

Check your email – especially in the Season of Miracles.

On a busy Tuesday morning here at the JCCH – Hanukkah was to begin that evening - I was on the phone when an email came in from an address I didn't recognize: *Hanukkah2RSVP@who.eop.gov*.

Should I open it? I suppose. The attachment was a bit fuzzy but, when I looked closely, I realized what it so clearly was – an unbelievable invitation from President and Mrs. Obama requesting the “pleasure of my company” at a Hanukkah Reception at the White House. The very next day at 6:30 PM. Could I make it? Of course I could!

But first, I thought to use the surprise invitation as an opportunity to showcase our youngest students celebrating Hanukkah with the JCCH Menorah Mobile (my car, menorah strapped to the top with music pumping from an external speaker). We called News12 Westchester with the nice news of the invitation and they arrived in ten minutes – it was a slow news day, I suppose. That very night they aired a wonderful story showing our Early Childhood students dancing to the Hanukkah music. Back at home, we arranged childcare for the next day, got our good clothing ready and prepared to leave for a lightning trip to Washington.

A long security line – we used the time to reconnect with friends we saw from various stages of our lives – led us in, finally, to the beautiful reception rooms of the White House. Just as we were coming up the stairs to the Grand Foyer, we heard a beautiful voice singing the menorah lighting blessings. We later realized that the voice was that of Rabbi Angela Buchdal, the newly elevated senior rabbi at Manhattan's prestigious Central Synagogue. Two menorahs were lit that day in the White House. One was made by students of Jerusalem's Hand-in-Hand School, an unusual Arab-Jewish school in Israel, recently the target of vandalism. The other menorah was made by children of Yemin Orde, a Jewish youth village near Haifa home to 400 youngsters from Ethiopia, Iran, India, Yemen, Eastern Europe and South America. In President Obama's remarks, he described the “timeless story” of Chanukah as one “so powerful that we all know it by heart — even us gentiles. It's a story of right over might, of faith over doubt,” reminding us “miracles come in all shapes and sizes.” I had a chance to briefly shake the President's hand, through the throngs of guests.

After the ceremony, it was quite a sight to see hundreds of Jews noshing kosher delicacies in rooms bedecked with holly as we enjoy the sounds of the University of Pennsylvania Jewish A Capella group and, in the East Room, the United States Marine Chamber Orchestra playing both Christmas and Chanukah tunes. The potato latkes and Chanukah desserts were quite good and the White House (kosher!) lamb chops deserve special mention.

Perhaps the most remarkable comments were shared by Rabbi Buchdal as she introduced the menorah lighting. She noted the improbability of the scene before us, asking President Obama, “Do you think that the founding fathers could have imagined that an Asian-American woman rabbi would be reciting Jewish prayers in front of an African-American president? At the White House? I think they'd be surprised... This country is a country of miracles.”

Editor of the New York Jewish, Gary Rosenblatt, was in attendance as well. In a column printed after the reception, he shared the following sentiments: “By evening’s end I felt a swell of pride — American and Jewish, for my country and my people — in seeing the realization of our parents and grandparents’ dreams embodied in this symbolic celebration. In the words of the traditional blessings, we were expressing gratitude for the miracles performed for our ancestors and, in our day, for “allowing us to reach this moment.”

Indeed, it was miraculous, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Rebecca and myself – to join at the White House in representing the Jewish community, in representing our new JCCH community and in representing our ancestors who would find our place and Jews’ place in this blessed country nothing short of miraculous.