



Rabbi Meir Soloveichik  
*teaches*

# JEWISH IDEAS AND THE AMERICAN FOUNDERS

A STUDY GUIDE

Sponsored by The Tikvah Fund

קרן תקווה  
TIKVAH

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Jewish Ideas and the American Founders  
is dedicated by Allen K. Schwartz, in  
memory of his wife, Barbara R. Schwartz,  
and in tribute to all Jewish Americans,  
both strangers and neighbors.



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# INTRODUCTION

This reading guide is designed to enhance Meir Soloveichik’s online course on “Jewish Ideas and the American Founders.” The course was originally recorded in New York during the summer of 2017 at one of Tikvah’s educational programs for American undergraduates. The lectures were followed by smaller discussion groups guided by senior instructors asking the same kinds of questions we ask in this guide. Although the conditions of the original program obviously cannot be replicated, this reading guide suggests how people may prolong their enjoyment of these ideas on their own, in pairs, or in groups. “Jewish Ideas and the American Founders” tells the story of religious and political ideas as they were brought to life by the exceptional men and women of America’s founding. These ideas can still inspire and instruct us today, and discussion and analysis of the lectures in this course can help that happen.

Combining history with theology and politics, the course examines Jewish contributions to the early republic by tracing the life of one remarkable Jewish family. When Jonas Phillips landed on the coast of South Carolina, a Jewish immigrant from the Old World looking for opportunity, he arrived as an indentured servant to another Jewish merchant. After earning his freedom, he went north, married in New York, settled in Philadelphia, created a large family, became a wealthy man, and throughout his life worked to help the new American nation realize its boldest and most promising ideals.

Jonas Phillips was a religious Jew and an American patriot, and his life is a testament to the Jewish significance of the uniquely American tradition of religious freedom. His story and the stories of his children orient us toward an understanding of American politics, culture, and law that combines modern and biblical ideals—contract with covenant, faith with freedom, and equality with pluralism. The Phillips family helps us to see just what makes America so unique in Jewish and world history—what is worth protecting, worth celebrating, worth bequeathing to our children. Throughout “Jewish Ideas and the American Founders,” Rabbi Soloveichik invites us to ask if America is prepared to stay true to the legacy of Jonas Phillips and keep alive the ideals that make America exceptional.

## A NOTE ABOUT MUSIC

The religious music you hear as each lecture begins is a recording from Congregation Shearith Israel, and it is a rendition of “*Baruch Habah*” (Psalms 118:26–29).

This particular melody is a mainstay of Moroccan and Sepharadi communities, and it is the one that we believe was sung, with small variations, during the Revolutionary War when, on September 13, 1782, Mikve Israel was consecrated in Philadelphia.

# ABOUT MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

Rabbi Dr. Meir Y. Soloveichik is director of the Zahava and Moshael Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University and the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, the oldest Jewish congregation in the United States.

Prior to this, Soloveichik served as associate rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in Manhattan. Rabbi Soloveichik has lectured throughout the United States, Europe, and Israel to both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences on topics relating to Jewish theology, bioethics, wartime ethics, and Jewish-Christian relations.

His essays on these subjects have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Mosaic*, *Commentary*, *First Things*, the *Jewish Review of Books*, *Tradition*, and the *Torah U-Madda Journal*. In August 2012, he gave the invocation at the opening session of the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida.

He is the son of Rabbi Eliyahu Soloveichik, grandson of the late Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, and the great nephew of the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.



# LECTURE 1:

## THE YIDDISH LETTER AND THE DECLARATION: THE INCREDIBLE STORY OF JONAS PHILLIPS, THE FIRST TRULY AMERICAN JEW

In this first lecture, Rabbi Soloveichik traces the life of Jonas Phillips, a German Jew who came to America in 1756 as an indentured servant. After earning his freedom, Phillips built a life for himself and his family in New York and, following the onset of the Revolutionary War, in Philadelphia.

Serving in the Pennsylvania militia, and firmly committed to the patriot cause, Phillips helped to shape America's unique conception of freedom—especially religious freedom—by asserting that he was co-equal to his fellow Americans as both a citizen and as a Jew. By examining two striking letters written by Phillips—one addressed to soon-to-be-President George Washington—we will see how Phillips portrays American Jews as having a dual character. In the words of the patriarch Abraham, each Jew is meant to be both *ger* (“stranger”) and *toshav* (“neighbor”). In America alone, Jews can retain their separateness from non-Jewish customs (*ger*), while also being full-fledged, co-equal citizens (*toshav*).

