

# Milestones in American Jewish History

## The Story Behind Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregation

by Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr.

Back in 1789, the Constitution that we Americans today take for granted had still not been ratified by all of the states. Nor had the First Amendment to the Constitution—with its guarantees of religious freedom and separation of church and state—been adopted. George Washington, the first president under the Constitution, decided to tour all of the New England states that fall of 1789. (Today we might consider it a public relations trip.) But he didn't visit Rhode Island. Scholars believe that was because Rhode Island hadn't yet ratified the new Constitution.

In May 1790, Rhode Island finally ratified it and in June ratified the Bill of Rights, so after Congress adjourned in August president Washington decided he would pay Rhode Island a good-will visit. He took along with him Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, New York Governor George Clinton, Supreme Court Justice John Blair, Congressman William Loughton Smith of South Carolina and three members of his personal staff. They sailed from New York City (then the nation's capitol) in a small packet passenger boat to Newport, where the group spent the night of August 17, 1790 after receiving an effusive welcome.

The next morning, notables and officials of Newport and representatives from various religious groups had the honor of presenting letters of welcome to the president. Among them was the leader of the Jewish congregation, Moses Seixas, the last person to present a letter to Washington before he left for Providence.

Moses Seixas poured out his heart full of gratitude to George Washington for his leadership in the establishment of the new government. He expressed the hope that this new country would accord all of its citizens respect and tolerance, whatever their background and religious beliefs. Seixas's message moved the president.

Washington responded in writing a few days later, assuring the Hebrew Congregation that "every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid." This was a biblical way of pledging that religious minorities would be safe in their homes and houses of worship. He also said this would be a nation that "gives to bigotry no sanction".

Beginning in 1789, George Washington wrote letters to various religious organizations in this country:

- On May 10, 1789 he wrote to the United Baptist churches in Virginia;
- That same month, he wrote to the General Assembly of Presbyterian churches;
- In September of 1789 he wrote to the annual meeting of the Quakers;
- In March, 1790 he wrote to the Roman Catholics;
- And in August of 1790, Washington sent his now famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport.

The tone of this last one was different from the other letters—it was declarative, assertive, and unusually crisp compared with Washington's ordinary style. It was a clarion call that has echoed through the centuries. Washington promised in his letter not just tolerance, but liberty of conscience no matter what one's religious beliefs, including none at all. He was paving the way for the First Amendment, which would be added to the Constitution on December 15, 1791.

### The first amendment as adopted in 1791:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

### Letter from the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island to President George Washington

Aug. 17, 1790

Sir:

*Permit the children of the Stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person and merits—and to join with our fellow citizens in welcoming you to Newport.*

*With pleasure we reflect on those days—those days of difficulty, and danger when the God of Israel, who delivered David from the peril of the sword,—shielded Your head in the day of battle:—and we rejoice to think, that the same Spirit, who rested in the Bosom of the greatly beloved Daniel enabling him to preside over the Provinces of the Babylonish Empire, rests and ever will rest upon you, enabling you to discharge the arduous duties of Chief Magistrate in these States.*

*Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People—a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship:—deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language equal parts of the great governmental Machine:—This so ample and extensive Federal Union whose basis is Philanthropy, Mutual confidence and Public Virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the Great God, who ruleth in the Armies of Heaven, and among the Inhabitants of the Earth, doing whatever seemeth him good.*

*For all these Blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal and benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the angel who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised land, may graciously conduct you through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life:—And, when like Joshua full of days, and full of honour, you are gathered to your Fathers, may you be admitted into the Heavenly Paradise to partake of the water of life, and the tree of immortality.*

*Done and Signed by order of the Hebrew Congregation in Newport Rhode Island august 17th 1790.*

*Moses Seixas* Warden



### George Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island

Aug. 21, 1790

Gentlemen:

*While I receive with much satisfaction your address replete with expressions of affection and esteem, I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced on my visit to Newport from all classes of citizens.*

*The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good government, to become a great and happy people.*

*The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.*

*It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the children of the Stock of Abraham who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and his own due time and way everlastingly happy.*

*G. Washington*

