



FRUM PLASMA DONORS

A KIDDUSH HASHEM AT THE WHITE HOUSE



Rabbi Ariel Sadwin speaking on the National Day of Prayer at the White House

As a regional director of Agudath Israel since 2007, being in the public eye and interacting with government officials are not new experiences for me. As an unmistakably Orthodox Jew representing *klal Yisrael* as a profession, it's not a matter I take lightly. Whether my colleagues and I are called upon to address a challenging situation or we are engaged in one of many issues of communal importance, our goals are the same—to help our fellow *Yidden* and be *mekadesh Shem Shamayim*. Sometimes those two goals are separate; other times they come together.

With the arrival of the coronavirus a few months ago, many aspects of our “regular” *askanus* activities took a back seat to the new reality. Chief among the items that occupied most of our time were working to ensure that the governor’s executive orders would not cripple critical aspects of our community’s operations and trying to understand the new stimulus grant programs that would provide *mosdos* and local businesses with critical

relief. New concerns, both local and national, were shared and discussed every morning on the daily Zoom conferences held by National Agudah staff.

It was during one of those morning conferences that my colleague Avrohom Weinstock, Esq., chief of staff of National Agudah, shared the initiative he was undertaking with three New York-area *askanim*, Mordy Serle, Abba Swiatycki, and Chaim M. Lebovits, regarding COVID plasma.

COVID Plasma

As one who is tightly connected to the medical establishment here in the Maryland-Washington, DC, area, I started reading up on the work they had started, and began contacting local doctors and hospitals to see if a COVID plasma initiative was taking place in this region.

I soon learned that Baltimore-based Johns Hopkins Hospital was doing extensive research on the effectiveness of “convalescent

COVID plasma,” but there was no initiative to effectively identify potential donors and pursue wide-scale plasma donations.

I then connected with Aryeh Leib Freedman of Misaskim of Maryland and Dr. Yosef Levenbrown, the medical director of Hatzalah of Baltimore, to create the Maryland COVID Plasma Initiative.

Although the goal was to get plasma donations from those who had recovered from COVID, it was clear to everyone involved that there were too few confirmed COVID cases for this initiative to be fully productive. The effort across participating communities was expanded to increase the donor “market” by testing the blood antibodies of all those who assumed they had had the virus. If their blood titers were shown to contain the necessary level of COVID antibodies, their plasma would be eligible for transfusion into a current COVID patient.

As part of what has now become a national effort, two antibody drives have already been

held in Baltimore, and we have helped guide other communities in doing so, as well. We have identified hundreds of COVID-positive plasma donors and have been arranging plasma donations at the blood banks with whom we have partnered.

Because of the size and scope of this operation, it has generated thousands of COVID plasma donors, making the Orthodox Jewish community responsible for a significant percentage of all COVID plasma currently available in the country.

The Rose Garden

Each year, the first Thursday in May is designated as the National Day of Prayer. Several weeks ago, the Trump administration decided that in the solemn spirit of the COVID pandemic, participants at the National Day of Prayer event hosted by the White House should bear a connection to COVID response efforts. The White House reached out to its contacts among the many faith groups to find out how they were responding to the pandemic. Among the countless COVID-related projects, Rabbi Abba Cohen, National Agudah's vice president for government affairs and director of its Washington office, submitted information on the COVID plasma initiative undertaken by his colleagues as an item for White House consideration.

After considering submissions from several other Jewish groups, the White House chose our submission to represent the Jewish faith at the National Day of Prayer event. Out of a desire to reduce unnecessary travel from the New York area, where the project's founders reside, and because of the role I have had regionally in the plasma initiative, I was contacted by the White House and invited to attend and share a prayer.

Before accepting the invitation, I wanted to make certain that participating in the prayer event was appropriate from a halachic and hashkafic perspective. Along with Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel and Rabbi Abba Cohen,

we called Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky and presented him with the *sh'eilah*, first explaining to him the plasma initiative. He responded that an opportunity like this to make a *kiddush Hashem* on such a grand scale should not be passed up.

Last Thursday, May 7, together with six other faith community leaders, I was a guest in the White House Rose Garden. The size of the affair was drastically scaled down from what

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it would normally have been—no additional guests, limited White House staff, a limited media presence, and full social distancing. We all took a complimentary rapid COVID nasal swab test courtesy of our tax dollars.

The vice president and the president opened the event with their prayers, and I was to be called up by the president to offer the event's closing prayer.

In preparing my prayer, I knew that it would be viewed by millions of people. I tried to encapsulate the feelings we have all had throughout this challenging period and to present them in a manner that all those viewing could understand and appreciate.

My prayer, which has been widely circulated, drew from the *pasuk* in *Shir Hashirim*

“*Hinei zeh omeid achar kosleinu, mashgiach min hachalonus, meitzitz min hacharakim*” (2:9), focusing on the idea that Hashem is always with us even when His presence does not seem apparent. Especially now, when we cannot even go to seek out Hashem in His house—our *shuls*—we still feel His presence through the *tefillos* that emanate from our “home *shuls*.”

At the conclusion of the ceremony, I had the opportunity to share a few special intimate moments of conversation with Vice President Mike Pence and Second Lady Karen Pence. A deeply religious man, he immediately commented on the scriptural verse I had chosen and how appropriate it was during this time when so much is unknown. He was intrigued by the mention of our “shuttered synagogues” and the fact that we reach out to G-d in the “sanctuary of our homes.”

That led me to explain that we had turned the den of our home into a mini-synagogue, replicating some of the features of our *batei knesses*, to enable us to draw the necessary inspiration to keep ourselves spiritually afloat while we endure the pandemic. We parted with the words “May G-d bless us all, and may He heal our nation.”

It was a remarkable and thrilling experience, and certainly a tremendous *zechus*, to participate in a *kiddush Hashem* of that magnitude. However, our participation in the COVID plasma initiative, with its potential to save many lives, is likely an even greater *zechus*. ●

● Rabbi Ariel Sadwin has served as the Executive Director of Agudath Israel of Maryland – Mid-Atlantic Region since 2007. His work focuses on government affairs and constituent services for the Orthodox Jewish communities of the region. He is a talmid and musmach of Yeshivas Ner Yisroel in Baltimore, Maryland. He is a native of Silver Spring, Maryland, and lives in Baltimore with his wife and children.