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think Phillips' Sabbath lawsuit would be decided today?
2. What unique features of American political ideas and American culture allowed American Jews to live as both *gerim* (strangers) and *toshavim* (neighbors)?
3. What are the difficulties of being both *ger* and *toshav* at the same time? Are there certain settings in which separateness and solidarity are more easily integrated? Are there any ways in which the two are irreconcilable?
4. In what ways does the concept of "equality before the law" represent a mixture of both modern and biblical ideas? Is it a specifically Jewish idea?
5. In Jonas Phillips' letter to Gumpel Samson, he writes that the Declaration of Independence was a "declaration for the whole state" rather than a declaration on behalf of thirteen separate states. Why is this significant? What promise does a large nation founded on equal rights hold for Jews and other religious minorities?
6. Was Pennsylvania's requirement to have legislators attest to the divine nature of the Old Testament any less problematic than the requirement to have legislators attest to the divine nature of the New Testament? Should Phillips have objected to Pennsylvania's requirement altogether, or was it right for him to specifically object to the part about the New Testament? Was he objecting as a Jew, as a citizen, or both?
7. What sense of obligation did Jonas Phillips have toward America? What can Jews learn from him about their obligations to Jews, to Judaism, and to the United States?



# LECTURE 2:

## AMERICA'S PASSOVER: FRANKLIN, JEFFERSON, AND THE SEAL OF THE UNITED STATES

What relation did America's founding have to Jewish ideas? In this lecture, Rabbi Soloveichik introduces us to the story surrounding the creation of the United States' official seal and the committee convened on July 4, 1776, to determine what that seal would be. Benjamin Franklin's proposal depicted Moses standing above the Red Sea as it crashed down on Pharaoh's army, while Thomas Jefferson's showed the Children of Israel traversing the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. While neither seal ended up finding the favor of the Continental Congress, Rabbi Soloveichik shows how each seal elucidates the founding generation's understanding of freedom as firmly rooted in complementary and contrasting ideas—each emerging out of Biblical sources.

While Franklin's and Jefferson's conceptions of freedom are quite different, their seals nevertheless illustrate America's commitment to the idea that freedom presupposes a monotheistic God who cares about the life and well-being of the men and women created in His image. While throwing off the yoke of tyranny is necessary for freedom, the purpose of freedom is a sustainable society where families and individual citizens can prosper.



*Benjamin Franklin's proposed seal design  
(See also in primary source documents)*



*Thomas Jefferson's proposed seal design  
(See also in primary source documents)*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Joseph Joel's 1862 U.S. Army *seder* tell us about religious liberty, Jews' place in America, and the universality of the Exodus story?
2. What are the differences between Franklin's emphasis on God intervening in the natural order and Jefferson's emphasis on mankind's own endeavor to help himself on the long journey to freedom in the Promised Land?
3. According to the vision of liberty depicted in Jefferson's seal, why is the road to liberty so long and arduous? What about founding a free society requires such toil?
4. Does the founders' commitment to certain biblical ideas—especially the Exodus narrative—shed any light on their views of slavery? Did the founding betray biblical ideals by allowing slavery to remain under the new constitution? Or does the Bible's complex system of indentured Hebrew servitude and Gentile slavery enable Americans influenced by Hebrew Scripture to allow for slavery to endure in the new nation?
5. How are the legal restrictions embedded in Jewish law compatible with a life of freedom?
6. Can a society be both free and secular? Are some religions more compatible than others with life in a free society? What are the features of a religion that make it compatible with a free society?

# LECTURE 3:

## FROM THE TALMUD TO THOMAS PAINE: POLITICAL HEBRAISM AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* is the piece of writing perhaps most responsible for persuading American colonists to separate from England. In addition to making the case that King George III's treatment of the colonists was unacceptable, Paine argues that monarchy itself is a pernicious blight on mankind. Though a non-believer, Paine's primary argument against monarchy is sourced in the Bible, drawing upon an episode in the Book of Samuel in which the Israelites demand a king, much to the chagrin of the Prophet Samuel and God Himself.

Paine's argument, Rabbi Soloveichik shows, draws directly upon the work of poet John Milton, whose own arguments against the divine right of kings draw upon Talmudic discussions about the status and desirability of monarchy in Jewish law (*halacha*). Not only did Jewish thought influence the Revolution insofar as Paine cloaked his argument in the stories of the Bible in order to persuade the common American, but the very strongest arguments made against monarchy came directly from Jewish interpreters as they were read by the European tradition of political Hebraism.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why was it necessary for Paine, an ardent non-believer, to make his argument against monarchy on a biblical basis? Was he simply trying to appeal to his audience, or did he think there was some truth to the way monarchy is negatively depicted in the Book of Samuel?
2. In what ways was America fertile soil for some of the arguments of political Hebraism to take root?
3. Which is more conducive to freedom: rule by divine law or rule by a human king?
4. Why did American colonists' opinions of monarchy change so quickly? That is, why did their main grievance seem to transition from one about their relationship to Parliament to one about the legitimacy of monarchy itself?
5. Are there any ways in which our Constitution resembles a monarchy? If so, in what ways does it attempt to avoid the dangers of one-man rule to which the British monarchy had succumbed?
6. Are there stronger arguments to be made against monarchy that don't rely on Scripture?

# LECTURE 4:

## THE FOUNDING FATHER AND THE HUPPAH

Returning to the Phillips family story, Rabbi Soloveichik recounts the occasion of the marriage of Jonas' daughter Rachel to Michael Levy, an *Ashkenazi* man from Virginia. Perhaps the most notable guest at the Phillips wedding was Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, the man who gave *Common Sense* its title, and a good friend of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. In a letter to his wife, Julia, Rush describes the affair in all its detail, prompting him to reflect on the continuity of the Jewish people and the glory of ancient Israel.

