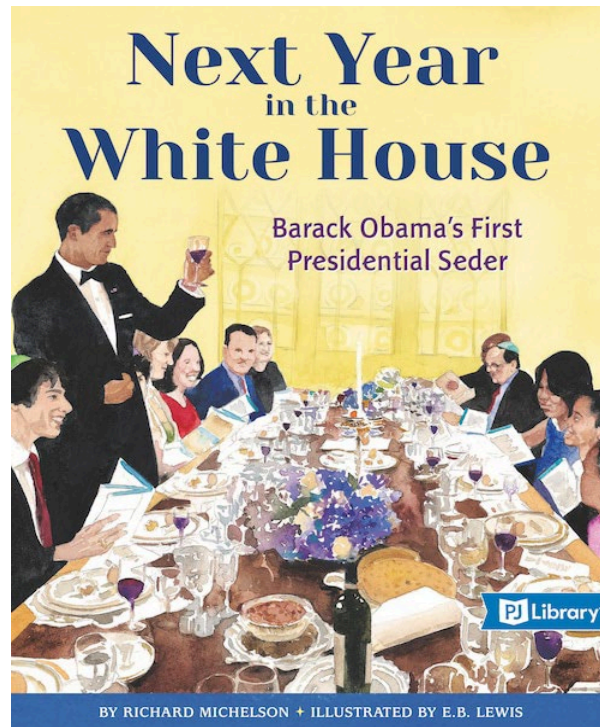


‘Next Year in the White House’: Children’s book tells story of Obama’s 2008 Passover Seder

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Richard Michelson, award-winning Amherst author and poet, has written ‘Next Year in the White House,’ a children's book that recounts the night Barack Obama celebrated Passover with his campaign staff.

[Staasi Heropoulos | Special to The Republican](#)

LONGMEADOW— When Eric Lesser celebrates the beginning of Passover in April by holding a Seder dinner with his family, the former state senator from Longmeadow will recall the night former President Barrack Obama toasted the Jewish holiday with him when Lesser was a junior staffer on Obama’s first presidential campaign.

Fresh out of college after attending Longmeadow High School, Lesser was in charge of getting the campaign’s luggage from one stop to another. He also helped plan events and appearances, traveling some 200 thousand miles through 47 states with then-U.S. Senator Obama, according to Lesser.

Lesser found himself in Pennsylvania in April 2008 where Hillary Clinton was beating Obama ahead of the Commonwealth’s critical primary.

“I normally would’ve gone home to Longmeadow, but it was physically impossible given the travel schedule,” he told The Republican.

Lesser said he and Obama, along with others on the campaign, were staying in a “non-descript” hotel in the outskirts of Harrisburg. It was the end of another 15-hour day when Lesser and two other junior staffers organized a Seder in a windowless room in the hotel’s basement.

“Obama got wind of it and showed up,” recalls Lesser, who was a four-term senator in the First Hampden and Hampshire district. He is now a regulatory attorney in Boston.

According to Jewish custom, celebrants raise a glass and proclaim, “Next year in Jerusalem.”

“That’s considered the culmination of the meal. When we put our glasses down, he (Obama) put his glass up and said, ‘Next year in the White House,’” according to Lesser.



President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama mark the beginning of Passover with a Seder in the Old Family Dining Room of the White House, April 18, 2011. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)The White House

A children's story

The story of Obama's Seder with his staff is told in the new children's book, "Next Year in the White House," published this month by Penguin Random House's Crown Books for Young Readers.

Richard Michelson, award-winning Amherst author and poet, wrote the book based on his interviews with Lesser and the two other staffers that organized the dinner.

"In the middle of the Seder, there was a knock on the door and it was Obama. It was after a long day of campaigning when, by all rights, he should have ordered dinner in his room and gone to bed. It shows you the measure of the man that he was there to support his youngest staffers, celebrate with them and give them hope," said Michelson in an interview with The Republican.

Obama's approval rating was sinking fast in this must-win primary, which he eventually lost, and pundits expected him to drop out of the race.

"There were no newspapers around for the Seder. Nobody found out about it until months later. He was not doing it to boost his campaign. He was doing it because he was a decent man who cared about the people around him," continued the book's author.



President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama host a Passover Seder dinner in the Old Family Dining Room of the White House, April 15, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)The White House

'We're here'

One year after that impromptu dinner, Lesser found himself in the White House, working as the assistant to David Axelrod, one of President Obama's senior advisors.

"I had a small cubby office right next-door to the Oval Office so I could see the President go back-and-forth. It was around this time of year that he poked his head in and he said, 'Oh hey, Eric. Are we doing the Seder?' "I said, 'I don't know sir.' He looked at me with a grin and told me, 'Well, I said next year in the White House and here we are,'" recalls Lesser.

President Obama had only one request, said Lesser—that there would be no national or international figures, religious leaders or media in attendance. He just wanted original celebrants and his family at the first-ever Seder in the White House.

Lesser said Obama continued to mark Passover this way for his entire eight years as president.

The original Seder was so low-key, there are no pictures of it. Caldecott Honor-winning illustrator E. B. Lewis imagined what it looked like and created oil painting images of it that appear in the book, which also features paintings Lewis created of the dinner at the White House.

"I tried to tell this passionate, old story about persecution, survival and the celebration of what a group of people had to go through to survive—and their ability to celebrate what they were able to endure," said Lewis.

"This is a great opportunity to tell a story that is very similar to the African American experience," he added.

Lesser said he has no stake or financial interest in the book. He is simply a key source for the publication, which is being distributed to 30,000 children this month by PJ Library.

PJ Library "Inspires joyful Jewish experiences by sending free monthly storybooks and activities to families with children," according to a news release.

During the Seder, Jews tell the story of the Israelites' escape from slavery in ancient Egypt, a key event in Jewish history. As this tradition continued in Obama's White House, diners would also read aloud the Emancipation Proclamation, the declaration by President Abraham Lincoln that freed slaves in America.

“The book delivers a message about friendship and loyalty—the staff’s loyalty to their boss and to the campaign, but also the boss’s loyalty to his team, knowing they were away from their families,” said Lesser. “It’s a personal story about friendship, teambuilding and overcoming adversity.”

“Next Year in the White House” is a 40 page hardcover that retails for around \$18.99 and is available wherever major books are sold.

