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To: President Obama Re: Happy Hanukkah

Like him, it's hopeful, historic, and carbon-conscious.

By Joyce Eisenberg

and Ellen Scolnic

Dear President Obama:

In April, you hosted the first Passover seder in the White House. *Mazel tov!* We saw the photos, and it looked beautiful.

You're probably thinking about your Hanukkah party now, so we're writing to offer you some advice for a joyous Festival of Lights:

**Double-check the date.** The days on the lunar Jewish calendar don't line up with those on your Oval Office desk calendar. We always know where to find Christmas, but Hanukkah can catch us by surprise. On the Jewish calendar, it begins on the 25th of Kislev, which was Dec. 21 in 2008, and Dec. 4 in 2007. Oy! This year, Hanukkah begins at sundown tonight.

If you already have plans tonight, don't panic. You have seven more nights to choose from, because Hanukkah lasts for eight days - as did the miraculous oil.

About 2,000 years ago, when the Syrians conquered ancient Israel, King Antiochus forbade Judaism. A small band of Jewish revolutionaries - the Maccabees - fought the Syrian army and won. When the Jews went to rededicate the temple in Jerusalem, they found only enough oil to burn in the menorah for one day. The Maccabee spin is that it miraculously lasted for eight.

Unlike Passover, when your festivities lasted for hours and guests had to plow through the whole Haggadah (prayer book), Hanukkah can be a quick affair. There are just three Hebrew blessings to recite over the candles. And if you invite Adam Sandler to sing "The Hanukkah Song," that'll be another 10 minutes, tops.

**Requisition a menorah.** See the huge menorah on the Ellipse outside your White House window? It's lovely, but you'll need a personal-size version for your party. In fact, get a few. Think of the energy savings when you switch the White House to candlelight.

Menorahs come in all shapes and sizes. Artists craft them out of silver and glass. Novelty examples feature dogs, cats, or baseball players. We've even seen one shaped like a moose. It wouldn't go with the White House decor, but it would be the perfect holiday gift for that hard-to-please Alaskan hunter.

A Hanukkah menorah (also called a *hanukkiah*) has places for nine candles - one for each of the eight nights, plus an extra, the *shamash*, to light the others. You might have to send the social secretary out to Georgetown Park to buy some. They're unique - bigger than birthday candles, but smaller than a centerpiece taper - and they come in a rainbow of colors.

**Decorate!** In our house, the blue and silver paper napkins and the musical Star of David foil centerpiece are holiday favorites. The White House Blue Room would be the perfect setting for blue and silver Hanukkah decorations. Put them on the marble-topped Monroe table. But Hanukkah is remarkably short on outdoor decorations - no twinkling electrical lights, inflatable Santas, or reindeer or other animals of note.

True, there were elephants in the Hanukkah story; the Syrians tried riding some into the hills of ancient Israel to root out the Maccabees. The mountains were big, the elephants were slow, and the idea didn't turn out to be as bright as it sounded. But you wouldn't be tempted to put a lit-up elephant in the Rose Garden anyway.

**Plan your menu.** With Thanksgiving all done, the White House kitchen staff will be happy to know it doesn't have to plan another big dinner. Hanukkah is all about the *latkes*, crisp potato pancakes fried in oil. With latkes on the menu, no one will care that there's no Washington state cedar-plank salmon or Michigan cherry chutney.

If your chef Googles *latkes*, he'll also find gourmet-sweet-potato, carrot-zucchini, and corn-cilantro versions. But our favorite is the original - plain potato. And don't be fooled by boxed instant latke mixes. Also, when the debate begins over whether to top the latkes with applesauce or sour cream, don't escalate the fight; try to build consensus.

The only other Hanukkah food comes from Israel. *Sufganiyot* are deep-fried, jelly-filled doughnuts dusted with powdered sugar. Although Hanukkah lasts eight nights, one night of these is enough: We're trying to limit our oil consumption.

**Play a holiday game.** Roll back the Oriental rug in the Green Room so Sasha, Malia, and their friends can spin the dreidel, a four-sided, spinning top with a Hebrew letter on each side: *nun*, *gimel*, *hay*, and *shin*. The letters stand for the phrase "A great miracle happened there."

Each player places a bet using nuts, pennies, or *gelt*, the gold-foil-wrapped chocolate coins that are a traditional Hanukkah gift. With gold at more than \$1,000 an ounce, they're a bargain. You can find them at the supermarket for under a dollar.




**Wish your guests a happy Hanukkah.** Though "Happy holidays" might be the politically correct greeting, go ahead and wish your Jewish friends "Happy Hanukkah!" Unlike more solemn dates on the Jewish calendar, Hanukkah is a joyous family holiday that celebrates religious freedom.

Joyce Eisenberg and Ellen Scolnic, the Word Mavens, are the coauthors of the Dictionary of Jewish Words (Jewish Publication Society). They can be reached via [www.thewordmavens.com](http://www.thewordmavens.com).

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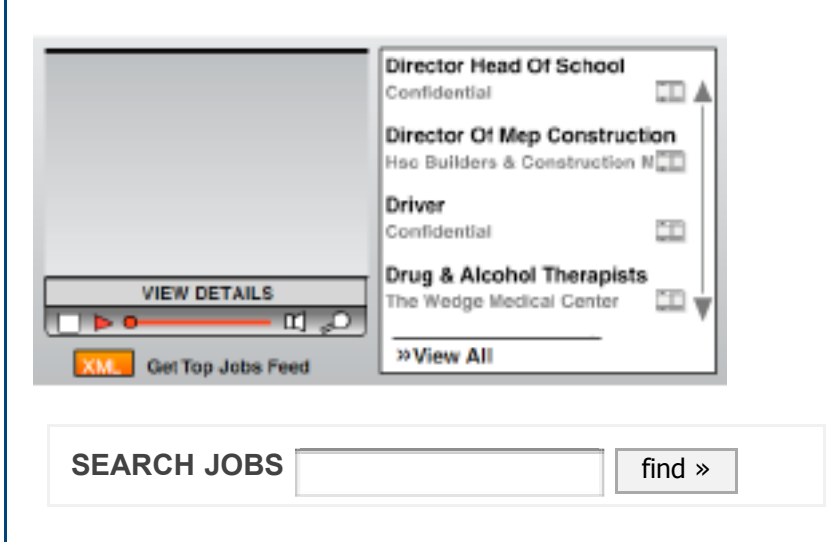
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