Using Rush's letter to Julia as a starting point, Soloveichik dissects the various segments of the Jewish wedding ritual, discerning in it a double character: Jewish marriage is at once a contract and a covenant. It is a contract insofar as it acknowledges the different interests of two different people, joining them together so that they might pursue them more perfectly. Yet, it is a covenant insofar as the individuals join together to accomplish something they could not accomplish alone, and in so doing take responsibility for one another. Nevertheless, the Jewish wedding ritual suggests that one cannot create a covenant without a contract; the unification achieved by the covenant cannot be attained without acknowledging human difference.

It is this distinctly Jewish understanding of covenant and contract, Soloveichik argues, that gave form and depth to the founding. Just as Benjamin Rush looked on the *huppah* of Rachel Phillips Levy and her bridegroom, so too did the founding draw inspiration from the Jewish conception of covenant and contract. When the founders approved the Declaration of Independence, they took responsibility for one another, affirmed a common goal, and formed a covenant. When the states ratified the Constitution, on the other hand, they acknowledged that human difference was inescapable, but could be channeled so as to be mutually beneficial. In other words, they signed a contract conducive to the common good.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What about the Hebrew Bible made its ideas politically instructive for the founding generation?
2. Why must contracts accompany covenants? Is there any significance to the fact that, in the Jewish wedding, the contract (*ketubah*) comes before the covenant (*huppah*) whereas, in the founding of America, the covenant (the Declaration) came before the contract (the Constitution)?
3. How can a community integrate without assimilating? Does that proposition threaten the idea of being both *ger* and *toshav*, or are they identical to one another?
4. How do covenants—either the Israelite covenant or the American covenant—operate so as not to threaten human difference? Can two parties be so different that they can never enter into a contract or a covenant? Must the parties to a contract or a covenant be equals? If so, in what way(s) must they be equal?
5. In what ways are the Constitution and the *ketubah* alike and in what ways different? The Constitution is designed to facilitate legislative deliberation as well as checks, balances, and the federal system itself. This can lead to an inefficiency that protects minority rights and restrains capricious policy decisions. In other words, the Constitution assumes each part of government and the men and women who work in them are not necessarily dedicated to the common good. Does the *ketubah* make an assumption like that about the parties it is uniting?

# LECTURE 5:

## WASHINGTON, SEIXAS, AND GIVING THANKS

Ratification of the Constitution was a contentious process, and it was met with much opposition from leading political figures of the Revolution. Jews, in contrast to many other religious groups, supported ratification by large margins since, as the spiritual leader of Shearith Israel, Gershom Mendes Seixas, put it, this Constitution was “founded upon the strictest principles of equal liberty and justice.” In other words, it would allow Jews and every other religious minority to be full citizens; no public office would be beyond their grasp.

By 1789, when the Constitution had been ratified, Congressman Elias Boudinot proposed that the new United States Congress petition President George Washington to proclaim a national day of Thanksgiving. Those in favor were not seeking to remember Pilgrims and Native Americans; rather, they believed that the Constitution was something for which the entire country ought to give thanks. Arguing in favor of Boudinot’s recommendation, Congressman Roger Sherman cited the biblical story of Solomon’s dedication of the Temple, which points, Rabbi Soloveichik argues, to a deep relation between America’s Thanksgiving and the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did America need a “dedication of the Constitution?” What about “dedication” requires an expression of gratitude to God?
2. Why does the giving of thanks and the dedication of a public institution (whether it be the federal government or the Temple) need to be enacted in ritual? What is the wisdom underlying ritual?
3. What is the significance of the postponement of the New York parade for the fast of the 17 of *Tammuz* or the kosher food at the parade in Philadelphia? Can’t Jews be co-equal citizens—can’t they be both *gerim* and *toshavim*—even in situations in which they are excluded from non-governmental, informal civic gatherings?
4. Jewish support for the Constitution centered on its prohibition of religious tests for federal public office. Why did the Jewish community find this so appealing? What made them think that this was more than just a “parchment promise”?
5. What was so admirable about Judaism or the Kingdom of Solomon that it made King Hiram of Tyre so enthusiastic about helping Solomon build the Temple? Similarly, what was it about the Jewish community in America that made non-Jewish citizens both so interested in Hebrew texts and so committed to equalizing the political status of Jewish citizens?



# LECTURE 6:

## CONTINUE TO WATER THEM WITH THE DEWS OF HEAVEN

The inauguration of George Washington witnessed speeches and acts of profound religiosity. The procession, which included 13 Christian ministers and Gershom Mendes Seixas, the religious leader of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, exemplified the kind of cohesion that, Washington would argue in his inaugural address a few moments later, could be achieved among the kaleidoscope of religious factions in America. After his inauguration, many religious groups authored letters to the new president to congratulate him. America's Jews could not coalesce around a single representative to write on behalf of the whole community, instead sending President Washington three separate letters.

