

A White House Hannukah Reception Revelation

Parashat Miketz

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

Visiting the White House is always a breathtaking experience. I remember the very first time I came to Washington, with my sixth grade class, my little 12 year old heart beating as I entered the East Room. I can still remember walking right up to the velvet ropes and stanchions, peering into the Blue Room and the Red Room and wondering if Ronald and Nancy Reagan relaxed on the silk couches after all the tourists cleared out at the end of the day. The White House is not a palace or a castle. There's a house on Willowbrook right here in Potomac that has more square footage than the Executive Mansion, but even at an early age I was taken by its grandeur and history; I was enthralled that every president except George Washington lived and worked in that house, made decisions in that house that not only affected America but the entire world. That its easily recognizable neoclassical columns and portico are symbolic of American power and democracy throughout the world.

This past Tuesday evening, 37 years after my first visit to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, I was back again, this time as a guest at the annual White House Hannukah Reception. This is a relatively modern feature of American history. While John Adams, the original occupant of the White House, hosted the first Christmas Party there in 1800, it wouldn't be until 1979, when President Jimmy Carter lit the first Hanukah menorah, *outside* the mansion. President Clinton was the first to light a menorah in the Oval Office in 1997, and President George W. Bush kindled the first menorah in the White House residence in 2001. In 2005 the White House kitchen was *kashered* so that food could be prepared for what would become an annual reception that has continued to this very day. As I milled around the same rooms my sixth grade-self day-dreamed about--only this time I was allowed to sit on the chairs and sofas in the Red Room and the Green Room and the Library—and with a plate full of latkes and *sufganiyot*—I thought about how my great-grandparents, poor and destitute Jews who fled pogroms in Russia and Romania could never have imagined any relative of theirs, or probably any Jew for that matter, being a guest in the White House. I thought about my grandparents who were the most patriotic Americans I ever met. Back in the day when seatbelts were optional, I would sit in the back of their station wagon and with an American flag sticking out the window as we all sang *You're a Grand Old Flag* and *Yankee Doodle*. My grandfather served in the U.S. Army in the Second World War; my great grandfather in the First. They believed with all of their hearts in the promise of American freedom.

And of course there was the image of the Jewish husband of the Vice President lighting the White House menorah itself, crafted out of wood from the original construction of the house, and the first-ever permanent White House menorah. Another Hanukkiah was also lit in the White House this year; a crystal menorah salvaged from the ruins of Shai Hermesh's home in Kfar Aza.

Hamas terrorists destroyed the entire home, and when Shai returned a few weeks later to see what remained, only that menorah and his *tefillin*, still in their gold embroidered red velvet bag, remained unscathed. As powerful and historic as all of this truly was, I also felt a certain unease. Christmas is everywhere in the White House. Those halls are decked, let me tell you. There is hardly an inch of public space that is not adorned with lights or poinsettias. Every room has yet another glittering Christmas tree. Even the riser where the President made his remarks to a throng of Jewish leaders was backdropped with Christmas decorations. And I immediately thought of Joseph. Not Joseph Biden, but Joseph in our parasha. Joseph who rose from the dungeon of Egypt to the zenith of Egyptian power. Joseph the Hebrew, who was given an Egyptian name by Pharaoh himself: *Tzafnat Paneach*, which according to Rashi means something like the decoder of secrets, or the explainer of hidden things. It is of course a reference to Joseph's dream interpreting skills that were very useful to the Pharaoh. Joseph was among the first useful Jews, court Jews, Jews who made themselves indispensable to non-Jewish sovereigns because of their talents and abilities. It seems clear that the Egyptians didn't particularly care for the Hebrews. *Lo yuchlul ha'mitzrim le'echol et ha'ivrim lechem ki to'eva hi...* The Egyptians would not eat with the Hebrews, because they detested dining with those they considered inferior to them, the Torah tells us.¹ Joseph instructs his Jewish family not to tell Pharaoh or the Egyptians that they are shepherds, because it would be a *shanda fer d'goyim*...He is literally embarrassed by his own relatives *ki to'avat mitzrim kol-ro'ei tzon*, because all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians.² Tell them you do something else for a living, tell them you are executives in the livestock industry! Anything but shepherds—which is of course what they actually were. No matter how powerful Joseph becomes, no matter how much he saves the Egyptian economy, no matter how successful and lifesaving his policies are for Egypt, there is something about that place that just doesn't feel fully like home. At the end of his life, Joseph, the Egyptian national hero, makes his family promise that they will reinter his remains in the land of Israel. No matter how long it takes, when they someday return to the promised land, they must vow to bring his bones with them. Why would he demand that if he felt that he was thoroughly Egyptian?

On Tuesday night, I saw Chuck Shumer *shmying* around, his red reading glasses perched at the end of his nose, even though he didn't seem to be reading anything. A crowd of people gathered around the Jewish attorney general Merick Garland and Debbie Wasserman Schultz navigated the crowds. Then the president appeared along with Doug Emhoff. His message was warm and reassuring. He vowed to fight antisemitism and not to forget about the hostages. He condemned the Hamas attack, and ribbed Netanyahu. And he repeated his now famous line that you don't have to be Jewish to be a Zionist, and I am a Zionist, he said to much applause. But then he said something else that was also met with gleeful applause. He said, "Folks, were there no Israel, there wouldn't be a Jew in the world who was safe — were there no Israel." I couldn't clap. I

¹Genesis 43:32

²Genesis 46:33-34

looked around and saw other people clapping. Jewish leaders, influential Jews, religious Jews. But I could not bring myself to join in the ovation...it was as if there was a magnetic force preventing me from putting my hands together. Did the President of the United States just say that Jews cannot rely on the United States for protection? Even though there are nearly 8 million Jews in America, and several in his own administration, we are not ultimately secure in this country; That the only guarantee of Jewish safety is the State of Israel.

I stood there trying to parse his words. Maybe this was Biden going off script, after all, he did start that sentence with the word "Folks..." Maybe he was just expressing his genuine Zionist proclivities, and the words didn't come out exactly right. Or maybe President Biden was making an astute historical observation. His own namesake Joseph, and all that he accomplished in Egypt was forgotten about when a new pharaoh arose. Joseph's family, who were so warmly welcomed to Egypt by one pharaoh were made to be public enemy number one by another pharaoh. Perhaps what the President of the United States was saying to us, 800 American Jewish leaders, was that while America should protect Jews and America ought to be a safe haven for all its inhabitants, the Jewish people must, at the end of the day, also have Israel. Maybe not today, at this very moment, but someday those words "were there no Israel, there wouldn't be a Jew in the world who was safe" may indeed come true.

Twenty two years ago, President George W. Bush said these words upon lighting an ornate 100 year old hanukkiah on loan from the Jewish Museum in New York:

"This house may be a temporary home for Laura and me, but it is the people's house, and it belongs to people of all faiths."

I certainly pray that those words remain true for a very long time to come. And as I cling to that hope, I will also never forget President Biden's words just last week, that were there no Israel, there wouldn't be a Jew in the world who was safe.

Let us pray both for an America that equally cherishes and protects all its many faith traditions, and an Israel that is strong and independent enough to keep its promise of keeping the Jewish people safe no matter what may come.

May God bless this country, the State of Israel, and our world with peace.