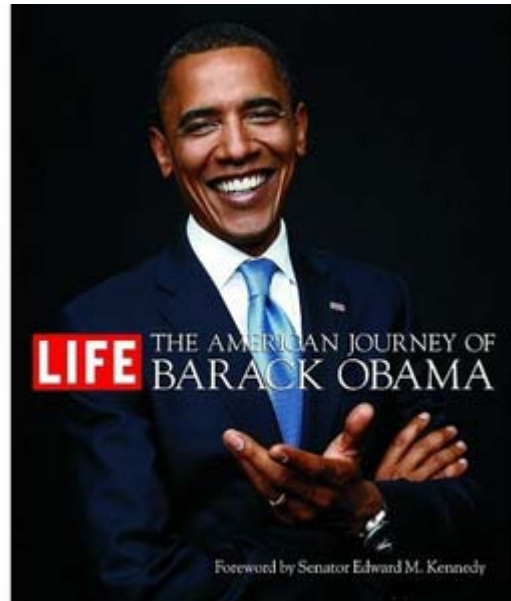


Our Children's Crusade
THE AMERICAN JOURNEY OF BARACK OBAMA
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My husband and I have nine children (four by birth, five by adoption), ages 10 to 26, white, Romani, and Ethiopian, which makes Thanksgivings really, really complicated, but does allow easy access to polling data without leaving the house. Regarding the several generations and ethnic groups within our immediate family, I can say I have not seen everyone so united around a single purpose since the rush to get midnight tickets for the opening day of Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest. The children's purpose this time is to see Senator Barack Obama elected president.

The day before Super Tuesday, I got a phone call from Molly, our oldest, who works in radio in San Francisco. "There was an Obama supporter yelling on the street right outside my window at work today," she said. "I'm for Obama, but this started to get a little annoying." I asked how long he was yelling and Molly said: "Three hours."

Just as I hung up, a cell-phone text message came in from Seth, our second-oldest, who is in graduate school in New York City. "Volunteered for Obama today," he texted.

"What did you do?" I wrote back.

"Stood on street corner yelling for Obama."

"For how long?" I asked, feeling I already knew.

"Three hours."

Only Daniel, 13, did not immediately leap to the bandwagon last winter. He'd recently joined our family from Ethiopia and, in his experience, presidential campaigns tend to end in gunfire. "Look, Daniel!" I said, pointing out Senator Obama in the row of podiums at a candidates' debate. "He could be the first black American president!"

"Where, Mom!" barked Daniel. He is lanky, black-skinned, and—wearing a younger brother's small t-shirt, tightly-belted jeans stopping short at his ankles, and neon-green Crocs—clueless about American urban fashion.

"There, Daniel, right there," I said, gesturing again towards the Illinois senator.

"Where, Mom?" he repeated, with the Ethiopian roll of the R.

"Daniel, right there," I said, having walked to the TV screen and placed my finger on Obama's head.

In Daniel's experience, presidential campaigns tend to involve black candidates. But this didn't look like one of them. "No, Mom," he said sadly. "Not black, Mom. He not black."

But the rest of the kids caught fire—the words, the call for global justice, the elegance, the books (for the oldest three), the promise to end the war, and the overturning of the Bush White House. And also because—no matter how often pundits warn that American voters don't get who Obama is, that they fear that he's an outsider, a foreigner, who doesn't understand them—my kids and their friends get exactly who Obama is. I'm sure they feel that, if he could stop by for a couple of hours, they'd instantly have him in gym shorts and t-shirt in the driveway shooting hoops, then in the front yard chasing a soccer ball, then getting soaked as the game devolved into a water gun fight, then perhaps lured to the kitchen table to help with homework, which includes, on any given night, assignments in Spanish, French, Hebrew, and Latin.

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We live in Atlanta, not far from downtown. When I was a child—growing up in Macon, Georgia—Atlanta was like Macon, but more so: state flags, with their slashing Confederate emblems like crossed swords, flew everywhere; segregation was unassailably deep and wide. This was the Heart of Dixie. Every restaurant served barbeque, and many offered knick-knacks—like salt-and-pepper shakers resembling a mammy and a sharecropper—in the display cases under the cash registers. Black people were expected to

say 'ma'am' and 'sir' to white people. In the 1950s, a large African-American woman was paid to dress up like Aunt Jemima and sit on a bale of hay at the Atlanta airport, welcoming visitors to the Deep South. The Klan, reborn in Stone Mountain, Georgia, in 1913, was ever-present. But Atlanta took a sharp turn in the late 1950s when Mayor Bill Hartsfield denounced the domestic terrorism of the white supremacists. He called Atlanta, "The City too Busy to Hate," which was more wishful thinking than fact at that time, but did steer Atlanta in a different direction than its sister cities around the South.