President Washington responded to each of them separately. Most notably, in his response to the Jewish congregation in Savannah, Georgia, Washington insists that the God who took Israel out of Egypt continues to bless the Jews in America, and that part of their blessing is the freedom and equality that America promises to them and all other religious groups. America is, in a certain way, a kind of Promised Land for all of its inhabitants. Examining each letter in turn, we will discover not only that Washington believed the Jews and the Hebrew Bible had a special place in America, but also that Washington himself shares the credit for America's unique attitude toward religious liberty.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Washington's inauguration procession included ministers from over a dozen different religious groups. What does that tell us about religious toleration and equality in early America?
2. Why did Washington write to each religious denomination in its own religious language? Would it have been better for him to formulate a general stance about religious liberty for all denominations, rather than explaining why each sect has a place in America?
3. Based on these letters, what specifically did Washington contribute to America's unique vision of religious freedom? What might religious freedom in America look like without him?
4. What did Washington mean when he told the Savannah congregation that the God of the Israelites was the same God who had given them America? Why didn't he say something similar to Quakers, Catholics, or Baptists?
5. What did Washington see in America that caused him to compare biblical Israel to America in his letter to the Savannah congregation?
6. Is it a violation of Christian or Jewish teaching to believe that America's founding was providential? What is special or chosen about America—or, rather, what is “promised” to the inhabitants of America?
7. Why was it important for America's early Jews to be “stiff-necked,” in the sense that they remained committed to Jewish law? Would the social situation of early America have posed a particular danger to Jewish identity if those communities didn't remain “stiff-necked”?
8. In what ways were America's early Jews more “fragmented” than the Jews in the Old World? What are the risks and the advantages of a fragmented Jewish community?

# LECTURE 7:

## ADAMS, JEFFERSON, AND THE JEWS

Mordecai Manuel Noah—Jonas Phillips' grandson through his daughter Tzipporah—was perhaps the most prominent American Jew of the first half of the 19th century. After being appointed Ambassador to Tunis in the Madison Administration (and being fired from the position due to his faith), he returned to America and founded a Jewish colony in upstate New York called Ararat. In a speech dedicating the Shearith Israel building in New York, Noah articulated what he believed to be America's significance to the Jews. America, he said, was the best the Jews could do until the Messiah brought them back to the Land of Israel, because America guaranteed what Europe could only promise: religious tolerance and full political equality *as Jews*. Noah's address was, in many ways, the first proto-Zionist speech.

Noah sent his address to both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams—the founding generation's leading thinkers, and ones whose differences on politics and religion ran quite deep. In particular, they differed about the value of the Jews and Judaism. Nevertheless, as Soloveichik shows by examining their responses to Noah's address, both Jefferson and Adams had peculiar views of religion and religious liberty that lead them to believe the Jews would be, and should be, fully at home in America.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Given that Jefferson thought all religious people would eventually progress toward reason and away from superstition, was his criticism of Judaism especially unfair?
2. John Adams was deeply committed to religious liberty in America, but he also wrote religious tests into the Constitution of Massachusetts. Are the two reconcilable?
3. Why was Jefferson so passionate about religious freedom if he doubted the truth of most organized religions' major doctrines?
4. Adams believed that the Jews played a world-historical role in bringing monotheism to humankind. Why was monotheism so important to him? Does monotheism serve a political purpose? Can one have full equality and full liberty without a single God whose power extends everywhere?
5. Why could America alone make good on Europe's promise to grant full religious toleration and full political equality? Why couldn't a country like France allow Jews to be both *gerim* and *toshavim*?
6. The founders' identification of the Jews with Americans and the Land of Israel with America could be taken as an abandonment of the biblical ideal of Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land. In Noah's address and in Adams' response, however, we see a connection between the two. What accounts for this connection—why does the success of America seem for them to point toward Messianic redemption for the Jews?
7. If Noah believed that America afforded Jews as such full equality, why did he feel the need to found Ararat?
8. What does Jefferson and Adams' disagreement about the rights of each generation to set their own laws have to do with their disagreement about Jews or about religion in general?
9. Whose view of religious liberty—Jefferson's or Adams'—is most prevalent today in America?

# LECTURE 8:

## THE HOME WE BUILD TOGETHER

When Benjamin Rush attended the Phillips-Levy wedding at the home of Jonas Phillips, he asked questions about different parts of the Jewish wedding ceremony. The explanation he received about the *huppah*—that it was used in European ceremonies to protect bride and groom from the elements during their outdoor ceremony—was incomplete. In this lecture, Soloveichik uses the *huppah* and its surprisingly modern history to explain why Rush’s witness of the Phillips-Levy wedding is more than just an interesting historical anecdote.

