



1790 | “The Stock of Abraham”:  
The Defense of  
Religious Freedom

Moses Seixas | George Washington

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# Dateline: Newport, Rhode Island, 1790

## Religious Freedom for the Jews

Following years of war with Britain—and an unsuccessful attempt to govern the country under a weak national government called the Articles of Confederation—delegates from all 13 states gathered in Philadelphia to participate in a great Constitutional Convention. Following three months of deliberation, the Convention concluded on September 17, 1787, with the signing of the U.S. Constitution, creating a new form of government for the United States of America.

Yet the new Constitution would not become binding until it was ratified by at least nine out of the 13 states. Many of the Founding Fathers travelled around the country to champion the Constitution and convince the states to support it. Some states initially objected, because the original Constitution did not guarantee rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, or freedom of the press. Rather than calling for another Constitutional Convention, key leaders promised that, once the Constitution was ratified, they would swiftly work to add such rights.

On July 12, 1788, the Constitution was ratified by nine out of the 13 states. George



*George Washinton depicted on his horse.*



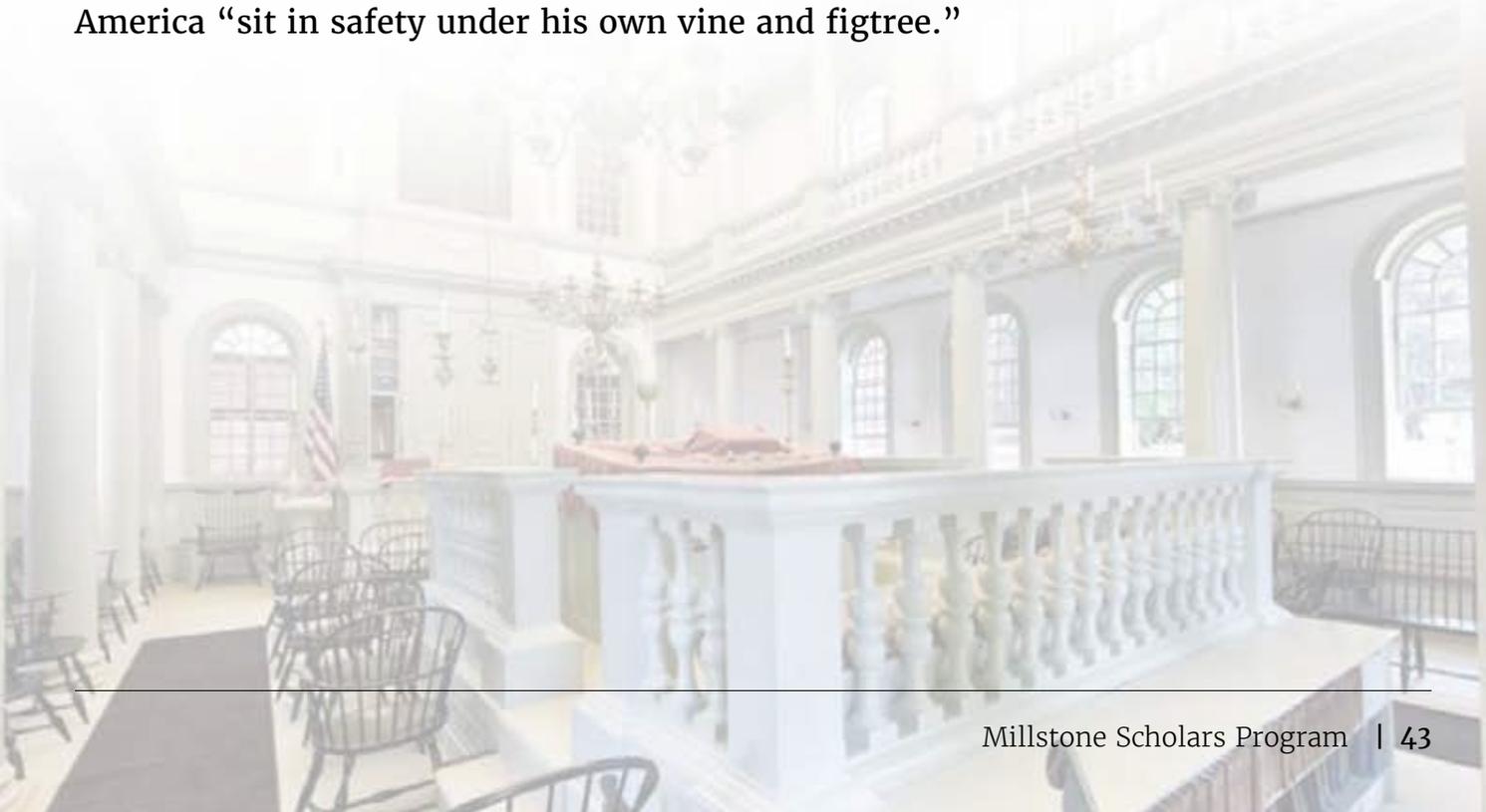
*Moses Sexias of Newport, RI*

Washington became the nation's first president on March 4, 1789. And on September 25, 1789, a set of amendments to the Constitution—which eventually became known as the Bill of Rights—was sent to the states for ratification.

On the morning of August 17th, 1790, George Washington arrived in Newport, Rhode Island, on a special mission: to get the Bill of Rights ratified in the Rhode Island state legislature. The Bill of Rights was especially important to religious minorities in America, including Jews. One Jewish leader from Rhode Island, Moses Sexias, was determined to help get the Bill of Rights approved in his state.

Moses Sexias had risen to prominence as president of the Touro Synagogue in Newport and president of the Bank of Rhode Island. On August 18th—the day after Washington's arrival—Washington and his distinguished traveling party visited the Touro Synagogue. Sexias delivered a famous speech to the esteemed guests, which took the form of a letter. He expressed hope that the young country would respect the religious beliefs of all its inhabitants.

Sexias's speech gained even more significance when Washington replied with his own letter three days later. According to Washington, Jews (and other minority religions) should not merely be tolerated, “as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their natural rights.” Rather the Jews should see themselves as full citizens of the American nation, free and equal to every other religious group. Washington's Newport letter is one of the most important documents in the history of religious freedom. It is a powerful affirmation of Jewish liberty in America, rich with biblical imagery honoring the Jewish people as the “Stock of Abraham” and praying (in the words of the biblical prophet Micah) that every Jew in America “sit in safety under his own vine and figtree.”



