



# AmericanRhetoric.com

**Barack Obama**

*Righteous Among the Nations Award Ceremony Address*

delivered 27 January 2016, Israel Embassy, Washington, D.C.



**AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED:** Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Good evening. Erev Tov.

The Talmud teaches that if a person destroys one life, it is as if they've destroyed an entire world, and if a person saves one life, it is as if they've saved an entire world.

What an extraordinary honor to be with you as we honor four Righteous individuals whose courage is measured in the lives they saved -- one child, one refugee, one comrade at a time -- and who, in so doing, helped save our world.

I deliver a lot of speeches. Very rarely am I so humbled by the eloquence that has preceded me -- not just in words, but in the acts that we commemorate today.

To my dear friend, Steven Spielberg, thanks for your moving and generous words. You spoke of the importance of finding your voice and using it for good, and I know that your work -- whether a masterpiece like Schindler's List or the stories that you have so persistently preserved through the Shoah Foundation -- is deeply personal. Steven once said that the story of the Shoah is the story that he was born to tell, rooted in those childhood memories that he just gave you a taste of -- the relatives lost, the stories you heard from your family.



# AmericanRhetoric.com

And, Steven, the whole world is grateful that you found your voice, and for the good that you've done with that voice. It will endure for generations. And so, on behalf of all of us, we are grateful.

To Ambassador and Mrs. Dermer, to Nina Totenberg, our friends from the Israeli Embassy and Yad Vashem -- thank you so much for hosting us today.

Let me just add tonight that our thoughts are also with former Israeli President Shimon Peres. I had the opportunity to speak with Shimon earlier this week. I thanked him for his friendship, which has always meant so much to me, personally. And I thanked him, once again, for the shining example of his leadership. With his extraordinary life -- in the Haganah, and as a founding father of the State of Israel, a statesman who has never given up on peace, an embodiment of the great alliance between our two nations -- Shimon inspires us all. And this evening we speak for all of us -- Israelis, Americans, people around the world -- in wishing him a full and speedy recovery.

I also want to just note the presence of two of our outstanding senators from the great state of Tennessee. I know that it's rare where you have such an extraordinary native of the state being honored in this way, but I think it's also worth noting that this represents the bipartisan and steadfast support of members of Congress for the security and prosperity of the state of Israel. And they act on that every single day.

To the survivors, families of the Righteous and those they saved, to all the distinguished guests: We gather to honor the newest of the Righteous Among the Nations and make real the call to "never forget," not just on this day of remembrance, but for all days and for all time.

And at moments like this, as I listened to the extraordinary stories of the four that we honor, memories come rushing back of the times that I've encountered the history and the horror of the Shoah -- growing up, hearing the stories of my great uncle who helped liberate Ohrdruf, part of Buchenwald, and who returned home so shaken by the suffering that he had seen that my grandmother would tell me he did not speak to anyone for six months, just went up in his attic, couldn't fully absorb the horror that he had witnessed.

Then having the opportunity to go to Buchenwald myself with my dear friend, Elie Wiesel, and seeing the ovens, the Little Camp where he was held as a boy. Standing with survivors in the Old Warsaw Ghetto. And then the extraordinary honor of walking through Yad Vashem with Rabbi Lau and seeing the faces and hearing the voices of the lost, of blessed memory. And then taking my own daughters to visit the Holocaust Museum -- because our children must know this chapter of our history, and that we must never repeat it.



# AmericanRhetoric.com

The four lives we honor tonight make a claim on our conscience, as well as our moral imagination. We hear their stories, and we are forced to ask ourselves, under the same circumstances, how would we act? How would we answer God's question, where are you? Would we show the love of Walery and Maryla Zbijewski? There, in Warsaw, they could have been shot for opening their home to a five-year-old girl. Yet they cared for her like one of their own, gave her safety and shelter and moments of warmth, of family and music -- a shield from the madness outside until her mother could return.

Would we have the extraordinary compassion of Lois Gunden? She wrote that she simply hoped to "add just another ray of love to the lives of these youngsters" who had already endured so much. And by housing and feeding as many Jewish children as she could, her ray of love always shone through, and still burns within the families of those she saved.

Would we have the courage of Master Sergeant Roddie Edmonds? I know your dad said he was just doing his job, but he went above and beyond the call of duty, and so did all those who joined in that line. Faced with a choice of giving up his fellow soldiers or saving his own life, Roddie looked evil in the eye and dared a Nazi to shoot. His moral compass never wavered. He was true to his faith, and he saved some 200 Jewish American soldiers as a consequence. It's an instructive lesson, by the way, for those of us Christians. I cannot imagine a greater expression of Christianity than to say, I, too, am a Jew.

And I ask these questions because, even as the Holocaust is unique, a crime without parallel in history, the seeds of hate that gave rise to the Shoah -- the ignorance that conspires with arrogance, the indifference that betrays compassion -- those seeds have always been with us. They have found root across cultures, and across faiths, and across generations. The Ambassador mentioned the story of Cain and Abel. It's deep within us. Too often, especially in times of change, especially in times of anxiety and uncertainty, we are too willing to give into a base desire to find someone else -- someone different -- to blame for our struggles.

Here, tonight, we must confront the reality that around the world, anti-Semitism is on the rise. We cannot deny it. When we see some Jews leaving major European cities -- where their families have lived for generations -- because they no longer feel safe; when Jewish centers are targeted from Mumbai to Overland Park, Kansas; when swastikas appear on college campuses -- when we see all that and more, we must not be silent.