The 1996 Olympics fulfilled the late Mayor's hopes; and, to look around Atlanta today, you might wonder if most of the world's people who came here for the Olympics simply lingered, driving taxis, opening restaurants, enrolling in graduate school, and starting medical practices. A more diverse city is hard to imagine. In the entire sum of my public school education—in Georgia and later in Ohio—I may have met a total of four black children. Other than Jewish families, including my own, I can't recall being exposed to any ethnic group other than the Simopoulos family of Dayton, Ohio. When Helen arrived in Atlanta from Ethiopia in 2004, speaking both English and Amharic, and started public school kindergarten, her four best friends were an African-American girl, a white American girl, a bilingual French-American girl and a bilingual Korean-American girl. When school let out, the five girls came tearing down the sidewalk to our house, grabbed seats at our kitchen table, and tore with their fingers into the bland Ethiopian bread to dip it into the spicy Ethiopian stews awaiting them. While others remarked that the children looked like a UNICEF ad, this was the world they knew. When they all went to the Korean family's house, they slipped off their shoes at the door and they ate kimchi. When they went to the French family's house, they ate Rwandan egg fritters, but that's another story....

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A couple of weekends ago, I canvassed for Obama with my sons, Lee, 20, and Seth, 23, in the Kirkwood neighborhood of Atlanta. We were equipped to register unregistered voters. Black, white, straight, gay, working class, and affluent families, with flea-bitten hound dogs or with poodles in studded collars, all lived side-by-side in shotgun houses and multistory villas. We never knew what sort of person would open the door. One man said, "Yeah I'm for Obama, I'm black, ain't I?"

"Well, let's see," I said. "We just met your neighbor, the black Republican."

"Yeah," he said. "You can look at the car he drive and know what he stand for."

Mansion for Obama, Shack for Obama, Elderly White Woman for Obama, Black Male Octogenarian for Obama, Lesbian-Feminist for Hillary,

and a Libertarian who said, "No Soliciting means No Soliciting," after I asked, "Is it soliciting if I'm not asking you for any money?"

"Who do you like for president?" I asked Swann Lee, a Korean-American dancer and my hair stylist.

Mid-cut, she bent down and whispered in my ear, "I like Obama. Don't tell!"

Israeli carpet cleaners arrived at my house. "Who do you like for president?" I asked.

"Well," said a young man, a veteran of the Israeli army. "Is it true what they say, Obama is a Muslim?"

"No, not true," I say. "Not that it should matter, but Obama's a Christian."

"I get many emails about this."

"They're lies."

"Okay," he said. "If this is true, I like."

Out for brunch with a crowd of old friends, all of us active in Jewish affairs, including an Israeli woman and a Mexican-American Jewish woman, I ask, "Who are we voting for, for president?" I've read in the New York Times about Jewish voters' reluctance to vote for Obama. I haven't personally met any such voter, but I thought maybe there was one among us.

"Melissa, are you crazy?" said one friend. "Why, do you think we trust McCain on foreign policy?!" Everyone laughed. At the end of our meal, one of the women offered me a Barack Obama bumper sticker in Hebrew.

"You like Obama?" I asked a Nigerian taxi driver on a ride home from the airport.

"Yes, but, do you think they will let him win?"

"Yes, I think they will," I said.

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"Mom, Obama is win?" asks Daniel.

Daniel's English is coming along nicely, but verb tenses are so difficult! I loved the day he sadly held up his crushed water bottle, which

he'd found on a chair under his younger brother Yosef. "Mom," he said, regarding it with regret. "Yosef is sit."

So when he asks, "Obama is win?" I don't know if he's asking, "Is Obaba winning?" or "Did Obama win?" or "Will Obama win?" When I press him on this, he smiles and grows shy.

Later he asks, "Dad like Obama?"

"Yes."

"Molly vote Obama?"

"Yes."

"Seth like Obama?"

"Yes."

"Lee vote Obama?"

"Yes."

"Lily like Obama?"

"Lily's 16, too young to vote."

"You?"

"Yes."

"Molly's friends, Seth's friends, Lee's friends?"

"Yes."

"All?"

I hesitate, thinking about Seth's Bulgarian-American friend, formerly a college Young Republican, now on Wall Street. I ask Seth. The answer is: Venci likes Obama.

"Yes, all."

"Obama is win," Daniel concludes.

Based on this scientific polling data, I have reached the same conclusion.