

**“My Journey to the Foot of the Hill – or Should I Say the Mountain:
Reflections on the Inauguration”
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Rabbi Jay M. Stein**

I made my way to Washington. I had made plans. Train reservations, meeting spots, and a place to sleep over, where we were going to eat, what we were going to carry with us and so much more. Then I boarded the train to Washington and the journey began. I was a little late making my reservation but thankfully Suzy, my assistant, is a bit of a magician and was able to get me the last seat on a train. I knew from the get-go it was going to be crowded, but usually when it's a good idea, a lot of people are doing it. I got to 30th Street station and parked my car without incident but that was last thing that turned out to be easy. From that point on, every step was difficult. The train arrived late, it departed late and it only got worse, but I didn't care. You see, I was going to be part of something historical. I knew there would be wrinkles. I knew there would be crowds and after spending 10 years in New York City, I knew there would be pushing and tension, but I was up for it. I was going to be a part of history. So, I let the tension go and I went with the flow.

There were many restrictions on what we could bring to the Inauguration so I had nothing with me. I wasn't carrying my laptop and I had no luggage, even backpacks weren't allowed. I couldn't even carry my *tephillin* for fear of leaving it somewhere, but I was able to make a plan to borrow a friend's. So, there I was. All I had with me was my toothbrush and my phone and that's it. I don't think I can ever remember packing in this manner, especially over the last 18 years or so, and I certainly don't ever remember traveling like this. I know that I've had dreams of just jet-setting away and buying whatever I needed at the destination, but I've never done it. However, this time was different. I was completely unencumbered. No baby bags, no luggage, no carry-on, nothing.

When I got to the train station, I bought a newspaper, but that's it. Whatever was going to happen, would happen. I would be meeting my son for what was certainly going to be one of the most amazing father-son moments in our lives and I didn't have a thing on me. It seemed strange, but then it dawned on me. The significant journeys are not about what you bring, they're really about *who* you bring. Like so many thousands of other Americans, (and people I met from Minnesota, Atlanta and even California,) I converged on Washington with my son, to stand side-by-side in the cold, to be there and to be there together. I thought long and hard about not going. I was nervous about standing in the cold and, the truth is, it was going to be a hassle. Why not just watch it on television?

I decided to go and although I never got in, I learned these two important lessons:
First, we all must leave places in order to become who we want or who we want to be.
Second, the people we meet in these places are important. We should think about taking them with us on our journey because, as it turns out, they just may be going to the same place.

We planned together and mapped out our routes together, from Union Station to dinner, from dinner to where we were staying in Georgetown, and finally, the route from our hospitality home to the Metro and from the Metro to our line. Then we executed it. We talked about proper dress

and we talked about strategy. It is a conversation that I am sure hundreds of thousands of people had with their respective husbands and wives, parents and children, coworkers, school administrators and faith institutions.

All along I imagined that this is what was going through the minds of the Hebrews as they prepared themselves for their Exodus. You see, it is the strangest of circumstances that brings about our redemption, and it is precisely those events that leave us with more questions than answers. That, too, is the nature of leaving. We have no idea what to expect. Leaving on our own makes sense but, as is so often in life, we won't make a change until we have no choice. Even when we have no choice, we cling to the past. Some need to be prodded, coaxed or goaded into beginning their journey. Some never want to leave. So is the case with our people as they readied to leave Egypt, but the strange thing was, although they were given two weeks to ready themselves, they were still completely unprepared.

I'm sure you're familiar with the story, a story that is summed up in one symbol, which maybe the most identifiable Jewish symbol of all. More than any other symbol, the *matzah*, comes to represent our freedom. We had to eat the *matzah*, rather than the nicely risen *challah*, because we did not have enough time to wait for the *matzah* to rise. Our Torah teaches, *ki lo hametz ki garshu m'mitzrayim v'lo yochlu l'hitma'meah* – and they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt, for it was not leavened; because they were thrust out of Egypt, and could not remain, neither had they prepared for themselves any provision.” (Exodus 12:39) I can relate to this, and I do know that no matter where we go, Missy makes sure there is enough food for the trip. I can't tell you how many sandwiches I made for the car ride, how many little goody bags I filled for the plane. I can't tell you how many times I heard Missy ask the kids, “Do you have your bag of snacks for the drive?” Just like the Jewish people who were finally leaving the slavery of Egypt forever, they still hadn't packed a single thing to eat along the way.

God gave two-weeks notice so they knew it was coming. Were they just naïve? Had they not seen the plagues? Either way, God warns them that they are going. God instructs and they listen and he tells them to pack the silver, gold and clothing, (12:35). Unbelievably, they didn't even prepare a little food for the trip. Either they didn't think God was actually going to go through with it or they simply were acting as slaves do, and that is, they only do what they are told to do, nothing more, nothing less. Either way, they didn't even pack a lunch.

At this point, we must ask ourselves if there's another option. The key is found in verse 38: *V'gam erev rav alah itam*, “and a mixed multitude also went up with them.” The Hebrews knew that as long as they had all of the right people, all else was of no consequence. I know it's hard to imagine, but food is not the most important part, it really doesn't matter.