An attack on any faith is an attack on all of our faiths. It is an attack on that Golden Rule at the heart of so many faiths -- that we ought to do unto others as we would have done to us. For Americans, in particular, we should understand that it's an attack on our diversity, on the very idea that people of different backgrounds can live together and thrive together. Which is why -- your father was right -- we are all Jews. Because anti-Semitism is a distillation, an expression of an evil that runs through so much of human history, and if we do not answer that, we do not answer any other form of evil. When any Jew anywhere is targeted just for being Jewish, we all have to respond as Roddie Edmonds did -- "We are all Jews."



# AmericanRhetoric.com

We know that we'll never be able to wipe out hatred from every single mind. We won't entirely erase the scourge of anti-Semitism. But like the Righteous, we must do everything we can. All of us have a responsibility.

Certainly government has a responsibility. As President, I've made sure that the United States is leading the global fight against anti-Semitism. And it's why, with Israel and countries around the world, we organized the first United Nations General Assembly meeting on anti-Semitism. It's why we've urged other nations to dedicate a special envoy to this threat, as we have.

It's why, when a statue of an anti-Semitic leader from World War II was planned in Hungary, we led the charge to convince their government to reverse course. This was not a side note to our relations with Hungary, this was central to maintaining a good relationship with the United States, and we let them know.

It's why, when voices around the world veer from criticism of a particular Israeli policy to an unjust denial of Israel's right to exist, when Israel faces terrorism, we stand up forcefully and proudly in defense of our ally, in defense of our friend, in defense of the Jewish State of Israel. America's commitment to Israel's security remains, now and forever, unshakeable. And I've said this before -- it would be a fundamental moral failing if America broke that bond.

All nations that prize diversity and tolerance and pluralism must speak out whenever and wherever Jews and other religious minorities are attacked. In recent years, we've seen leaders in France, Germany, and Great Britain stand strongly against anti-Semitism. In Israel, President Rivlin has spoken eloquently about the need for tolerance and acceptance among all Israelis -- Jewish and Arab.

Meanwhile, governments have an obligation to care for the survivors of the Shoah -- because no one who endured that horror should have to scrape by in their golden years. So, with our White House initiative, we're working to improve care for Holocaust survivors in need here in the United States. And with the compensation fund we helped create, claims are finally being paid that even more Jews deported from France during the Holocaust, including survivors here in America, can benefit from.

But the task before us does not fall on government alone. Every faith community has a responsibility. Just as all religions speak out against those who try to twist their faith to justify terrorism and violence, just as all faiths need to speak out when interpretations of their religion veer in an ugly direction, so, too, must they speak out against those who use their faith to justify bias against Jews, or people of any faith.

We know that there were Muslims -- from Albanians to Arabs -- who protected Jews from Nazis. In Morocco, leaders from Muslim-majority countries around the world just held a summit on protecting religious minorities, including Jews and Christians.



# AmericanRhetoric.com

His Holiness Pope Francis has spoken forcefully against anti-Semitism, saying, "Every human being, as a creature of God, is our brother, regardless of his origins or religious beliefs." These are the voices we must heed. And anyone who claims to be a religious leader must project that vision, that truth.

And finally, all of us have a responsibility to speak out, and to teach what's right to our children, and to examine our own hearts. That's the lesson of the Righteous we honor today - the lesson of the Holocaust itself: Where are you? Who are you? That's the question that the Holocaust poses to us. We have to consider even in moments of peril, even when we might fear for our own lives, the fact that none of us are powerless. We always have a choice. And today, for most of us, standing up against intolerance doesn't require the same risks that those we honor today took. It doesn't require imprisonment or that we face down the barrel of a gun. It does require us to speak out. It does require us to stand firm. We know that evil can flourish if we stand idly by.

And so we're called to live in a way that shows that we've actually learned from our past. And that means rejecting indifference. It means cultivating a habit of empathy, and recognizing ourselves in one another; to make common cause with the outsider, the minority, whether that minority is Christian or Jew, whether it is Hindu or Muslim, or a nonbeliever; whether that minority is native born or immigrant; whether they're Israeli or Palestinian.

It means taking a stand against bigotry in all its forms, and rejecting our darkest impulses and guarding against tribalism as the only value in our communities and in our politics. It means heeding the lesson repeated so often in the Torah: To welcome the stranger, for we were once strangers, too. That's how we never forget -- not simply by keeping the lessons of the Shoah in our memories, but by living them in our actions. As the book of Deuteronomy teaches us, "Tzedek, Tzedek tirdof" -- "Justice, Justice you shall pursue."

I want to close with what I'm told is a Jewish legend. It's said that within every generation there are 36 virtuous individuals -- individuals so honorable, so filled with compassion, that their good works sustain the very existence of the world. They are called *Lamed Vovniks*, and without them, society crumbles, according to the legend. We don't know who they are. They're entirely indistinguishable, ordinary people -- like Walery and Maryla and Lois and Roddie. You wouldn't necessarily recognize them in a crowd. But I believe that their generation -- the generation of Schindler and Wallenberg and Karski -- demanded a lot more than 36. It called for more than 26,000 Righteous Among the Nations. It called for the millions of heroes who did not go quietly and who stood up and fought back.

And may we all strive to live up to their noble example, to be the Lamed Vovniks of our generation, to do our part to sustain each other and to embrace the humanity that we share, and in so doing, save our world. May the memory of the lost be a blessing. And as nations and individuals, may we always strive be among the Righteous.

God bless you. God bless the United States of America. And God bless the State of Israel.