

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks at a Hanukkah Reception

December 11, 2023

Well, Rabbi, thank you. And thank you for your blessings.

You know, thank you, Doug and the staff, for lighting this special White House menorah. As Doug said, that was from a piece of material from one of the beams in the White House. And I thought it's about time we had a permanent menorah here in the White House.

And to all of you, this means so much to Jill and me and to Doug and Kamala that you're here.

You know, I also want to thank—special thanks to my buddy right—standing right here in the front: Chuck Schumer. Chuck is our leader in the Senate. He's a great leader and recently delivered a powerful and historic speech—and I mean it, powerful and historic—combating anti-Semitism. I encourage everyone to read it. Everyone in America should read it.

Chuck, thank you, pal. You're always standing up.

The Talmud says, "What comes from the heart, goes to the heart." That's the warmth and kinship I feel so deeply with the Jewish community.

I got in trouble—got criticized very badly by the southern part of my State and some of the southern parts of the country when, 35 years ago, I said, "You don't have to be a Jew to be a Zionist, and I'm a Zionist." [*Laughter*] And by the way, you don't have to be a Jew to be a Zionist.

Hanukkah is a timeless story of miracles. Think about it. You know, from the Maccabees defeating one of the—history's most powerful empires, on oil lasting 8 days was a miracle all by itself. The flame of faith that endures from tragedy to persecution to survival and to hope; that's what it survives to: survival and hope.

But we know this year's Hanukkah is different.

It's been 65 years [days; White House correction] since the deadliest day of the Jewish people since the Holocaust—65 years [days; White House correction]. Most of you—and I met—I got to meet with five [Holocaust; White House correction] survivors downstairs—that's why we're a little bit late—five survivors in each of the camps.

I've taken all my children when they turn 14 years of age. My three children who lived and my five grandchildren, when they're 14 years old, I put them on a plane, I take them to Dachau, because I want them to see. I want them to spend the day there and see.

You can't pretend you don't know. Silence is complicity.

Most of you know someone directly or indirectly—a family, a friend—that was stolen from you or wounded, traumatized, or called up in the reserves in this last attack in Israel.

As I said after the attack, my commitment to the safety of the Jewish people, the security of Israel, and its right to exist is independent—as an independent Jewish state is unshakeable.

Folks, were there no Israel, there wouldn't be a Jew in the world who was safe—were there no Israel. [*Applause*] It's the ultimate guarantee.

And I make no bones about it. I've had my differences with some Israeli leadership. I've known Bibi for now 51 years. He has a picture on his desk of he and I when he was a young member of the Israeli service here—foreign service, and I was a 32-year-old Senator. And I wrote

on the top of it, "Bibi, I love you, but I don't agree with a damn thing you have to say."
[*Laughter*]

It's about the same today. I love him, and—[*laughter*].

But look, it's a tough spot. It's a tough spot. We continue to provide military assistance to Israel until they get rid of Hamas.

But we have to be careful. They have to be careful. The whole world's public opinion can shift overnight. We can't let that happen.

We're working relentlessly for the safe return of the hostages. I've personally spent—[*applause*—I've personally spent countless hours—and I mean it; probably up to 20 hours—with the Qataris and the Egyptians, the Israelis to secure the freedom of hostages, to get the trucks in, to get the humanitarian aid flowing, to convince them to open the gate, to get—have Elsisi make sure he opened the gate into Egypt.

And there's a whole range of things going on now that are really very, very difficult, very—but we've gotten more than a hundred hostages out, and we're not going to stop until we get every one of them home.

We will continue to lead the world in humanitarian assistance to innocent Palestinian civilians to emphasize to our friends—[*applause*—to our Israeli friends we need to protect civilian life.

And let me be clear: Hamas using rape, sexual violence, and terrorism and torture of Israeli women and girls is appalling and unforgiveable. And we should—and I was there, saw some of the photographs, and it's beyond—it's just beyond comprehension. We all have to condemn such brutality without equivocation, without exception.

I also recognize your hurt from the silence and the fear and for your safety, because the surge of anti-Semitism in the United States of America and around the world is sickening. You know, we see it across our communities in schools and colleges and social media. They surface painful scars from millennia to hate—of hate, to genocide of the Jewish people.

My dad was a righteous Christian, for real. My dad, when he'd come home from work—he was a well-read man, never had a chance to go to college. And he'd come home before he closed down the business—he didn't own, but he managed—to go back and close it. And the kitchen table was where the—the dinner table is where we had conversation and incidentally ate.