The *huppah* as a symbol, Soloveichik contends, simultaneously suggests what it means to be both *ger* and *toshav*, suggests a criticism of earthly kingship, and embodies the covenantal-contractual relationship between God and Israel. In so doing, the *huppah* reminds Americans of their distinct conception of freedom, religion’s role in public life, the covenant that binds all Americans together, and the fundamental possibility of integration without assimilation.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After the decline of the practice to wait one year between betrothal and marriage, “*huppah*” came to mean something new, and everyone agrees that on a basic level it represents the new home the couple is building. What’s important about preserving the imagery of the home? Although the *huppah* represents the message of Abraham and Sarah, does it also represent the private domain of the nuclear family? Why is the nuclear family so important to Judaism?
2. What political statement is the Jewish tradition making by having bride and groom married under a *huppah*? Does Judaism have a specific interest in asserting the inferiority of an earthly king? If so, what interest?
3. What is the Abrahamic message illustrated by the *huppah*? Was that message only imperfectly achieved by Diaspora Jews before the settlement of America? In what way does America make the Abrahamic charge easier to fulfill?
4. In what ways do Jews seek to take their religion outside of the private realm and into the public domain?
5. What is unique about the Jewish view of covenants? From that perspective, what is the status of America—is it a covenantal society? If so what is the status of our covenant today?
6. If it can be said that there is a common view about religious liberty among the founders, what can we say about the status of that view today? Do most Americans accept it? Or do we typically endorse a new and different version of religious liberty? If we do, which one do you think is better?
7. Could America have been founded the way it was without Jewish ideas? Why or why not?

# PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS

# BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S PROPOSED SEAL FOR THE UNITED STATES





# THOMAS JEFFERSON'S PROPOSED SEAL FOR THE UNITED STATES



# JONAS PHILLIPS TO GUMPEL SAMSON

Philadelphia July 28th 1776

Philadelphia, Sunday, 12 Menachem Ab, 5536.

Peace to my beloved master, my kinsman, the eminent and wealthy, wise and discerning, God-fearing man, whose honored, glorious name is R. Gumpel, may his Rock and Redeemer protect him and all his family! Peace!

As it is not always possible to send a letter to England on account of the war in America, I must therefore write by way of St. Eustatia.

I have not yet had any answer to a letter of May, 1775, when I sent my master a bill of exchange for ten pounds sterling for my mother. Should that letter not have arrived, then the enclosed third bill of exchange will obtain the money, and please send it to my mother, long life to her. Should it, however, have already been obtained you need not return the bill of exchange again, and this to the wise will suffice.

As no English goods can come over at all, and much money can be earned with Holland goods if one will venture, should you have a friend who will this winter acquaint himself with the goods mentioned below, I can assure you that four hundred per cent is to be earned thereby. I could write my meaning better in English than Judaeo-German.

The war will make all England bankrupt. The Americans have an army of 100,000 fellows and the English only 25,000 and some ships. The Americans have already made themselves like the States of Holland. The enclosed is a declaration of the whole country. How it will end, the blessed God knows. The war does me no damage, thank God!

I would like to send you a bill of exchange, but it is not possible for me to get it. If my master, long life to him, will disburse for me 100 gulden to my mother, I can assure you that just as soon as a bill of exchange on St. Eustatia can be had I will, with thanks, honestly pay you. I have it, thank God, in my power, and I know that my mother, long life to her, needs it very much; and I beg of my master, long life to him, to write me at once an answer, addressed as herein written.

There is no further news. My wife and children, long life to her and them, together send you many greetings and wish you good health up to one hundred years.

You friend, to serve. From me, Jonah son of R. Felbesh [Phoebus] (the memory of the righteous is a blessing), of Busick.

Jonas Phillips

# BENJAMIN RUSH TO HIS WIFE, JULIA RUSH

My dear Julia,

Philadelphia, June 27, 1787

Being called a few days ago to attend in the family of Jonas Phillips, I was honored this morning with an invitation to attend the marriage of his daughter to a young man of the name of LEVY from Virginia. I accepted the invitation with great pleasure, for you know I love to be in the way of adding to my stock of ideas upon all subjects.

