

What I Said to the President on his First Day in Office
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What a week. Little has changed, and yet so much is already so very different. Much has already been said and written about this historic week when for the first time in our history an African American took the oath of office as President of the United States. It is tempting to merely repeat the platitudes uttered by others and to parrot the obvious points about the significance of the inauguration of Barack Obama as President. The parallels to earlier precedents and other presidents, as well as the sharp contrasts, the recognition of how far we have come as a nation, of what it means to us and all that it says about us have all been expressed --- and repeatedly repeated on the cable news networks, so I will not do that this morning.

It was a glorious day with many special moments and memorable images: from the two beautiful little girls who now live at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue to the intangible spirit of hope gendered by a fresh new beginning.

I was honored to be invited to attend the National Prayer Service at the National Cathedral. In accordance with tradition, the morning after the inauguration of a new president an ecumenical prayer service is held. I have attended previous services, but this time I had an aisle seat up close. Little did I know at the time that the seat my wife had procured for me would be the means of egress for the President as he entered and departed from his seat at the Cathedral.

As he walked down the aisle, I extended my hand, but wanted to do more than merely shake his hand. Conscious of the fact that we were in a church and had just concluded a prayer service, I introduced myself to him, and said, "Mr. President: We wish you well. May God be with you, and may you be with God."

He paused to thank me for my good wishes and continued on his way.

One can only imagine the awesome sense of responsibility he must bear and feel. With so much confronting our nation it is hard to know where he should begin: protecting the nation's security, sorting out defense matters, dealing with the wars in Iraq,

Afghanistan and Pakistan, the conflict in the Middle East, the hot spots in Sudan and Somalia ready to erupt any minute, global warming, the search for energy alternatives, dealing with health care, coming up with strategies to solve our economic woes, and these are just the obvious immediate challenges.

I choose to say what I said to him because I thought it appropriate as a rabbi to express the sincere prayer that God be with him as he undertakes to tackle the complex issues facing him. But I also think it is important not just to ask God to be with him, but for him, and for that matter each and every one of us, to seek to live a life that God would want us to live, for God to be with us in whatever we do.

In many respects, that is the message we read in this week's Torah portion. When God speaks to Moses He tells him to go forward, to lead the people out of slavery. Moses is hesitant and reluctant. He argues with God that he is not up to the task, and is not capable of doing what is asked of him. Ultimately, he accepts the mantle of leadership once he is assured that he is not alone, and that God will accompany him on his mission. At the burning bush God reveals his name and nature to Moses and tells him "*Eheyei imach*: I will be with you." Those simple words were good enough for Moses, and sufficed to instill in him and impart to him the confidence he needed to go forward with his mission. Thus saying, "May God be with you" to the newly elected President was intended to iterate and evoke a biblical passage while bringing a message of comfort and reassurance.

Each individual who has served as President speaks of the tremendous amount of faith necessary to do the job, and of the importance of drawing on a reservoir of faith to fulfill the awesome task.

Yet in the brief moment I had with the President I wanted to say more than just, "May God be with you." For as important as it is for leaders and individuals to know that God is with them, it is equally important for them to strive to act in a way that aligns them with what it is that God expects and demands of us.

The famous immortal words that Moses says to Pharaoh: "*Shlach et ami*: Let my people go!" have inspired many peoples and liberation movements of the oppressed throughout the millennia. Those around the globe who have sought to free themselves of the shackles of repression have seen in the biblical paradigm a story that gives them hope and that they hope to replicate.

But in truth, the words, "Let my people go" are not the whole sentence. Moses tells Pharaoh that God has told him to proclaim, "*Shlach et ami veyavduni*: Let my people go, so that they may worship Me."

We often overlook or neglect the last half of the sentence, but we should not. The reason they were to be freed was so that they could be with God. It was not enough for God to be with them. Freedom means they have to be with God. And so that is why I expressed those words as well, the hope that he will be with God, that his actions will be pleasing to the Lord.

Leadership demands courage and entails making tough decisions, as well as the capacity to lead, to inspire and to uplift others.

