

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024*

**Remarks at a Jewish American Heritage Month Celebration**

*May 20, 2024*

*Second Gentleman Douglas C. Emhoff.* I've got to wait for that song to end. *[Laughter]*

Good evening.

*Audience members.* Good evening.

*Second Gentleman Emhoff.* It is my honor to be standing here with President Biden and Vice President Harris. They have both stood strong with the Jewish community time and time again. There is no one fighting harder to combat hate and to unite our country.

To all of our esteemed guests, it is so great to join you for a Jewish American Heritage Month celebration at the White House.

Tonight we've come together to celebrate our heritage and honor our culture, to reflect on the invaluable contributions of our ancestors and the Jewish leaders of today.

But it is also a challenging time for our community. It's been a dark and difficult 7 months. I know a lot of us are feeling alone, afraid, and in pain.

There is an epidemic of hate, including a crisis of anti-Semitism, in our country and around the world. We see it on our streets, our college campuses, and our places of worship.

I know it's difficult to have hope and to feel optimistic right now. And to be honest, some days, it's really challenging for me to put myself out here and do this work publicly. And I know it's hard for you too. But we keep fighting because we have no choice but to fight.

Jewish leaders are on the frontlines fighting anti-Semitism through education, advocacy, and building bridges with other communities. It's because of your leadership that we will dismantle prejudice and ensure Jewish safety.

I also want to acknowledge the student leaders who are here with us today. You have stood up to hate and anti-Semitism on college campuses. And, on behalf of our Nation, thank you for your courage. And let me be clear: We have your back.

Ever since that horrific day of October 7, I've been reaching out to Jewish leaders and Jewish students all across the country just to check in and see how they're feeling. And in each of these conversations, my message is always the same: We still need to find and embrace that Jewish joy.

Joy is what I remember most about growing up Jewish. And it's what I felt in some of my favorite moments as Second Gentleman, like returning to my Jewish summer camp and reliving the memory of being voted "Most Athletic." *[Laughter]* Or when I attended—*[laughter]*.

*Vice President Kamala D. Harris.* *[Laughter]* You did. *[Laughter]*

*Second Gentleman Emhoff.* *[Laughter]* Or——

*Audience member.* You're still athletic! *[Laughter]*

*Second Gentleman Emhoff.* Or—thank you.

Or when I attended the BBYO International Convention and spoke with—*[applause]*—there you go—with the next generation of leaders about how proud they are of being Jewish.

And when the Vice President, my wife, and I affixed the first-ever mezuzah on the door of the Vice President's Residence with our entire family there. And honestly, I think it's one of the only times I've ever seen my father cry was during that moment.

So it's that same feeling of joy I want everyone to experience, especially our young people, because we cannot live in fear. We cannot be afraid. We must always raise our voices and live openly and proudly as Jews.

Last year, before my trip to Poland and Germany to recognize International Holocaust Remembrance Day, President Biden pulled me into the Oval Office. He shared with me his memories of visiting the Dachau concentration camp with his children and grandchildren and also how angry his father was that the Allies had not bombed the train tracks leading to the concentration camps.

Then, in the immediate aftermath of October 7, I stood beside President Biden as he condemned the pure evil Hamas unleashed into the world and staunchly proclaimed his support for the Jewish people and Israel.

He reaffirmed America's ironclad commitment to Israel's security, and that hasn't changed. President Biden and Vice President Harris are steadfast in their support of Israel and the entire Jewish community. Thank you.

I am so grateful for their leadership, especially during these challenging times.

So please join me in welcoming President Joe Biden.

*The President.* Well, thank you, Kamala and Doug. It's an almost—it's an honor to be introduced by the first-ever Jewish spouse of an American President—Vice President.

It's also—have with us the Attorney General, Members of Congress, including Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, who will be here soon; Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who is responsible for this occurring, having sponsored this early on—[*applause*]*—back when she was 12 years old as a—[laughter].*

And, to all of you here, welcome to the White House to celebrate extraordinary contributions of Jewish Americans in the Nation. Look, the story of the Jewish people is a story of resilience—absolute resilience—from pain and persecution, to hope and delight even in the darkest times.

The story that endures. Throughout our history, Jewish people helped define and expand the singular idea that binds us together as Americans—this is not hyperbole: freedom. Freedom—the bedrock principle on which this Nation was built and that American Jews fought for since the 1600s after fleeing persecution abroad.

One of our Nation's first commitments to freedom of religion was in the Jewish community in Newport, Rhode Island. It goes back a long way—1790, America was just 14 years old. A local Jewish leader wrote a letter to President George Washington expressing his hope that America would be a nation of religious freedom not just for Jews, but for all citizens, a nation which, quote, "gives bigotry no sanction [and] persecution no assistance."

It helped bring—lay the groundwork for religious freedom and the First Amendment in our—amendment in our Constitution.

And ever since, Jews have been in the forefront of helping realize the promise of America for all Americans. Jewish artists, poets helped define the American vision of liberty for millions of people who come to our shores.

And look, Jewish suffragettes and advocates have fought for women's rights, voting rights, every—every right we have. My whole career, every fight to increase civil rights and civil

liberties have been led by Jewish community, where I come from. The Jewish faith leaders and citizens march, petition, boarded a bus, demanded civil rights for all.

Jewish scientists and engineers and doctors have led breakthroughs in innovation, technology, and medicine. Across government, Jewish Americans have proudly served our Nation in uniform and elected and appointive office, in Embassies and civil service and our Nation's highest courts.

That's why Jill and I hosted the first-ever High Holiday reception at the White House. The—[*applause*]. It's important. The first-ever permanent White House menorah, made from the original wood of the White House building to make clear that the history and vibrancy of the Jewish life is woven into the very fabric of America, and it's permanent. It's permanent.

