

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks at a Hanukkah Reception

December 16, 2024

My name is Joe Biden, and I'm Jill Biden's husband. *[Laughter]*

And I was raised by—some of you know me well—by a righteous Christian: my dad. My dad used to come home and rail against the fact that we didn't let the ship in—let—after Auschwitz, we didn't—we didn't bomb the railroad tracks, et cetera. And my dad would always talk about moral obligations. And my dad was the one who inspired me.

And I see my fellow father-in-law out there, Ronnie Oliver. Ronny is a good friend.

And my—what happened was that—my dad always thought that we had an obligation to—to step up and—talk about what happened, and he inspired me to take every one of my children and grandchildren—when they reached the age of 14, their first trip in an aircraft overseas was to Auschwitz—to—excuse me—to the camp—that I wanted them to see what it was like, wanted them to see that no one could have misunderstood that there—what was going on in those camps.

And so they toured the camps. And they toured them, so I wanted them to know that you couldn't pretend it didn't happen and it should never happen again.

And so I learned a long time ago: You don't have to be a Jew to be a Zionist. I'm a Zionist.

A little early, but happy Hanukkah to everyone. Jill and I and Kamala and Doug are honored to host you here at the White House. Doug, thank you for being such a great friend.

And thank you, Anne. You've been a true friend and a real leader. And tell your son how proud of him I am. She has a beautiful son.

And I want to thank you all for being here tonight.

Look, when you walk around the White House, you feel the history and the story of our Nation, including the story of the Jewish people who came to our shores in the 1600s after fleeing persecution abroad.

Here in the East Room is a portrait of George Washington. In 1790, a local Jewish leader from Newport, Rhode Island, wrote a letter to President Washington expressing his hope that America would be a nation of religious freedom for all its citizens, a nation which, quote, "gives bigotry no sanction and persecution no assistance."

Like the ancient Hanukkah story when a Jewish—when the Jewish Maccabees fought for religious freedom thousands of years ago, the letter to George Washington echoed the same vision for freedom. And ever since, the values and contributions of the Jewish Americans have shaped the very foundation and character of our Nation.

That's why, 2 years ago, Jill and I displayed the first-ever permanent White House menorah made of the original wood from the White House building. We displayed it again tonight to make clear that history and vibrancy of the Jewish life is woven into the fabric of America, every aspect of it, and it's permanent. It's permanent.

But I know this year's Hanukkah falls on the hearts that are still very heavy. It's the second Hanukkah since the horrors of October 7. Over a thousand slaughtered, hundreds taken hostage, unspeakable sexual violence, and so more. The trauma of that day and its aftermath is still raw and ongoing.

I've gotten over a hundred hostages out, and I will not stop until I get every single one of them home—every single.

Last month, we secured a cease-fire between Israel and Lebanon so residents can safely return home. And I've said many times before, my commitment to the safety of the Jewish people and security of Israel and its right to exist as an independent nation-state is—remains ironclad.

I know—not just me—I know the Jewish community is also suffering from despicable surge of anti-Semitism in America and all around the world. It's immoral, it's wrong, and it must stop now.

And, Doug, I want to thank you. Thank you for your leadership in this effort. I really mean it sincerely.

And I know it's hard to find hope while carrying so much sorrow. But from my perspective, Jewish people have always embodied the duality of pain and joy.

You know, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said, "A people that can walk through a valley of shadow of death and still rejoice is a people that cannot be defeated by any force or fear"—any force or fear.

That resilience and that capacity to find faith and joy despite centuries of persecution and pain is your light, like the light of miracles throughout the Jewish history, from the menorah oil lasting 8 days to the miracle of Israel itself.

Look, let me close with this. Throughout my life, rabbis, Jewish friends, colleagues have always been there for me and my family when we've gone through very tough times—and I mean it sincerely—been there on our doorstep, in our home with us. They taught us so much about the optimistic spirit of the Jewish people.

Above all, they taught me one thing we can never lose: hope. Hope, hope, hope. I've seen the power of that hope in my own life and in the life of our Nation.

Next week, you'll light the eight candles in your menorahs. My final Hanukkah message to you is this—as President—this is: to hold onto that hope, shine your light—shine the light of optimism, and above all, keep the faith. Keep the faith.

May God bless you. Happy Hanukkah.

And now I turn it over to Rabbi Cosgrove. Rabbi Cosgrove, who—by the way, who I visited his—as I was—his synagogue in New York. He was still nice to me afterward too.

Rabbi, it's all yours, kid. Go get them. [*Laughter*]

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:12 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Ron Olivere, father-in-law of the President's deceased son Beau; Vice President Kamala D. Harris and her husband Douglas C. Emhoff; Deputy National Security Adviser for Cyber and Emerging Technology Anne Neuberger, who introduced the President; and Elliott Cosgrove, rabbi, Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City. He also referred to his grandchildren R. Hunter, Natalie, Finnegan, and Maisy Biden, and Naomi K. Biden Neal. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 17.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Hanukkah reception.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden Neal, Naomi K.; Biden, Ashley B.; Biden, Finnegan J.; Biden, Jill T.; Biden, Natalie P.; Biden, R. Hunter; Biden, R. Hunter, II; Biden, Roberta M. "Maisy"; Cosgrove, Elliott; Emhoff, Douglas C.; Harris, Kamala D.; Neuberger, Anne; Olivere, Ron.

Subjects: Anti-Semitism; Deputy National Security Adviser for Cyber and Emerging Technology; Gaza, hostages held by Hamas; Hanukkah; Israel, attacks by Hamas of October 7, 2023; Israel, military operations in Israel; Lebanon, Israeli military operations; Religious freedom; Vice President.

DCPD Number: DCPD202401084.