I am reminded of the story of the young *yeshivah bachur* (rabbinical student) who excitedly told his teacher that he had a prophetic dream three nights in a row. "Master, surely it must mean something," he said. He explained to his rabbi, "Rebbe, I dreamed three nights in a row that I was the leader of thousands of disciples, thousands of *hasidim*. What do you think it means?" The wise rabbi answered him, "My son, until thousands of *hasidim* dream that you are their rebbe it doesn't mean anything." To lead, one must have willing followers.

In this week's Torah portion the long and arduous process of leaving Egypt begins. It takes ten plagues accompanied by extensive negotiation and argumentation, fraught with many setbacks and moments of doubt. Yet eventually after all the struggles the people leave Egypt and set out on their journey to the Promised Land.

It is significant that the one who led the people of Israel was a Hebrew, yet one who had never personally experienced slavery. Moses' mother had placed him in the Nile River, where he was discovered and taken out of the water by Pharaoh's daughter, who raised him as her own son, as a prince in the palace of the Pharaoh. Although he was a Hebrew, unlike his fellow Hebrews, he had not personally experienced the bitterness of slavery. Consequently he could have easily chosen a life of luxury, but instead went out and saw the plight of his brothers and identified with them. He saw a Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster, and intervened. He saw two Israelite slaves fighting with each other, and he tried to break up their altercation. In other words, Moses went out and became a "community organizer" among his people.

And so it was that Moses, the one who had tasted and known freedom, who had not been a slave was the person who could lead his people to freedom.

Perhaps there is a parallel here as well, with our new president. As a graduate of Harvard Law School and editor of the Harvard Law Review, he could have gotten a top paying job with any firm in the country. Instead, he went out and became a community organizer. Like Moses, he chose to identify with and help his people.

Similarly, he is an African American whose Kenyan father had not been brought to this country as a slave against his will. Raised primarily by his white grandparents, he has the capacity, like Moses to be a transformative figure, one who bridges both worlds, for he was familiar with discrimination, yet did not personally taste the bitterness of slavery in his family's experience.

And so we find parallels, precedents, inspiration and guidance from this week's Torah portion for our new president and for our nation as he moves forward and treads on new ground.

Being among the masses at the swearing in ceremony, there was one disappointing moment, and that was when outgoing President, George W. Bush was booed. I personally believe that respect must be shown to all, especially to those who serve our nation. And by the way, it is clear that President Obama also understands the importance of *kavod*, of dignity and respect. When Vice President Joe Biden made a joke deriding Chief Justice John Roberts when swearing in members of the Executive branch of government, Mr. Obama was visibly uncomfortable and upset with the disparaging of the Chief Justice. Our new president is a man who reaches out to his opponents, and who wants to unite our nation. He understands that respect for all is the foundation of that bridge he seeks to build.

Our tradition tells us how important it is to treat all with respect and dignity. But we Jews should admit that we owe President Bush a special debt of gratitude for his unflinching and unwavering support of Israel as it faced those who sought it ill.

I was at the White House in the Oval Office in December of 2000, for President Clinton's last Chanukah in the White House. I am not sure if he thought of it that way, but I know that the thought occurred to me that it was not only Mr. and Mrs. Clinton's last Chanukah as president, but probably the last time Jews would be so welcome in the White House. His successor was to be a Texas oil man who had won election without any significant Jewish support, whose head of his transition team had used an expletive to say what he thought about the Jews, and whose father had expressed his disdain and contempt for us as well. Yet this President, while being the first to call for a Palestinian state, something most Arabs have forgotten, was also the first to unequivocally state that Israel has a right to defend itself in the face of aggression and terrorism. He stood by Israel and supported Israel as it faced the ongoing threat of terrorism. He repudiated Yasser Arafat, for he recognized how duplicitous he was and understood that he had not really renounced violence. While we welcome the new administration, and do not ignore the shortcomings of the previous one, we should not hesitate to express appreciation for President Bush's service and gratitude for his ongoing support of the state of Israel.

The challenges facing our nation are clearly daunting. Yet it is an exciting time, filled with a renewed sense of possibility and hope.

Let us pray that God will be with our new president, and that he will be with God as well.

Amen.

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