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On Tuesday night, with earthquake hubbub dwindling, I went to Delancey Street's annual Seder (held on an untraditional night for Passover), celebrating "35 years as a family," as leader **Mimi Silbert** said. The Passover story is about breaking out of slavery and leaving Egypt; for many non-Jews, without sentimental childhood memories of Seders, the telling can be long and tedious. But at Delancey Street, the point is that the struggles and challenges – overcoming habit and fear of the unknown – described in the ancient story are the same as those of the former drug addicts and criminals who live at the facility.

The dining room was packed, and the residents were dressed for an occasion, in suits and dresses, a sea of white and blue shirts and ties, many men wearing skullcaps. The traditional prayers are always performed by people of all religions, and "Dayenu," the song that gives thanks for all the steps that led to freedom, is performed gospel-style. The rites, including a tear-off-the-roof performance by the choir, take about an hour and a half, and if you sit down hungry, by the time it's winding down, you're ravenous.

But before the meal starts, Silbert, a small woman but an oratorical rabble-rouser who clenches the event in her tiny fist, steps away from the podium and invites two people to deliver "freedom speeches" about what the concept has meant in their lives.

This year, one speaker had flown in from Alaska, where he heads a new Delancey Street branch. His childhood was troubled, he said, and when adults asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, he'd stumble around trying to name a profession while thinking about his real longing: "I want to be happy." By the time he was a teenager, he was on the streets, doing drugs, in and out of jail and prison. His education had been cut off, and having abandoned family and friends, "I got rid of all responsibility....I was very lonely."

At Delancey Street, it took time to stop lying, to care about anyone but himself and finally to learn that caring made life meaningful. He completed his education; he worked. And after 10 years, he was put in charge of the Alaska project, a challenge he faces every day. His story was told between pauses, as he swallowed and winced and tried to keep his emotions under control. "That little kid," he concluded, "is finally happy."

Guests and many residents – each perhaps thinking of a similar story – wiped away tears. And then, having already been nourished, we ate.