At 1 o'clock the company, consisting of 30 or 40 men, assembled in Mr. Philips' common parlor, which was accommodated with benches for the purpose. The ceremony began with prayers in the Hebrew language, which were chaunted by an old rabbi and in which he was followed by the whole company. As I did not understand a word except now and then an Amen or Hallelujah, my attention was directed to the haste with which they covered their heads with their hats as soon as the prayers began, and to the freedom with which some of them conversed with each other during the whole time of this part of their worship. As soon as these prayers were ended, which took up about 20 minutes, a small piece of parchment was produced, written in Hebrew, which contained a deed of settlement and which the groom subscribed in the presence of four witnesses. In this deed he conveyed a part of his fortune to his bride, by which she was provided for after his death in case she survived him. This ceremony was followed by the erection of a beautiful canopy composed of white and red silk in the middle of the floor. It was supported by four young men (by means of four poles), who put on white gloves for the purpose. As soon as this canopy was fixed, the bride, accompanied with her mother, sister, and a long train of female relations, came downstairs. Her face was covered with a veil which reached halfway down her body. She was handsome at all times, but the occasion aid her dress rendered her in a peculiar manner a most lovely and affecting object. I gazed with delight upon her. Innocence, modesty, fear, respect, and devotion appeared all at once in her countenance. She was led by her two bridesmaids under the canopy. Two young men led the bridegroom after her and placed him, not by her side, but directly opposite to her. The priest now began again to chaunt an Hebrew prayer, in which he was followed by part of the company. After this he gave to the groom and bride a glass full of wine, from which they each sipped about a teaspoonful. Another prayer followed this act, after which he took a ring and directed the groom to place it upon the finger of his bride in the same manner as is practised in the marriage service of the Church of England. This ceremony was followed by handing the wine to the father of the bride and then a second time to the bride and groom. The groom after sipping the wine took the glass in his hand and threw it upon a large pewter dish which was suddenly placed at his feet. Upon its breaking into a number of small pieces, there was a general shout of joy and a declaration that the ceremony was over. The groom now saluted his bride, and kisses and congratulations became general through the room. I asked the meaning, after the ceremony was over, of the canopy and of the drinking of the wine and breaking of the glass. I was told by one of the company that in Europe they generally marry in the open air, and that the canopy was introduced

to defend the bride and groom from the action of the sun and from rain. Their mutually partaking of the same glass of wine was intended to denote the mutuality of their goods, and the breaking of the glass at the conclusion of the business was designed to teach them the brittleness and uncertainty of human life and the certainty of death, and thereby to temper and moderate their present joys.

Mr. Phillips pressed me to stay and dine with the company, but business and Dr. Hall's departure, which was to take place in the afternoon, forbade it. I stayed, however, to eat some wedding cake and to drink a glass of wine with the guests. Upon going into one of the rooms upstairs to ask how Mrs. Philips did, who had fainted downstairs under the pressure of the heat (for she was weak from a previous indisposition), I discovered the bride and groom supping a bowl of broth together. Mrs. Phillips apologized for them by telling me they had eaten nothing (agreeably to the custom prescribed by their religion) since the night before.

Upon my taking leave of the company, Mrs. Phillips put a large piece of cake into my pocket for you, which she begged I would present to you with her best compliments. She says you are an old New York acquaintance of hers.

During the whole of this new and curious scene my mind was not idle. I was carried back to the ancient world and was led to contemplate the passovers, the sacrifices, the jubilees, and other ceremonies of the Jewish Church. After this, I was led forward into futurity and anticipated the time foretold by the prophets when this once-beloved race of men shall again be restored to the divine favor and when they shall unite with Christians with one heart and one voice in celebrating the praises of a common and universal Saviour.

I have only time to add that the pleasure I enjoyed in the sight and reflections I have recorded was soon damped by my being obliged to take leave of my dear friend and late partner Dr. Hall. He took me by the hand at 4 o'clock - but was unable to bid me farewell. His eyes filled with tears, and he attempted in vain to give utterance to his affection and grief. Mr. Blakely, Dr. Griffiths, and four or five more of his companions accompanied him to Gray's ferry. He has left a blank in every part of the house. I feel without him as if I had lost my right arm.

John prefers visiting Morven in the holidays next month to a short excursion, agreeably to your proposal. I have promised Dick that he shall accompany him.

Adieu. With love to your Mama, sisters, and brothers, and to our dear children, I am your affectionate husband,

B. RUSH

P.S. June 28th. We met last night about our free schools. The company was well chosen and truly respectable. A plan was adopted that cannot fail (heaven continuing to smile upon the undertaking) of succeeding and doing the most extensive good. O! Virtue, Virtue, who would not follow thee blindfold! - Methinks I hear you cry out after reading this postscript, "Alas! my poor husband! he is as crazy as ever."

I have sent the wedding cake by Mr. Stockton.

# JONAS PHILLIPS TO GEORGE WASHINGTON

Philadelphia 24th Ellul 5547 or Sepr 7th 1787

Sirs

With leave and Submission I address my Self To those in whome there is wisdom understanding and knowledge. They are the honorable personages appointed and Made overseers of a part of the terrestrial globe of the Earth, Namely the 13 united states of america in Convention Assembled, the Lord preserve them amen.

I the subscriber being one of the people called Jews of the City of Philadelphia, a people scattered and despersed among all nations do behold with Concern that among the laws in the Constitution of Pennsylvania their is a Clause Sect 10 to viz.—I do belive in one God the Creator and governour of the universe the Rewarder of the good and the punisher of the wicked—and I do acknowledge the scriptures of the old and New testement to be given by devine inspiration—To Swear and belive that the new testement was given by devine inspiration is absolutly against the Religious principle of a Jew and is against his conscience to take any such oath. By the above law a Jew is deprived of holding any public office or place of Government which is a Contradectory to the bill of Right Sect. 2 viz.