# Understanding the Soul of America

## Key Texts and Discussion Questions

### Source 1: A Letter from Moses Seixas (1790)

#### Introduction

Moses Seixas (1744–1809) was a first generation Jewish–American. His parents migrated from Lisbon, Portugal to Newport, Rhode Island, and he emerged as a prominent banker and Jewish communal leader. A *Newport Mercury* obituary remembered him as “a Jew” with an “unblemished reputation . . . zealous and uniform in the profession of his faith.” In this letter, Seixas thanks President Washington for his leadership, and he celebrates the possibility of realizing full rights for Jews in the new American republic.

#### The Blessings of Religious Liberty

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 G–d 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 [difficult] duties of Chief Magistrate [President] in these States.

Deprived as we heretofore [so far] 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

#### Discussion Questions



1. Seixas writes that the Jews have been “deprived..of the invaluable rights of free Citizens,” but look forward to living in a nation which does not permit “bigotry” or support “persecution.” Why is America a land of hope for the Jewish people?

2. What does Seixas mean when he says that the United States affords “to all Liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship”?

People — a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction [does not allow bigotry], to persecution no assistance — but generously affording to all Liberty of conscience, and immunities [protections] 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 G-d, who rules in the Armies of Heaven, and among the Inhabitants of the Earth, doing whatever seems [to] 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 [guided] our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised Land, may graciously conduct [guide] 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 17<sup>th</sup> 1790

### Discussion Questions



3. Seixas concludes by thanking G-d “for all these Blessings of civil and religious liberty.” He also blesses Washington, asking G-d to help guide him like the “Angel who conducted [guided] our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised Land.” Is America—a new nation in 1790—still in the wilderness? What does Seixas mean here?

4. Why do you think Seixas compares Washington to the biblical Joshua in the letter’s very last line? Consider the two biblical figures he mentions: David and Joshua. What is the significance of choosing these two Israelite leaders in particular?



*Touro Synagogue, Newport, RI*

## Source 2: Washington’s Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island (1790)

### Introduction

George Washington (1732–1799) cared enough about the affirmation of Jewish liberty—and the larger question of religious freedom—to reply directly to Moses Sexias’s letter. In his response, Washington emphasizes that, in America, merely tolerating religious minorities is not enough. Jews (and members of other minority faiths) should be seen as full citizens and full participants in the civic and political life of the new country. Washington encourages the “Stock of Abraham” to see America as their own and to be loyal citizens to it. Like Sexias, Washington refers to the Hebrew Bible—including the image of Jews sitting in safety under their own “vine and fig tree,” a famous image from the Book of Micah.

