

*Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010*

**Remarks at a Reception Celebrating Jewish American Heritage Month**  
*May 27, 2010*

Thank you so much. It is wonderful to see all of you, and I am proud to welcome you to the first ever event held at the White House to honor Jewish American Heritage Month.

This is a pretty—pretty fancy group here, pretty distinguished group. We've got Senators and Representatives. We've got Supreme Court Justices and successful entrepreneurs, rabbinical scholars, Olympic athletes, and Sandy Koufax. Sandy and I actually have something in common: We are both lefties. [*Laughter*] He can't pitch on Yom Kippur; I can't pitch. [*Laughter*]

I'm looking forward to the reading by Rabbi Alysa Stanton, the performance by Regina Spektor.

I know that my Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, wanted to be here but, as some of you know, he is in Israel for the Bar Mitzvah of his son, and—which is——.

The diversity of talents and accomplishments represented in this room underscores the vast contributions that Jewish Americans have made to this country. Of course, it's impossible to separate the achievements of Jewish Americans from the struggles of Jewish people around the world. Even before we were a nation, we were a sanctuary for Jews seeking to live without the specter of violence or exile. That's what drew a band of 23 Jewish refugees to a place called New Amsterdam more than 350 years ago. That's what brought Jewish immigrants, fleeing pogroms, on a long journey to America in the last turn of the century. And that's what led Holocaust survivors and Jews trapped behind the Iron Curtain to travel to these shores to rebuild their lives.

As Jews sought freedom and opportunity in America, these waves of immigrants and generations that followed have helped to make America what it is—richer, stronger, more prosperous—from the discoveries of Jonas Salk to the pioneering work of Albert Einstein; from the music of Irving Berlin to the poetry of Emma Lazarus. And then there are the countless names that we don't know—the teachers, the small business owners, the doctors and nurses, the people who seek only to live honestly and faithfully, and to give their children more than they had. Jewish Americans have always been a critical part of the American story.

These contributions have not always been embraced. Jewish communities have at times faced hardship and hostility—right here in the United States of America—a reminder that we have to respond, at all times, swiftly and firmly whenever bigotry rears its ugly head. But no matter what the obstacles, Jewish Americans have endured—learning from each other, leaning on each other, true to their faith, leaning on the values that have been associated for so long with Jewish history: a sense of community, a sense of moral purpose, and an ethic of responsibility.

So it's heartening to know that these are the enduring values of a history marked by so much tragedy—not cynicism or despair, not callous indifference. Every person in this room knows somebody—perhaps a mother or father, an aunt, an uncle, perhaps yourself—who exemplifies this heritage. Every person in this room stands at the end of an unbroken chain of perseverance, of a conviction that a better future is possible. That doesn't just offer a lesson to

Jewish Americans, it offers a lesson to all Americans. And ultimately, that is what we are celebrating today.

Yes, Jewish Americans have garnered success in industry and in government, as we can see by the guests gathered here today. Yes, Jews have helped to pioneer incredible advances in science and medicine, across countless fields. But the contributions of the Jewish community to America run deeper. As a product of history and faith, Jewish Americans have helped to open our eyes to injustice, to people in need, and to the simple idea that we ought to recognize ourselves in the struggles of our fellow men and women.

That's what's led Jewish advocates to fight for women's equality and workers' rights. That's what led rabbis to preach against racism from the *bimah*, and to lead congregants on marches and protests to stop segregation. And that is what helped lead America to recognize and support Israel as a Jewish homeland and a beacon for democratic values, beginning mere minutes after its independence was declared. In fact, we have the original statement by President Harry Truman on display here today.

So what we are called upon to do now is to continue to live up to those values as a nation, to continue to uphold the principle of *tikkun olam*—our obligation to "repair the world." Here at home, at a time of continuing struggle for millions of families, it is incumbent upon us to remain focused not only on rebuilding our economy but rebuilding it stronger than before. And I'd note that our efforts are bolstered by the work of so many Jewish organizations that help the sick and educate our children and provide assistance to seniors and others in need.

But our responsibility doesn't end at the water's edge. That's why my administration is renewing American leadership around the world—strengthening old alliances and forging new ones, defending universal values while ensuring that we uphold our values here at home. In fact, it's our common values that leads us to stand with allies and friends, including the State of Israel. That's why, even as we never waver in pursuing peace—

[*At this point, a pager went off in the audience.*]

That happens to me all the time. [*Laughter*]

That is why, even as we never waver in pursuing peace between Israelis, Palestinians, and Arabs, our bond with Israel is unbreakable. It is the bond of two peoples that share a commitment to a common set of ideals: opportunity, democracy and freedom.

Those ideals are what have drawn generations to these shores. Those ideals are what have allowed Jewish immigrants to seek a better life in America, while enriching the life of our country. And those ideals are what you and all Jewish Americans continue to help us uphold each and every day.

So thank you. God bless you. And may God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:27 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Brooklyn/Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Sanford "Sandy" Koufax; Rabbi Alysa Stanton of Congregation Bayt Shalom in Greenville, NC; and entertainer Regina I. Spektor.

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

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Emanuel, Rahm; Emanuel, Zach; Koufax, Sanford "Sandy"; Spektor, Regina I.; Stanton, Alysia.

*Subjects:* Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Civil rights : Freedom of religion; Civil rights : Minorities :: Anti-Semitism; Civil rights : Racial equality; Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Foreign policy, U.S. : Diplomatic efforts, expansion; Israel : Relations with U.S.; Jewish American Heritage Month; Middle East : Peace and democracy efforts.

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