

THE PRESIDENT AND THE HAZZAN

July 4th

July 4th is America's day to celebrate independence, freedom and American values. It's also a good opportunity to remember and learn from our first President and the Hazzan....

A Moment that Defined America

After the American Revolution, the new country that is now the United States of America was briefly governed through the Articles of Confederation, which proved to be a flawed structure. By 1787, delegates from 12 of the 13 states met in Philadelphia to resolve problems created by the Articles, including the inability of the central government to enforce laws or collect taxes.ⁱ Smaller states were not enthusiastic, fearing that a new government would override state and individual liberties; Rhode Island chose not to attend the convention, and when the U.S Constitution was created, it refused to sign (as did with several other states).ⁱⁱ These states demanded that a bill to protect individual liberties be included in the Constitution.ⁱⁱⁱ To address these concerns, James Madison promised a Bill of Rights, prompting Rhode Island to ratify the Constitution in 1790.^{iv} As a gesture of goodwill, President George Washington then visited Rhode Island as part a wider tour of all the states.^v

Sailing from New York, America's capital at the time, Washington arrived in the port of Newport on August 17, 1790. The following day, delegations of city officials and religious leaders greeted the president, and read aloud letters of support. One the men present was Moses Seixas, warden, a Jewish man, and Hazzan of Newport's Touro Synagogue of Congregation Jeshuat Israel.^{vi} Seixas read a letter he had written aloud, praising President Washington himself and the nation as a whole for defending the rights of citizens. In his letter and speaking as a representative of his religious community, Seixas described the new nation's commitment as one in which all people no matter their heritage are to be afforded freedom of belief and treated equally.^{vii} The letter moved George Washington so greatly that he wrote back on August 21, 1790, affirming America's commitment to religious freedom for all^{viii}.

For this July 4th, Tanenbaum is re-publishing this powerful correspondence. It reminds us that the United States stands for embracing religious diversity and protecting it by preserving religious freedom—and that religious freedom and the foundation of the United States are inseparable.

The Letter from Moses Seixas to George Washington^{ix}

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 benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the Ancient of Days, the great preserver of Men — beseeching him, that 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 honor, 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

Moses Seixas, Warden
August 17th 1790

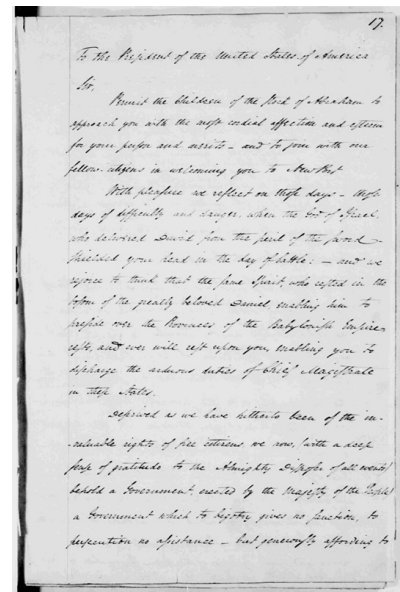


Figure 1 The letter From Moses Seixas to George Washington.
<https://www.facinghistory.org/>

The Letter from George Washington to Moses Seixas^x

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 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 man-kind 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
August 21, 1790

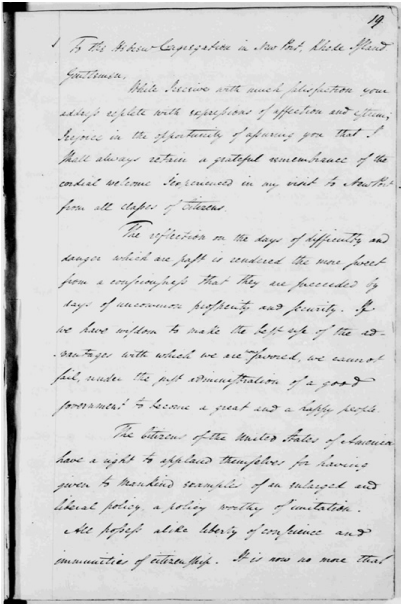


Figure 2The letter from George Washington to Moses Seixas.
<https://www.facinghistory.org/>

The Aftermath

Moses Seixas public letter to George Washington was not the only correspondence the Hazzan had with the President. On the same day that Seixas wrote his public letter, he penned a second letter to Washington as a member of King David’s Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons.^{xi} Washington, a fellow mason, responded, stating that he would promote the society’s virtues while president.^{xii} The Bill of Rights—and the First Amendment, which protects (among other key rights) freedom of religion for all—was ratified shortly afterward, on December 15, 1791.^{xiii}

Although the Bill of Rights enshrined the ideal of freedom of religion in the U.S Constitution, it has taken time before many would begin to reap its benefits. Enslaved African Americans were unable to practice their traditional faiths such as Orisha or Islam.^{xiv} The American government took land sacred to the native peoples, and passed legislation banning certain Native American religious practices such as the Great Sun Dance.^{xv} It was not until 1978 that Congress would guarantee the religious freedom of Native peoples by passing the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.^{xvi} This act extended the definition of religious freedom to include the ability to access religious sites and perform traditional ceremonies.^{xvii}

Though George Washington’s view of what it meant to have religious freedom was as broad as his time, the principles he laid out are universal. Now, it’s up to us to apply them in a way that includes, embraces and respects ourselves, our neighbors, everyone in our country and the strangers at our shores.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Bill of Rights Institute Staff, "Constitution of The United States of America," *Bill of Rights Institute*. <http://billofrightsinstitute.org/founding-documents/constitution/>.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v Catherine Treesh, "New England Tour," *George Washington's Mount Vernon*. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/new-england-tour/>.
- ^{vi} Kathryn Harris, "Moses Seixas," *George Washington's Mount Vernon*. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/moses-seixas/>.
- ^{vii} Ibid.
- ^{viii} Facing History and Ourselves Staff, "The Story Behind the Letters," *Facing History and ourselves*, <https://www.facinghistory.org/nobigotry/the-letters/story-behind-letters>.
- ^{ix} "Moses Seixas to George Washington, 17 August 1790," Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series, Vol. 6, 286.
- ^x "From George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790," Founders Online, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135>. [Original source: The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series, vol. 6, 1 July 1790 – 30 November 1790, ed. Mark A. Mastromarino. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996, pp. 284–286.]
- ^{xi} Kathryn Harris, "Moses Seixas," *George Washington's Mount Vernon*. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/moses-seixas/>.
- ^{xii} Kathryn Harris, "Moses Seixas," *George Washington's Mount Vernon*. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/moses-seixas/>.
- ^{xiii} Bill of Rights Institute Staff, "Constitution of The United States of America," *Bill of Rights Institute*. <http://billofrightsinstitute.org/founding-documents/constitution/>.
- ^{xiv} Cliff Odle, "African American Religion in Early America," *The Freedom Trail Foundation*, <https://www.thefreedomtrail.org/educational-resources/article-religion.shtml>.
- ^{xv} The Pluralism Project Staff, "Religious Freedom for Native Americans," *Harvard University*. <http://pluralism.org/religions/native-american-traditions/issues-for-native-peoples/religious-freedom-for-native-americans/>.
- ^{xvi} The Pluralism Project Staff, "Religious Freedom for Native Americans," *Harvard University*. <http://pluralism.org/religions/native-american-traditions/issues-for-native-peoples/religious-freedom-for-native-americans/>.
- ^{xvii} The Pluralism Project Staff, "Religious Freedom for Native Americans," *Harvard University*. <http://pluralism.org/religions/native-american-traditions/issues-for-native-peoples/religious-freedom-for-native-americans/>.