

## An Evening at the White House

BY EZRA FRIEDLANDER

Last Thursday night at the White House, politics stood still for one brief, shining moment as a cross-section of Jews from across the United States came to celebrate Chanukah, and perhaps more than that. I would like to share with *Hamodia's* readership the extraordinary feeling of inclusion I experienced as I entered the South West gates of the White House.

Indeed, for those of us who appreciate history, entering the White House to the singing of traditional Chanukah melodies is an acknowledgment of just 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. Those who are familiar with the history of those days know what I am referring to; it is important for those who do not know to educate themselves.

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...* Yes, symbolism is important. In many ways, that is the message of Chanukah, when we display our symbols for the world to see!

On Thursday night at the White House I saw an extraordinary display of unity — a night bereft of politics, partisanship or division. Jews of all stripes — Republicans, Democrats, Independents and, indeed, representing all levels of observance, gathered together to acknowledge that all of us are grateful to these United States for the privilege of practicing our religion as we choose.

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

It was more than just an 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, D.C., whose emphasis on *pas Yisrael* and *chashidische shechitah* indicated that the cuisine was permitted. There was also an implicit message that we can prosper in these United States while conducting ourselves as fully observant Jews, with our faith remaining the central fact of our lives.

As President Obama welcomed us to the White House, I was keenly aware not only of the distinction of being feted at the White House but also of the awesome responsibility that comes along with it. I could not help but feel a sense of awe that I was standing in line to greet the President of the United States, a man whose decisions may have momentous consequences for mankind.

I was impressed with the respectful approach of the White House staff to the nuances of our religious observances, an attention to detail that I believe reflected something very unusual but also very positive: that we, as Orthodox Jews, not only have the *right* to be fully observant but are *obligated* to do so.

The President and First Lady could not have been more gracious or welcoming. In the few seconds that were allotted to us to share private time with the President, we had the opportunity to tell him whatever was on our mind. I had thought long and hard about what to say, realizing that it might be inappropriate to address a singular issue or advocate for something in particular. Having discussed this with my father, the Liska Rav, *shlita*, I decided to



Ezra Friedlander (R) speaking with Vice President Biden at the White House.

convey a *brachah* for “Divine inspiration as he leads our nation and is confronted with decisions that impact humanity.” The President listened to me thoughtfully, thanked me and asked me, “Where I’m from,” and then wished me a Happy Holiday.

Upon taking leave of the President, we returned upstairs to the State Dining Room to mingle with the guests. Vice President Biden played the gracious host who greeted everyone warmly and spent an inordinate amount of time making everyone feel very much at home. We had many opportunities to schmooze that night. Since my conscience persisted in reminding me that I ought to use this opportunity to advocate for a pressing issue, I decided to respectfully mention Jonathan Pollard. I told the Vice President that I was aware this might not be the proper venue for it, but I just wanted to remember him tonight. In order to be respectful of the Vice President’s agreeing to talk with me, I will only say that I walked away with a positive feeling. I was quite conflicted about the propriety of raising the issue, but I am aware that officials are always monitoring the pulse of the community. At an event such as this, I concluded that I had an obligation to tell our nation’s leadership what is on the minds of our fellow Jews. Perhaps it was even appropriate during the spirit of the moment.

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, ‘gets it’ and knows how to advocate for the community. In 1944 the White House did not have a Director of Jewish Outreach; in 2011 we have the President of the United States opening his remarks by acknowledging Jarrod Bernstein as the new Director of Jewish Outreach at the White House.

Though I admit that the world stood still for me that night in the White House, I am under no illusions about the overwhelming challenges that face our community and the world. I am mindful that it was an evening for reflection, not just an opportunity to eat glatt kosher lamb chops in the East Room of the White House. Still, it was also an evening to thank the President of the United States for recognizing and respecting our Jewish heritage, something for which we must be eternally grateful.

*Mr. Friedlander, is CEO of The Friedlander Group, a NYC and Washington D.C.-based public affairs consulting group that is now spearheading the effort to award Raoul Wallenberg with a Congressional Gold Medal in light of his upcoming centennial in 2012, recognizing his heroism in saving over 100,000 Jews in the waning days of the Holocaust.*

## Brooklyn Writers’ Conference Empowers and Inspires

BY CHAYA BREINDY KENIGSBURG

Over a hundred writers, from aspiring to professional, gathered on Wednesday evening, November 30, at the first-ever Writers’ Conference in Brooklyn. This groundbreaking, multifaceted event gave participants the opportunity to tap into a variety of resources, to network and learn from some of today’s most talented authors.