But look, I know today's reception falls on hard times. The trauma of October 7 and its aftermath of the deadliest day the Jewish people have undergone since the Holocaust is still fresh and ongoing and many of—with many of you.

And we have parents of someone being held hostage right now. And we're going to get him home. We're going to get him home, come hell or high water.

Twelve hundred innocent people slaughtered in their kibbutz; massacred at a music festival; brutally raped, mutilated, sexually assaulted. Hundreds taken hostage and thousands more wounded, carrying the scars and the memory of what they endured. You all know someone, directly or indirectly—family, friends—who were stolen from you or are in a harm's way now.

And my commitment to the safety the Jewish people, the security of Israel, and its right to exist is—as an independent Jewish state is ironclad. [*Applause*] No, it really is.

My administration is working around the clock to free the remaining hostages, just as we have freed hostages already.

And here with us today is Hersh Goldberg-Polin, and who is still—he is not here with us, but he's still being held by Hamas, and Rachel and Jon are here with us. Stand up, guys. Their love, strength, and compassion inspire the entire world. And I pledge to both of you—and I mean it—and I know you know, Mom, that I mean it—that I will not rest until we bring your loved one home. We've got to bring him home.

And, folks, let me [be; White House correction] clear. I'll always ensure that Israel has everything it needs to defend itself against Hamas and all other enemies, just as I did when Iran's unprecedented attack last month.

We stand with Israel to take out Sinwar and the rest of the butchers of Hamas. We want Hamas defeated. We'll work with Israel to make that happen.

And, consistent with Jewish values in compassion, kindness, and dignity and human life, my team also is providing critical humanitarian assistance to help innocent Palestinian civilians who are suffering greatly because of the war Hamas—Hamas—has unleashed. It's heartbreaking.

As we do this, we're also committed to bring the region together to work toward a two-state solution that provides security, prosperity, and enduring peace for Israel and Palestinians.

And let me be clear: We reject the ICC's application for arrest warrants against Israeli leaders. Whatever these warrants may imply, there is no equivalence between Israel and Hamas. And it's clear Israel wants all—do all it can to ensure civilian protection.

But let me be clear. Contrary to allegations against Israel made by the International Court of Justice, what's happening is not genocide.

*Audience member.* Thank you.

*The President.* We reject that. And we'll always stand with Israel and its—in the threats against its security.

Compounding the pain and [is; White House correction] a vicious surge of anti-Semitism around the world, here in America as well, in our streets, our social media, and college campuses. It's amazing it's happening. It's absolutely despicable. It's wrong, and it must stop. It must stop.

In America, we respect and protect fundamental rights of free speech to protest peacefully. That's America. But there's no place in any campus in America, any place in America for anti-Semitism, for hate speech that threatens violence of any kind against Jews or anyone else.

Nobody should fear going to synagogue or school or walking on the street wearing a symbol of your faith. That's wrong—simply wrong.

And that's why, long before October 7, I launched the Nation's first National Strategy To Counter Antisemitism. And it's mobilizing the full force of the Federal Government to crack down on anti-Semitism wherever we find it.

We recently cured—secured an additional \$400 million, the largest increase ever, in physical security for nonprofits, including synagogues, Jewish community centers, Jewish schools, Jewish nonprofits.

My Department of Education has put colleges on notice that anti-Semitism is discrimination prohibited under title 6 of the Civil Rights Act, period. And the Department has to investigate discriminatively and aggressively—discrimination aggressively.

That's my Special Envoy To Monitor and—[inaudible]—Antisemitism, Deborah—Deborah, you all—where—is Deborah here?

*Audience member.* Yeah!

*The President.* Deborah, thank you—Lipstadt—for furthering our efforts all around the world. It matters. This matters.

To the Jewish community, I want you to know: I see your fear, your hurt, and your pain. And let me assure you, as your President: You are not alone. You belong. You always will belong.

Let me close with this. In moments like this, we do well to remember that this ancient story of Jewish resilience endures because of its people. That's what today is all about: feeling the joy and pride of community; honoring the beauty of your unshakeable faith; and celebrating heritage and legacy of Jewish Americans, who continue to enrich every single part of our life.

So thank you for what you've done for America and for the whole world to make it a better place.

May the Jewish people shine their light and shine the light of the—on the world for generations to come, because we need you badly.

So God bless you all, and God protect our troops. Thank you for being here.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 5:35 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Rachel Goldberg and Jon Polin, parents of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, a U.S. citizen who was taken hostage during the Hamas attacks against Israel on October 7, 2023; Yahya Sinwar, leader of Hamas in Gaza; and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant of Israel. Second Gentleman Emhoff referred to his father Michael. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on May 21.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Jewish American Heritage Month celebration.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Emhoff, Douglas C.; Gallant, Yoav; Garland, Merrick B.; Goldberg-Polin, Hersh; Goldberg, Rachel; Harris, Kamala D.; Lipstadt, Deborah E.; Netanyahu, Benjamin; Polin, Jon; Schumer, Charles E.; Sinwar, Yahya; Wasserman Schultz, Deborah.

*Subjects:* Anti-Semitism; Arab-Israeli conflict, peace process; Attorney General; Gaza, conflict with Israel; Gaza, hostages held by Hamas; Gaza, humanitarian situation; Hamas political-paramilitary organization; International Court of Justice; International Criminal Court; Israel, Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023; Israel, military operations in Gaza; Israel, Minister of Defense; Israel, Prime Minister; Israel, security cooperation with U.S.; Jewish American Heritage Month; Religious freedom; Senate majority leader; U.S. Special Envoy To Monitor and Combat Antisemitism; Vice President.

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