

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Remarks on Lighting the Hanukkah Menorah

December 2, 2010

The President. Oh, this is a good looking group right here. [*Laughter*] Good evening, everybody.

Audience members. Good evening.

The President. Welcome to the White House. I want to thank all of you for joining us in celebrating the second night of Hanukkah. Happy Hanukkah, everybody.

We are joined tonight by Ambassador Michael Oren of Israel. Where's Michael? He's way back there. And so I want to begin by offering our deepest condolences to the families and loved ones of all of those who've died as a result of the terrible forest fire in northern Israel.

As rescuers and firefighters continue in their work, the United States is acting to help our Israeli friends respond to the disaster. A short while ago, our Ambassador in Tel Aviv, Jim Cunningham, issued a disaster declaration which has launched an effort across the U.S. Government to identify the firefighting assistance we have available and provide it to Israel as quickly as possible. Of course, that's what friends do for each other.

And, Mr. Ambassador, our thoughts and prayers are with everybody in Israel who is affected by this tragedy and the family and loved ones of those in harm's way.

Tonight, it's an honor to welcome so many friends and leaders from the Jewish community and beyond. And I want to start by recognizing my Special Envoy for Middle East Peace, George Mitchell, who is here. Please give him a round of applause, and all the other outstanding members of the diplomatic corps who are here.

One third of the Supreme Court is here. One of my favorites, Justice Ginsburg, is hiding out here in the front. [*Laughter*] She really is here. It's hard to see. [*Laughter*] Justice Breyer is here. And—where's Justice Breyer? There he is right here. And our newest addition and former colleague of mine when we were teaching together, Elena Kagan is in the house.

I want to also acknowledge somebody who I rely on day in, day out, who is not only a great Vice President, but is also—[*laughter*]—one of my dearest friends; Joe Biden is in the house.

And to all the members of the administration and Members of Congress and all the State and local leaders who are with us today, welcome. I want to thank Joshua Redman for gracing us with his talent and helping us with the music. And finally, I want to thank the rabbis and lay leaders who have traveled from all over the country to be here. Yes, you can give yourselves a round of applause.

Now, tonight, we gather to celebrate a story as simple as it is timeless. It's a story of ancient Israel, suffering under the yoke of empire, where Jews were forbidden to practice their religion openly and the Holy Temple, including the Holy of Holies, had been desecrated.

It was then that a small band of believers, led by Judah Maccabee, rose up to take back their city and free their people. And when the Maccabees entered the temple, the oil that should have lasted for a single night ended up burning for eight.

That miracle gave hope to all those who had been struggling in despair. And in the 2,000 years since, in every corner of the world, the tiny candles of Hanukkah have reminded us of the importance of faith and perseverance. They have illuminated a path for us when the way forward was shrouded in darkness.

And as we prepare to light another candle on the menorah, let us remember the sacrifices that others have made so that we may all be free. Let us pray for the members of our military who guard that freedom every day and who may be spending this holiday far away from home.

Let us also think of those for whom these candles represent not just a triumph of the past, but also hope for the future: the men, women and children of all faiths who still suffer under tyranny and oppression.

That's why families everywhere are taught to place the menorah in public view, so the entire world can see its light. Because, as the Talmud teaches us, "So long as a person still has life, they should never abandon faith."

Now, the menorah we're using tonight, and the family who—who is going to help us light it, both stand as powerful symbols of that faith.

This beautiful menorah has been generously loaned to us by Congregation Beth Israel in New Orleans. Five years ago, when Hurricane Katrina hit, the synagogue was covered in eight feet of water. Later, as the cleanup crew dug through the rubble, they discovered this menorah caked in dirt and mold. And today it stands as a reminder of the tragedy and a source of inspiration for the future.

And that feeling is shared by Susan Retik. It's a feeling they know all too well. After her husband David was killed on September 11th, Susan could have easily lost herself in feelings of hopelessness and grief. But instead, she turned her personal loss into a humanitarian mission, cofounding Beyond the 11th, a group that reaches out to Afghan widows facing their own struggles.

So on this second night of Hanukkah, let us give thanks to the blessings that all of us enjoy. Let us be mindful of those who need our prayers. And let us draw strength from the words of a great philosopher who said that a miracle is "a confirmation of what is possible."

And now I'd like to turn it over to Susan, who by the way has been on this stage before, receiving a Presidential award for her outstanding work. But she happens to be joined by a beautiful family: Donald, Ben, Molly, Dina, and Rebecca. *[Laughter]* Rebecca is down here. So I want to turn—there she is.

Audience members. Aww!

The President. Yes, she is adorable. *[Laughter]* As Michelle said as we were getting on stage, she will be stealing the show. *[Laughter]* So we're going to turn it over to Susan and her family for the blessings.

[At this point, a blessing was offered and the menorah was lit. Afterwards, saxophonist Joshua Redman performed a Hanukkah song. Some members of the audience sang along.]

The President. So happy Hanukkah to all of you. We're going to see most of you downstairs. Be patient in the line. *[Laughter]* And I just want to let everybody know that, yes, they will be able to Photoshop my lip for the picture. *[Laughter]* Happy Hanukkah, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:44 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Donald Ger, husband of Susan Retik, and their children Benjamin Retik, Molly Retik, Dina Retik, and Rebecca Ger.

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