

currently in his first term as President

What was happening in the U.S. in 1790?

- 1st US census

- National capital compromise = Birth of D.C.

- Rhode Island ratified constitution and became 13th state

- First State of the Union address - Benjamin Franklin dies April 1790

George Washington's 1790 Letter To Touro Synagogue

- in Rhode Island, oldest existing Jewish synagogue in the U.S. & only 1 to survive from Colonial era. Founded in 1658 by Sephardim, which was only 4 years after the 1st Jewish community (23 people) arrived as refugees and, after being told no, were permitted to settle in the American colonies (1654).

Why is this important/relevant?

During a visit to Newport, R.I., in 1790, a year before the Bill of Rights was ratified, President George Washington received a letter from Moses Seixas, warden of the Touro Synagogue, seeking assurance of religious freedom for Jews.

President Washington gave an unequivocal guarantee, returning a letter stating that the new government would "give to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

Below is the transcript of each letter. Original spelling, punctuation and capitalization have been retained.

The letter from Moses Seixas to President George Washington

To the President of the United States of America. IMAGINE WRITING THAT SENTENCE !!

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. Jews across the world, and especially in Europe, were ~~as in 1790~~ until 1790 not emancipated - they were not allowed to be citizens of countries they'd lived in for 100's or thousands of years. Was the U.S. going to be different?

Done and Signed by order of the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island August 17th 1790.
Moses Seixas, Warden

To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island.

Gentlemen,

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT:

This letter seems esp. important because

It was the Jewish community of R.I. saying: "our state just joined the Union..."

Will we be safe? Will your new country accept us? Protect us? Let us prosper?

We are refugees who have been persecuted for thousands of years. Will the U.S. be different? Will you include us?



Ethnic Studies
Educator Support

esresources.org

The motivation, ask, & "why" for writing the letter

AVA de respect you and your qualifications and, I see you generally, you seem a good guy

Imagery: David vs. Goliath = U.S. / Revolutionary Army vs. Britain, except Goliath himself seems to personify the whole cause / Revolution

Seixas is arguing that if the U.S. believes in liberty for all, religious liberty (freedom of religion) must be included

AKA "I'm blushing"

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 in 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 by 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 figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.

May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

G. Washington

If you would like to learn more about religious liberty, please contact:

Americans United for Separation of Church and State

1301 K Street NW, Suite 850, East Tower

Washington, D.C. 20005

Phone: (202)466-3234 Fax: (202)466-2587

e-mail: americansunited@au.org

website: www.au.org

What's interesting is he never says directly, "yes, you can be citizens." He thanks them for their admiration and then quotes the Hebrew Bible - but it's the meaning inside/behind the scriptural quote that actually gives the most compelling and clear answer: "You have the right to liberty, safety, and inclusion among the Citizens of this new country." And earlier he seems to imply he'd be a hypocrite if he'd decided otherwise ("If we have wisdom... We cannot fail, under... just administration...")

Spoken of by the indulgence of 1 class of people

Freedom to think, believe, understand, interpret?

He's saying: Other countries should copy our vision

All (who's included?)

Interesting word choice = "Self-evident"

blunt, honest

Same scriptural passage quoted again (from Hamilton & Abigail Adams)