

Celebrating Hanukah at the White House

Ezra Friedlander

White House politics came to stand still for one brief, shining moment as a cross section of Jews from the United States celebrated Hanukah with President Obama. The feeling of inclusion, as I entered the South West gates of the White House, was extraordinary.

For those of us who appreciate history, entering the White House to the sound of traditional Hanukah melodies is an acknowledgment of how far our community has come from the dark days of the Holocaust when our rabbis were not allowed anywhere near the interior of the White House to plead on behalf of our forefathers who were being killed by the millions.



Vice President Joe Biden with Ezra Friedlander

Those were the emotions that accompanied me, as the Secret Service waved me through and we

entered the White House—if only then, if only then...

Symbolism is important—in many ways that is the message of Hanukah—when we display our symbols for the world to see!

There are many ways to be a host and many ways to be a guest. While at the White House, I saw an extraordinary display of unity. It was a night bereft of politics, partisanship, and division. Jews of all stripes, Republicans, Democrats and Independents and indeed of all levels of

observance, gathered together to acknowledge that we are all Jews who are grateful to these United

States for the privilege of practicing our religion.

Yes, indeed, that was what the evening represented—a White House that hosted an evening of glatt kosher l'mehadrin is a testament and a strong statement that we, the Jewish people, can observe unhindered, but even more so—we can contribute to our nation without conflicts.

So it wasn't just the opportunity to eat on White House china and utensils kashered under the supervision of Rabbi Levi Shemtov, Executive VP of American Friends of Lubavitch in Washington, DC, whose emphasis on Pas Yisroel and Chasidiha shichtia indicated that the cuisine was permitted.

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When President Obama welcomed us to the White House, I sensed not only the aura of being regaled but the awesome responsibility that comes along with it. Perhaps my appreciation of history caused my emotions to overtake me. Either way, I was standing in line to greet the president of the United States—a man whose decisions effect mankind. I was in awe.

What I did not expect was what the Military Social Aide asked my wife and I, as we were approaching the receiving line: “are you shomer nigiah?” (which literally mean “observant of touch.” The term refers to someone who refrains from physical contact with members of the opposite sex.)

To be honest, I did not expect this level of courtesy. This level of detail reflected something very unusual but very positive: that we as Orthodox Jews have not only the right to be fully observant but indeed are obligated to do so.

The President and First Lady could not have been more gracious or welcoming. In the few seconds that we got to share private time with President Obama, we had the opportunity to tell him whatever was on our minds. I thought long and hard about what to say, realizing that it is extremely difficult and perhaps inappropriate to address a particular issue or advocate for something in particular. Having discussed this with my father, the *liska Rov Shlita*, I decided to convey a blessing for “divine inspiration as he leads our nation and is confronted with decisions that impact humanity.” The President was introspective, he listened to me and then thanked me and wished me a happy holiday.



Upon taking leave of the president, we returned upstairs to the state dining room and mingled with the guests. Vice President Biden was also a gracious host who greeted everyone warmly and spent an inordinate amount of time making everyone feel at home.

We had many opportunities to schmooze that night. In light of my conscience telling me that I had a responsibility to use this opportunity to advocate for a pressing issue, I decided to respectfully mention Jonathan Pollard. I excused myself saying this perhaps was not the venue, but I just wanted to remember him on this special night. The Vice President agreed to talk with me, and I will only say that I walked away with a positive feeling.

I was conflicted as to whether I should raise the issue. The reason I did, is the knowledge that officials keep track of conversations and the pulse of the community and an event that included a cross section of our community's leadership should include the mention of his name.

All in all, it was a sobering experience that imparted an important lesson to me: be proud of who you

are and try to be a better Jew. It demonstrated that Jarrod Bernstein, the White House Director of Jewish Outreach knows how to advocate for the community, which is a difficult task to represent the President of the United States.

In 1944, we didn't have a president who initiated his remarks with acknowledging his director of Jewish Outreach; in 2011 we do.

Though the world stood still for me, while in the White House, I am under no illusions that the overwhelming challenges facing our community and the world still very much exist, but as someone who would consider himself a student of history, this was an evening of reflection and not just an opportunity to eat glatt kosher lamb chops in the East Room of the White House.

For others it might have meant something else, but for me it was an evening to thank President Obama for recognizing our Jewish heritage—and for that we have to be eternally grateful. □

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