

Opening Thoughts

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Reverse the Neglect

IT'S INTERESTING the things you notice, but my first thought upon walking through the

White House — my first-ever visit to the presidential residence — was how much smaller it really is in real life. Whether in depictions on the small or large screen or in the fanciful imaginations of children and adults alike, let's face it: The White House is a palace; its corridors ooze with grandeur; the building itself is designed to intimidate foreign heads of states and pesky members of the opposition.

But up close, as I learned last week as one of many starry-eyed invitees to one of two official Chanukah parties thrown by President and Mrs. Obama, the White House, while grand, isn't all that big. When you get right down to it, it's a house, not a palace. And, as befits a house built by the people for a president whose unique contribution to government theory is that he is not a king, its grandeur emanates not from its size, but from its history.

The home of every chief executive with the exception of Washington, the White House marvels the powerful and plebian alike by the history that has taken place — and the history yet to be made — within the confines of its walls. It can be seen in the massive portraits of Washington, Madison and Lincoln, the slightly imperfect moldings enveloping the Green Room and the thousands of old volumes in the ground-floor library from which visitors are free to peruse.

Call me jaded or idealistic — I'll freely admit that I'm probably both — but on that night last week, as a Holocaust survivor lit a menorah made from nails scavenged by another survivor at Auschwitz, I was humbled not by President Obama before me,

but by the office he represents. It was the history of the house, of the country, of the presidency, of the fact that we live in a nation where a menorah can be lit and publicly celebrated from the East Room of the presidential mansion that made me speechless, not the man now occupying the residence.

History, unfortunately, is a commodity too little appreciated today. At its best, it is studied by rote by too many high schoolers; at its worst, it is trampled upon by the multitude whatever their age. It is derided and scorned, a product of another age all too quickly forgotten instead of honored and valued as a documentation of the failures we may yet avoid in the future and the successes we may only hope to repeat. Put simply, for far too many, history is that pesky reminder of from whence we came, and no one enjoys being put in his place.

And as you'll read in this week's JT, it is exactly our personal histories that are quickly fading into the ether. Here in Baltimore, as in cities up and down the Eastern seaboard, Jewish cemeteries dating back more than 100 years are in danger of succumbing to the elements, to a lack of resources, to time itself. For whatever reason, people today visit the resting places of their ancestors far less frequently than in the past; it's as if the very pace of forgetting is accelerating.

But thanks to new ways of pooling resources and the dedication of a handful of volunteers, our community's and families' links to the past are increasingly being restored and cared for.

For this core group of activists, perpetual care is the embodiment of perpetual memory. It's my earnest hope that they succeed, because if we neglect our claim to the past, what good is the present? JT

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