“And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about 600,000 on foot, who were men, beside children.” (12:37) They went but they never arrived. They started the trip, but this group would never see the Promised Land. They made the trip nonetheless, and so did we. We journeyed. Even though we never made it in to see the Inauguration for ourselves, we too traveled with more than 600,000 people. We traveled through the subways and along the streets to hear the words that would set the course for our next four years. We listened carefully.

At about 10:30AM, after waiting in line for more than three hours, it became clear we were never going to get through. Our blue tickets were just one of many amidst a massive crowd that was simply overwhelming security. We didn't even get close. So, we cut our losses and went to find a TV set somewhere so we could hear President Obama speak to our nation. We found ourselves in the lounge of a hotel, just two blocks from the Capitol. We sat there waiting. It was just my son and myself and two other gentlemen. Then, just before he took the oath, there must have been 20 people from the hotel staff that made their way into the lounge to see this momentous occasion and to listen to the President. As he spoke, the room became silent. I felt the world had become silent as we hung on his every word. As he spoke of our ancestors and uttered, "For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West; endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth." I identified with this because our people worked in those sweatshops. We understand what it means to have endured the lash of the whip, because we were slaves to pharaoh in Egypt.

When he said, "This is the source of our confidence, the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny." I knew what he was talking about our leaving Egypt to an uncertain future, to shape a new nation and to repair a broken world. When he reminded us, "It is the kindness to take in a stranger when the levees break, or the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job, which sees us through our darkest hours." I could relate because we "were strangers in a strange land" and it was only after the plague of darkness that we could emerge into the light with a new found purpose – not to build a pyramid, but to birth a nation. We understand what it means to leave for an uncertain destiny.

When our President proclaimed, "We understand that greatness is never a given. It must be earned. Our journey has never been one of short-cuts or settling for less. It has not been the path for the faint-hearted, for those who prefer leisure over work." The President moved me because our journey through the desert was a difficult one too, peril and ambush at every turn – and it took a generation, 40 years not 4 years. So, I was heartened and I was inspired.

Every week, during Kiddush, we are reminded of the Exodus from Egypt. Each and every week, we celebrate and we recall our difficult beginning. Each week we say, "*zecher l'itziat mitzrayim*." We dedicate ourselves to the tasks ahead because we remember what it took to get us to today. President Obama said the same thing. "For they have forgotten what this country has already done; what free men and women can achieve, when imagination is joined to common purpose, and necessity to courage."

"What free men and women can achieve, when imagination is joined to common purpose, and necessity to courage." This morning's Torah reading describes the first few moments of freedom and the enormous potential that lies within it, but we are the ones who must make it happen.

This economy has seen many people lose their jobs and, in fact, many who have lost their jobs, are forced to leave after decades of holding the same employ. For those people, times are tough, and for those who must let them go, times are tough. Leaving a job is painful, regardless of who leaves who. However, we are a great nation and we embody limitless potential for rebirth. To accomplish this, we have to be willing to take leave of the past and move forward to an uncertain

future. For some this will be done in the community and for some it will be extremely isolating, but it doesn't have to be so. For some, it will be a career move, for others it will be an emotional one, but no matter, they are intertwined. Each of us has to take leave of something in order to grow, to live, and to learn.

Rabbi Alan Lew, may his name remain for a blessing, once wrote, "Leave taking always precedes the Divine Encounter . . . God is never encountered in either convention or habit." If you want to ignite a force greater than oneself then we must take leave at some point. When I was about nine years old, I went off to Camp Ramah for what would become the beginning of one of the greatest summers of my life. Camp Ramah, for me, was the first experience I had, not as a Rabbi's son and not as a student. It was the first time I could spread my wings, so to speak. However, the months before I actually took my leave were incredibly difficult. So many times, I asked my parents, "What would happen if I was too homesick? What would happen if I couldn't do this or do that? We packed my trunk and I would ask, "What if I cry all of the time?" Then came the morning of the first day and I helped my father load my trunk into the car and we began the two-hour ride to camp.

I felt nauseous the entire ride. We pulled up to the bunk and, along with 10 other boys and their families, we unloaded my trunk. We were met by one of my counselors who said, "We can take it from here." He was determined to help me make a clean break. Unfortunately, that was not my mother's plan. She was determined to help me unpack. So she did – and I was relieved. I thought they were finally going to go. I knew the moment they left would be hard but the anticipation was excruciating. My counselor, recognizing the growing anxiety, tried to escort her to the door but she insisted on helping me make my bed. He reassured her that he and I would be able to do it together – but she insisted – and the tension grew.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, they did get back in the car and, as the red Buick station wagon pulled away, and I saw my father look back in his rear view mirror to see if I was OK. I put on the bravest face I could, waved and ran back into the bunk...and I cried. So, my counselor gathered the rest of the boys together and he sat us down in the middle of the bunk and we began to talk. There were boys who were returning campers, but most were brand new. We played an ice breaker game and then we just talked. So, the summer was launched.

It was during that first summer that I received a new identity. For the first time I discovered who I really was – an independent (or a pretty independent being.) I went back to camp for the next ten years without missing a summer. During that time, I learned these two important lessons:

First – Each of us must leave places in order to become who we want to be.

Second – People we meet in those places are important. In fact, they are so important that we ought to take them with us on our journey and it may just turn out that they are probably going to the same place.

I am glad you made it.