That all men have a natural and inalienable Right To worship almighty God according to the dictates of their own Conscience and understanding, and that no man aught or of Right can be compelled to attend any Religious Worship or Erect or support any place of worship or Maintain any minister contrary to or against his own free will and Consent nor can any man who acknowledges the being of a God be Justly deprived or abridged of any Civil Right as a Citizen on account of his Religious Sentiments or peculiar mode of Religious Worship and that no authority can or aught to be vested in or assumed by any power what Ever that shall in any Case interfere or in any manner Controul the Right of Conscience in the free Exercise of Religious Worship.

It is well Known among all the Citizens of the 13 united states that the Jews have been true and faithfull whigs; and during the late contest with England they have been foremost in aiding and assisting the states with their lifes and fortunes, they have supported the cause, have bravely fought and bleed for Liberty which they can not Enjoy.

Therefore if the honourable Convention shall in their Wisdom think fit and alter the said oath and leave out the words to viz.—and I do acknowledge the scriptures of the new testement to be given by devine inspiration, then the Israelites will think themself happy to live under a government where all Religious societys are on an Eaquel footing. I solecet this favour for my Self my Children and posterity and for the benefit of all the Israelites through the 13 united States of america.

My prayer is unto the Lord—May the people of this states Rise up as a great and young lion, May they prevail against their Enemies, May the degrees of honour of his Excellency the president of the

Convention George Washington, be {Extolled} and Raise up, May Everyone speak of his glorious Exploits—May God prolong his days among us in this land of Liberty—May he lead the armies against his Enemy as he has done hereuntofore, May God Extend peace unto the united States—May they get up to the highest Prosperity—May God Extend peace to them and their Seed after them so long as the Sun and moon Endureth—and May the almighty God of our father Abraham Isaac and Jacob endue this Noble Assembly with wisdom Judgement and unanimity in their Councils, and may they have the Satisfaction to see that their present toil and labour for the wellfair of the united States may be approved of Through all the world and perticular by the united States of america, is the ardent prayer of Sires

Your Most devoted obed. Servant

Jonas Phillips

# LEVI SHEFTALL TO GEORGE WASHINGTON

May 6th 1789

General George Washington resident of the United States

Sir, - We have long been anxious of congratulating you on your appointment by unanimous approbation, to the Presidential dignity of this country, and of testifying our unbounded Confidence in your integrity and unblemished virtue. Yet, however exalted the station you now fill, it is still not equal to the merit of your heroic services through an arduous and dangerous conflict which has embosomed you in the hearts of our citizens.

Our eccentric situation added to a diffidence founded on the most profound respect has thus long prevented our address, yet the delay has realized anticipation, giving us an opportunity of presenting our grateful acknowledgments for the benediction of Heaven, through the magnanimity of Federal influence and the equity of your administration.

Your unexampled liberality and extensive philanthropy have dispelled that cloud of bigotry and superstition which has long as a veil shaded religion, unriveted fetters of enthusiasm, enfranchised us with all the privileges and immunities of free citizens, and initiated us into the grand mass of legislative mechanism.

By example, you have taught us to endure the ravages of war with manly fortitude, and to enjoy the blessings of peace with reverence to the Deity and benignity and love to our fellow creatures.

May the Great Author of the world grant you all happiness, - an uninterrupted series of health - addition of years to the number of your days, and a continuance of guardianship to that freedom which under the auspices of heaven your magnanimity and wisdom have given these states.

LEVI SHEFTALL,

President.

In behalf of the Hebrew Congregation.

# GEORGE WASHINGTON TO THE SAVANNAH, GEORGIA, HEBREW CONGREGATION

June 14, 1790

Gentlemen,

I thank you with great sincerity for your congratulations on my appointment to the office, which I have the honor to hold by the unanimous choice of my fellow-citizens: and especially for the expressions which you are pleased to use in testifying the confidence that is reposed in me by your congregation.

As the delay which has naturally intervened between my election and your address has afforded an opportunity for appreciating the merits of the federal-government, and for communicating your sentiments of its administration—I have rather to express my satisfaction than regret at a circumstance, which demonstrates (upon experiment) your attachment to the former as well as approbation of the latter.

I rejoice that a spirit of liberality and philanthropy is much more prevalent than it formerly was among the enlightened nations of the earth; and that your brethren will benefit thereby in proportion as it shall become still more extensive. Happily the people of the United States of America have, in many instances, exhibited examples worthy of imitation—The salutary influence of which will doubtless extend much farther, if gratefully enjoying those blessings of peace which (under favor of Heaven) have been obtained by fortitude in war, they shall conduct themselves with reverence to the Deity, and charity towards their fellow-creatures.

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land—whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation—still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.

G. Washington



# MOSES SEIXAS TO GEORGE WASHINGTON

Sir:

Permit the children of the stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person and merit, and to join with our fellow-citizens in welcoming you to Newport.

... Deprived as we hitherto 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 base is philanthropy, mutual confidence and public virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the great God, who rules in the armies of the heavens and among the inhabitants of the earth, doing whatever seemeth to Him good.

For all the blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal and benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the Ancient of days, the great Preserver of men, beseeching Him that the angels 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 honors, 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 17, 1790.

Moses Seixas, Warden

# GEORGE WASHINGTON TO THE HEBREW CONGREGATION IN NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

Newport, R.I.,

August 18, 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 a 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.

