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ACADEMY

## **“Under His Own Vine and Fig Tree”: Washington Welcomes Jews**

Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern

Sunday, Aug. 15 at 11:00 AM EDT

### **Course Description:**

George Washington’s letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport is a short but profound statement about both the nature of America as well as the role the Jewish community can and should play in it. In this seminar, we will examine the themes Washington touches upon in the letter, including the nature of liberty, the threat of bigotry, loyalty, and mutual prosperity. As we will see, Washington’s vision of a flourishing America was inspired by the Hebrew Bible, a fountain of wisdom for all Americans, from the country’s inception to today.

### **Guiding Questions:**

1. What might George Washington have meant by "liberty of conscience"?
2. Where does the phrase "sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree" come from and why did Washington use it?
3. What does this letter indicate to you about the role of Jews in America? What about the role of Jewish ideas in America?

### **“Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport”**

George Washington

*21 August 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 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.