### “To Bigotry No Sanction”

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete [filled] 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 [warm and friendly] 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 [protections] of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence [good will] of one class of

### Discussion Questions



5. In his letter, Washington writes that “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.” How is this idea of creating a “great and happy people” similar to or different from John Winthrop’s idea of a “city on a hill”? Is creating a “covenantal community” the same as creating a nation committed to religious freedom?

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 [carry] themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual [binding, lasting] 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 [happiness]. 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



George Washington at the Constitutional Convention

### Discussion Questions



6. Washington writes that Jews in America should not merely be “tolerated,” they should be full and equal citizens. What is the difference between *toleration* and full *civic equality*?

7. What obligations does American citizenship place on the Jewish community? Can Jews pledge their “effectual support” to the American project?

8. At the close of his letter, Washington blesses the Jewish citizens of the United States: “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.” What is the significance of Washington’s biblical tone? Why do you think he chose to invoke the image of a “vine and fig tree,” a phrase which appears repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible?

# Windows Into the Jewish Experience

*Versions of the term “vine and fig tree” appear repeatedly throughout the Hebrew Bible (including in the Books of Isaiah, Zecharia, Kings, and Joel), as well as in the Talmud. In the powerful passage from Micah below, we are told that, in the future, each household of Israel will enjoy its own abundant vines and fig trees. The prophet Micah was speaking during the period of the First Temple, and much of the book is devoted to criticizing the people of Israel for not following the ways of G-d. Here, though, is a hopeful message filled with the promise of peace—a message that seems to have inspired George Washington.*

## Micah 4:1-5



In the last days, the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains;

it will be exalted above the hills, and peoples will stream to it.

Many nations will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the G-d of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.”

The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.

## Discussion Questions



1. Why do you think the phrase “vine and fig tree” is so often linked to blessings of peace and prosperity? What is the significance Micah’s prophecy that “everyone” will enjoy these gifts and that “no one” will make them afraid?

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD has spoken.

**מיכה ד:א-ה**

והָיָה בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים יְהוָה הָרַב בֵּית־הָ' נֶכּוֹן בְּרֹאשׁ הַהָרִים וְנִשְׂאָה הוּא מִגְּבְעוֹת וְנִהְרָו עָלָיו עַמִּים: וְהָלְכוּ גוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאָמְרוּ לָכוּ וְנַעֲלֶה אֶל־הַר־הָ' וְאֶל־בַּיִת אֱלֹקֵי יַעֲקֹב וְיִזְרְנוּ מִדְּרָכָיו וְנִלְכֶה בְּאַרְחֻתָיו כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תוֹרָה וְדִבְרֵה' מִירוּשָׁלַם: וְשָׁפֵט בֵּין עַמִּים רַבִּים וְהוֹכִיחַ לְגוֹיִם עֲצָמִים עַד־רָחֹק וְכִתְּתוּ חֲרֻבְתֵיהֶם לְאֲתָיִם וְחִנִּיתֵיהֶם לְמִזְמֵרוֹת לֹא־יִשְׂאוּ גוֹי אֶל־גוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא־יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה: וְיָשְׁבוּ אִישׁ תַּחַת גִּפְנוֹ וְתַחַת תְּאֲנָתוֹ וְאִין מִחֲרִיד כִּי־פִי ה' צְבָקוֹת דִּבֶּר:

**Discussion Questions**



2. Consider all the lines leading up to the term “vine and fig tree.” What do you make of Micah’s prophecy that “many nations” will seek out the “mountain of the LORD...the temple of the G-d of Jacob”? And that these varied and far-flung nations will then “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks”? In what way might this message have resonated with Washington after the war?



Washington and his family at Mt. Vernon

# Final Thoughts

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Both Moses Sexias and George Washington speak in biblical language about the meaning of America. Was America founded as a religious nation? Is a nation that affirms every person's "liberty of conscience" on matters of religious identity the same as a nation that believes it is called by G-d to create a "city upon a hill"? What is the relationship between a free society and a holy community? Can America hold together without a shared belief in a Creator and without a shared biblical language? While men of different faiths, what gave Sexias and Washington a shared faith in America?



*A statue of the Ten Commandments outside the Texas State Capitol, signifying the importance of the Abrahamic faiths to the American political project.*