My dad taught us about the horror of the Shoah. He talked about why we didn't let the ship in, why we didn't bomb the railroad tracks, and on and on and on. As I said, it awakened in me and my brothers and sisters and our children a sense—and our grandchildren—that this can happen again.

Silence is complicity. Silence is complicity.

As I said, that's why I've taken all of my children and grandchildren to Dachau and I—one to Auschwitz.

Look, folks, we just met with Holocaust survivors downstairs, including the widow of a dear friend—of the late Elie Wiesel, who taught us about the perils of indifference.

I think that they experienced only to—what they experienced, only to see what's happening today.

It's been clear that our administration stands with them arm in arm in arm. We're not going to walk away. We're aggressively—[*applause*—we're aggressing—we're addressing and implementing the first-ever national strategy to combat anti-Semitism, prosecuting hate crimes—

[*applause*]*—*prosecuting hate crimes, addressing anti-Semitism in schools, increasing security around Jewish centers of life, and more.

We're calling upon all Americans to make clear there is no place for hate in America against Jews and Muslims or anybody else.

I especially want to thank Deborah Lipstadt, the Holocaust expert and the first American Ambassador-level Special Envoy To Monitor and Combat Antisemitism around the world. It matters.

You know, in this moment, we must hold to the core values that make us Americans: equality, justice, freedom, dignity, respect—values that, from the inception of our Nation, have shaped the culture, the contributions, and the values of Jewish Americans, including all of you, including nearly 300,000 Jews who peacefully rallied on the National Mall last month with enormous pride, unity—[*applause*]*—*pride, unity, even joy in the face of extraordinary pain.

You embody what the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said: A people whose capacity for joy cannot be destroyed itself is [is itself indestructible; White House correction]*—*cannot destroy itself. It's indestructible.

Let me close with this. You know, after October 7, my father—a father returned to his kibbutz to salvage what he could from his home and what was left in the rubble and ruin. The home which hid—which he hid in with his wife and his daughter for 20 hours before being rescued, a home in the same neighborhood where his beloved son was brutally murdered.

But like the ancient Hanukkah story, buried [in; White House correction] piles of shattered glass, burned debris, and bullet-riddled walls, he pulled something from the ashes fully intact: a menorah. That's now on display in the foyer of this White House, your house, just outside this room.

He gave it to the President of Israel, who lent it to the Ambassador, Jack Lew, a symbol—a symbol of the Jewish people that not only survive, but heal, rebuild, and continue to shine their light on the world.

A reminder to hold on to the miracle of hope and faith, because when we do, no night is so dark we can't find light. No night is so dark we can't find night [light; White House correction].

No one knows that better than the Jewish people.

So, ladies and gentlemen, happy Hanukkah. And God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:24 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Angela Warnick Buchdahl, senior rabbi, Central Synagogue in New York City; Douglas C. Emhoff, husband of Vice President Kamala D. Harris; Prime Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu and President Isaac Herzog of Israel; President Abdelfattah Said Elsisi of Egypt; Marion Wiesel, widow of Nobel Prize winner, author, and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel; former Member of the Knesset Shai Hermesh of Israel and his wife Hava, whose menorah, salvaged from the rubble of their home, was on display at the White House; and U.S. Ambassador to Israel Jacob J. Lew. He also referred to his grandchildren Naomi K. Biden Neal and R. Hunter, Natalie, Finnegan, and Roberta "Maisy" Biden; and his sister Valerie Biden Owens and brothers Francis W. and James B. Biden. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 12.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Hanukkah reception.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden Neal, Naomi K.; Biden, Finnegan J.; Biden, Francis W.; Biden, James B.; Biden, Jill T.; Biden, Natalie P.; Biden, R. Hunter ; Biden, Roberta M. "Maisy"; Buchdahl, Angela Warnick; Elsis, Abdelfattah Said; Emhoff, Douglas C.; Harris, Kamala D.; Hermesh, Hava; Hermesh, Shai; Herzog, Isaac; Lew, Jacob J. "Jack"; Lipstadt, Deborah E.; Netanyahu, Benjamin; Owens, Valerie Biden; Schumer, Charles E.; Wiesel, Marion.

Subjects: Anti-Semitism; Domestic terrorism and extremist violence, efforts to combat; Egypt, President; Gaza, conflict with Israel; Gaza, hostages held by Hamas; Gaza, humanitarian situation; Gaza, international assistance; Hamas political-paramilitary organization; Hanukkah; Hate- based violence, efforts to combat; Israel, military operations in Gaza; Israel, President; Israel, Prime Minister; Israel, security cooperation with U.S.; Israel, U.S. Ambassador; Senate majority leader; U.S. Special Envoy To Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism; Vice President.

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