of deportation.’ They never showed me a warrant. I should never have opened the door.

“They took her. They did let her kiss her kids good-bye. She's crying. I'm crying. And then I went in the bathroom with her and gave her a priesthood

blessing. A priesthood blessing is a prayer, and I blessed her that she would have angels protecting her.

“They took her in a van. And in that van they picked up eight other people, all handcuffed and shackled for this criminal offense. She went to Immigration. She said they were treating her, all the people, horribly. She was crying for how they were treating the other people, with such compassion. She was there and they say, ‘If you go back tomorrow, and take your kids tomorrow, we will let you go.’ And she said, ‘I have to discuss this with my husband.’ And they said, ‘Well, he’s illegal too.’ And she said, ‘No. He’s an American citizen.’ And they started treating her differently because she said that.

“They had her sign a paper saying all these things were explained to her in Spanish. Nothing was explained in Spanish. This is wrong, the way that we’re going about this is wrong. And I’m not justifying any of her actions, and I’m not either. She wanted to take care of it. She didn’t see any other options.

“So now we went, I called a lawyer who called ICE and asked ‘What is her bail?’ And they said, ‘There is no bail. She’ll be gone tomorrow or in eight days.’

“I had given her that blessing and I had faith. I called two hours later and she said, ‘Come and get me. They’re going to let me out on an ankle bracelet.’ They let her out on an ankle bracelet.

“She didn’t come today. She was scared the Minutemen would be here, or it would get too much press and she would lose her job. She is working under a valid Social Security Number under the same name. She has paid taxes for the last 16 years and they want to kick her out of the country. They will not give us a hearing. They have denied our appeal. They have denied the stay of deportation and they have denied the motion to reopen, which our lawyer told us they would.

“We’re a humble family. We said, ‘What can we do?’ They said, ‘You need to hire a lawyer.’ I checked around and found a good lawyer - \$5,000 before he’d do anything. I went in that day. I went in with documents and said, ‘I have \$1,200 dollars. What can we do?’ He said, ‘We’ll get started and I’ll take payments.’

“So far, I’ve paid him \$3,000 and the money aspect is concerning. Because we’re worried – when she leaves, I depend on over \$1,000 of her money to support the family every month. And I shouldn’t. I feel bad about that. But this is

just how times are. When she leaves, that \$1,000 won't be there. She has health insurance for \$210 a month. My health insurance is \$610 a month. Now, I'll lose that health insurance when she's deported – which she will be – and as long as she's gone.

“When I say this, these are real people, real stories. This is what we feel. Hispanics, they say, ‘You don't know what we feel.’ Well I do. That knock on the door and them being there making this ache deep inside my chest. And they hauled her away in that van. And I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where to turn. And I'm one of the leaders in the Hispanic Latter Day Saints branch here, and I called the branch president on the phone. I told him what happened and I was shaking. And this branch president, he came to my work that day and brought me \$500 that he took out on his VISA card. And he's illegal. He's illegal.

“He's overstayed his visa. He was here on a legal visa and overstayed it because he couldn't get that renewed. And they're in the process of trying to get those things taken over, too.

“I was at church when a gentleman from a community action group told me about scholarships that were available to help working people. And I told him a lot of people don't have the paperwork to apply for that program.

“And he said, ‘Well, OK. But your thirteenth article of faith says you believe in upholding the law.’ And I say, ‘Hey, wait a minute. Yes, we do. And my wife believes in upholding the law.’ But I explained this, I felt it's important to explain this, ‘This is equivalent to a speeding ticket. It's not like robbing a bank or anything.’ These people will come here. And why do they come here? For a better life. The judge has denied her motion, and I had to explain in a second motion, that they she says in court records, ‘She doesn't think she'd be in danger if she went back for a visit, but if she went back and stayed, her life would be in danger because of this political group that had problems with her.’

“And I had to explain that, in her town, the houses are bamboo with dirt floors, no internet, no facebook. So if she showed up to visit her mother and left, no one would know. But if she stayed very long, word would get out. And the judges don't understand the conditions. I went there last year to help my mother-in-law come back and visit grandchildren she's never seen.

“I’ve heard people say all the time. ‘They should do it legally. They should go through the process legally instead of coming over.’ We’ll I’ll tell you. She’s applied three times legally. \$300 each time. Four hours on the bus to get to the city to apply at the U.S. embassy. She was turned down each time. It was, ‘No.’ And with her son-in-law from the United States, it was ‘Hell, no.’ They said, ‘It doesn’t help to have you here.’

“So I want you to know that this wasn’t my story to start with, and now it’s my story. I’m involved. I have faith that everything will work out, but it’s up to us. It’s up to us to combine together and say, ‘This is unjust. This is wrong. We need immigration reform.’

Resentment of immigrants is as old as America itself. Benjamin Franklin opposed German immigration, insisting that they would not assimilate into the culture.

In the mid-nineteenth century, there was a tremendous influx of immigrants from Ireland. This first large-scale arrival of non-protestants and fear of Catholicism, plus a general aversion to the Irish, combined to produce a backlash that produced much violence against the Irish immigrants, as well as the first anti-immigration political party, “The Know-Nothings,” which ran on a platform of anti-Irish and anti-Catholic fervor.

In the later 1800’s relatively small numbers of Chinese arrived, producing a backlash so powerful that it led to America’s only piece of legislation which specifically named a group as its restrictive focus: “The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.”

Each new wave of immigrants has been greeted with fear and suspicion, whether Irish, Germans, Poles, Italians, or Jews. They have been excluded, discriminated against, persecuted, and victims of violence, whether by individuals, mobs, or the courts.

The results of a poll by the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut are especially interesting. They demonstrate that every immigrant population has been welcomed once it has been visible for about a hundred years or more. It reported that, “By high margins, Americans are telling pollsters it was a very good thing that Poles, Italians, and Jews emigrated to America. Once again, it’s the

newcomers who are viewed with suspicion. This time, it's the Mexicans, the Filipinos, and the people from the Caribbean who make Americans nervous."

I considered speculating on the underlying factors and causes of this aspect of our culture, but I'll save that for another day.

Today I'll say that there is something deeply wrong with the way we are treating immigrants in America today. People are getting rich from building prisons for them. People are even getting rich from flying them back over the border.

I ask you to search your consciences and invite you to stand with me on the side of love, at the feet of the Statue of Liberty, with Emma Lazarus' words:

"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

May it be so.