In her inimitable, affable and humorous manner, Etka Gittel Schwartz, noted *Binah* columnist, opened the evening by sharing the tools she uses to make her narratives real and compelling. Chana Devorah Urbach charged the atmosphere with her inspiring speech on Courageous Writing, in which she challenged the participants to let go of their inhibitions and write.

The audience then chose to attend one of three simultaneous workshops presented by Azriella Jaffee, Sarah Shapiro and Chana Devorah Urbach. Azriella Jaffee empowered her audience with a host of pragmatic writing skills and tips. Sarah Shapiro’s intelligence and dignity entranced her listeners as she helped them tune into the stories inside of themselves. Chana Devorah Urbach helped writers advance their writing through creative exercises and techniques. Libby Lazewnik, noted author and *Binah* columnist, closed the evening with a talk as spellbinding as

she writes; she shared some of the ways that she brainstorms and plans before writing.

Other features of this event included a beautiful booklet of Resources for Writers, an interactive Writers’ Shadchan wall where participants posted their profiles if they were interested in finding a writing partner, a book raffle and private consultations with authors.

The evening was also graced with the presence of several forward-thinking publications including *Binah*, *Hamodia* and *Mishpacha*, which sent representatives to tap into the amazing pool of talent that was present at the conference. These publications set up appealing tables with wares, sample publications, questionnaires and surveys. The representatives took the initiative to open communication with tens of participants in a gracious manner.

Participants left the evening empowered and inspired. As Toby Z., one of the participants, expressed, “The energy in the room could be felt in the sense of community, joy, openness and sharing.” When asked what they felt they had gained from the evening, participants were eloquent in their enthusiasm. “A great dose of courage, guidance, inspiration and a craving for more writing!”

To inquire about future events or resources for writers, call Chaya Breindy Kenigsberg at 718-435-8127 or email kenigsberg@yeshivanet.com.

## Book Review

BY DAVID J. GLENN

*It might seem at first glance that Rabbi Shmuel Waldman’s book Beyond a Reasonable Doubt — Convincing Evidence of the Truths of Judaism is a work on kiruv designed to bring young Jews to, or back to, the Torah.*

*His key intent, though, is to provide answers for FFB [frum-from-birth] Jews with questions about the basics of emunah. He’s providing the kind of material he says he could have used himself when he was a teenager.*

*“I was an FFB teen,” Rabbi Waldman says. “Outwardly, I was doing everything — davening and learning every day, strictly keeping Shabbos and kashrus, and all the rest. But internally, I felt an emptiness. I had many conscious and subconscious emunah questions that I never dared to ask. Nor did I feel that I really had anyone qualified to answer any of my questions since the basic topics of emunah were really never discussed in class.*

*“The problem was, we were taught how to follow all the laws and mitzvos, we learned lots and lots of Gemara, but we had no idea why. We were given a house built on no foundation.”*

### Not Afraid of Questions

This started to change when he was seventeen. A friend, Rabbi Ephraim Isralowitz of the Mirrer Yeshivah, gave him some cassette tapes of lectures by Harav Avigdor Miller, *zt”l*. “I was amazed,” Rabbi Waldman says. “Rabbi Miller wasn’t afraid to answer questions on the theory of evolution or on human suffering. In fact, toward the end of all his lectures he invited questions of *emunah* and *hashkafah*.”



Rabbi Shmuel Waldman with a copy of his book *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*

Rabbi Waldman asked his friend for more tapes. Finally, “the doubts, the lingering, nagging questions,” were being addressed, he says.

### Strengthening the Connection

Rabbi Waldman studied in the Yeshivah of Staten Island and at the Mirrer Yeshivah in Brooklyn. He was a *Mashgiach* in Yeshivas Mercaz HaTorah of Belle Harbor for about eight years

and currently teaches at a Bais Yaakov seminary in Boro Park.

He often gives *shiurim* at yeshivos, seminaries and *kiruv rechokim* gatherings, conveying the basics of *emunah*.

Since the book was first published in 2002, Rabbi Waldman says he has received dozens of letters, emails and phone calls from Jews at all levels of *Yiddishkeit*, telling him that the book answered questions that had been lingering in their minds for a long time. Several organizations, including Oorah and NCSY (National Council of Synagogue Youth), have handed out hundreds of copies of the book, contributing to a distribution of many thousands in the past nine years.

Rabbi Waldman says the book was also written for *rebbeim* and *moros* so that they would be “better equipped to take on questions from students.” He says that several high schools are currently using the book in their classes.

The book addresses questions of evolution, the authenticity of *maamad Har Sinai*, *Olam Haba*, and other essential topics.

“The truths of the Torah have always been available in the works of the *Rishonim*,” Rabbi Waldman says. “You just have to know where to look.”