

In Israel: President Obama Draws from African-American Struggle

Written by George E. Curry
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President Barack Obama, standing before an audience of thousands of Israeli people in Jerusalem last week, drew from Black history in America in order to connect.

“In the United States - a nation made up of people who crossed oceans to start anew - we’re naturally drawn to the idea of finding freedom in our land. To African-Americans, the story of the Exodus was perhaps the central story, the most powerful image about emerging from the grip of bondage to reach for liberty and human dignity - a tale that was carried from slavery through the Civil Rights Movement into today,” he said in the March 21 speech at the Jerusalem International Convention Center.

His first time in the Holy Land, the President made a rare move in speaking openly about the pains of Black Americans and how they made it from slavery to freedom with faith and hope.

“For generations, this promise helped people weather poverty and persecution while holding on to the hope that a better day was on the horizon. For me, personally, growing up in far-flung parts of the world and without firm roots, the story spoke to a yearning within every human being for a home,” he said to applause.

He made the comparison with the plight of Jewish people.

“As Dr. Martin Luther King said on the day before he was killed, ‘I may not get there with you. But I want you to know that we, as a people, will get to the promised land,’” The audience applauded again. “So just as Joshua carried on after Moses, the work goes on for all of you, the

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Joshua Generation, for justice and dignity; for opportunity and freedom.”

On the “listening tour” to Israel last week, Obama’s intent was to spread good will and connect.

“Over the last two days, I’ve reaffirmed the bonds between our countries with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Peres. I’ve borne witness to the ancient history of the Jewish people at the Shrine of the Book, and I’ve seen Israel’s shining future in your scientists and your entrepreneurs. This is a nation of museums and patents, timeless holy sites and ground-breaking innovation. Only in Israel could you see the Dead Sea Scrolls and the place where the technology on board the Mars Rover originated at the same time.”

The message, billed as his speech “To the People of Israel”, carried a sense of resolve and promise of the Passover season.

“Of course, even as we draw strength from the story of God’s will and His gift of freedom expressed on Passover, we also know that here on Earth we must bear our responsibilities in an imperfect world. That means accepting our measure of sacrifice and struggle, just like previous generations. It means us working through generation after generation on behalf of that ideal of freedom.”