

George Washington
To The Hebrew Congregation of Savannah, Georgia
May, 1790

I thank you, with great sincerity, for your congratulations on my appointment to the office which I have the honor to hold by the unanimous choice of my fellow-citizens; and especially for the expressions, which you are pleased to use in testifying the confidence that is reposed in me by your congregation.

As the delay, which has naturally intervened between my election and your address, has afforded an opportunity for appreciating the merits of the federal government, and for communicating your sentiments of its administration, I have rather to express my satisfaction, than regret, at a circumstance, which demonstrates (upon experiment) your attachment to the former, as well as approbation of the latter.

I rejoice, that a spirit of liberality and philanthropy is much more prevalent than it formerly was among the enlightened nations of the earth, and that your brethren will benefit thereby in proportion as it shall become still more extensive. Happily, the people of the United States of America have, in many instances, exhibited examples worthy of imitation, the salutary influence of which will doubtless extend much farther, if, gratefully enjoying those blessings of peace, which, under the favor of Heaven, have been obtained by fortitude in war, they shall conduct themselves with reverence to the Deity, and charity towards their fellow-creatures.

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivered the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors, and planted them in the promised land, whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation, still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven, and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.

George Washington

Editors' notes:

The leaders of Savannah's Mikve Israel Congregation wrote to Washington, on May 6, 1790, congratulating him on his election as president. The letter, signed by Levi Sheftall (1739-1809), president of the Mikve Israel, apologized for the delay in writing congratulations to the President: "...Our eccentric situation added to a diffidence founded on the most profound respect has thus long prevented our address and expressing our unbounded confidence in your [Washington's] integrity and unblemished virtue...unexampled liberality and extensive philanthropy [that] have dispelled that cloud of bigotry and superstition which has long, as a veil, shaded religion - unriveted the fetters of enthusiasm - enfranchised us with all the privileges and immunities of free citizens, and initiated us into the grand mass of legislative mechanism." Washington dispatched an immediate response at the end of the same month, making it the first letter from the new President to an American synagogue (the famous Tuoro synagogue letter was sent in August, 1790). A copy of the letter is on display at Mikve Israel in Savannah, but the original is lost. Washington's copy of Sheftall's letter is preserved in the President's Letter Book, in the Library of Congress. Click here to see an image:

<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mgw2&fileName=gwpage038.db&recNum=144>