Go. Washington

# GEORGE WASHINGTON TO THE HEBREW CONGREGATIONS OF PHILADELPHIA, NEW YORK, CHARLESTON, AND RICHMOND

Philadelphia

December 13, 1790

Gentlemen,

The liberality of sentiment toward each other which marks every political and religious denomination of men in this Country, stands unparalleled in the history of Nations. The affection of such people is a treasure beyond the reach of calculation; and the repeated proofs which my fellow Citizens have given of their attachment to me, and approbation of my doings form the purest source of my temporal felicity. The affectionate expressions of your address again excite my gratitude, and receive my warmest acknowledgments.

The Power and Goodness of the Almighty were strongly Manifested in the events of our late glorious revolution; and his kind interposition in our behalf has been no less visible in the establishment of our present equal government. In war he directed the Sword; and in peace he has ruled in our Councils. My agency in both has been guided by the best intentions, and a sense of the duty which I owe my Country: and as my exertions have hitherto been amply rewarded by the Approbation of my fellow Citizens, I shall endeavour to deserve a continuance of it by my future conduct.

May the same temporal and eternal blessings which you implore for me, rest upon your Congregations.

Go. Washington.

# MANUEL JOSEPHSON TO GEORGE WASHINGTON

December 13, 1790

Sir:-

It is reserved for you to unite in affection for your character and person every political and religious denomination of men; and in this will the Hebrew congregations aforesaid yield to no class of their fellow- citizens.

We have been hitherto prevented by various circumstances peculiar to our situation from adding our congratulations to those which the rest of America have offerd on your elevation to the Chair of the Federal governmt. Deign then illustrious Sir, to Accept this our homage.

The wonders which the Lord of Hosts hath worked in the days of our Forefathers, have taught us, to observe the greatness of His wisdom and His might throughout the events of the late glorious revolution; and while we humble ourselves at His footstool in thanksgiving and praise for the blessing of His deliverance; we acknowledge you, the Leader of American Armies, as his chosen and beloved servant; But not to your sword alone is present happiness to be ascribed; that, indeed, opened the way to the reign of Freedom, but never was it perfectly secure, till your hand gave birth to the Federal Constitution, and you renounced the joys of retirement to seal by your administration in Peace what you had achieved in war.

To the eternal God, who is thy refuge, we commit in our prayers the care of thy precious life; and when, full of years, thou shalt be gathered unto thy people, thy righteousness shall go before thee, and we shall remember, amidst our regret, "that the Lord hath set apart the godly for himself," whilst thy name and thy virtues will remain an indelible memorial on our minds.

Manuel Josephson.

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# KEY CONCEPTS & TERMS

## **Ashkenazi / Ashkenazim (pl.)**

Jews from Eastern France, Germany, and Eastern Europe and their descendants

## **Brit**

Hebrew for “covenant”

## **D’var Torah**

A talk or discourse exploring a section of Scripture, typically the weekly Torah portion

## **Ger / Gerim (pl.)**

Hebrew for “stranger.” In the Hebrew Bible, the term typically refers to a resident alien

## **Halacha / Halachic**

The body of rituals and practices that make up Jewish law / of or pertaining to Jewish law

## **Hazzan / Hazaznim (pl.)**

A professional cantor or member of the congregation who leads a synagogue in prayer

## **Humash**

The first five books of the Hebrew Bible; the Five Books of Moses

## **Huppah**

The wedding canopy under which a Jewish groom and bride stand during the wedding ceremony

## **Ketubah**

The Jewish marriage contract

## **Kever**

Hebrew for “grave”

## **Kiddush**

The prayer recited over wine sanctifying the *Shabbat* (see below) or a festival

## **Kiddushin**

Betrothal; the first part of the Jewish wedding ceremony, which creates a legal relationship between bride and groom

## **Malchut / Melech / Melech Elyon**

Hebrew for kingship/king/the (Divine) King on High

## **Matzeva**

The tombstone marking a Jewish grave

## **Mikveh**

A ritual bath used for *halachic* (see above) purification. It is generally used in conversion rituals for men and women as well as by women after the traditional period of sexual separation during their menstrual cycles

## **Minha**

The afternoon prayer service

## **Minyan**

The quorum necessary to recite certain prayers, traditionally consisting of ten adult Jewish men

**Nisuin**

The second part of the Jewish marriage ceremony, during which the *Sheva Brachot* (see below) are recited

**Parnas**

The president or trustee of a *Sepharadi* (see below) synagogue

**Pesach / Passover / Erev Pesach**

The festival marking the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. “*Erev Pesach*” refers to the eve of the holiday

**Pirkei Avot**

A tractate of the Talmud (see below) devoted to the wisdom and advice of the great rabbis of the Talmudic era

**Posek**

A decisor of Jewish law; a legal scholar who decides on *Halacha* (see above) when a new situation arises

**Seder**

The family home ritual and festive meal conducted as part of the observance of Passover (see above).

**Sefer Devarim**

The Book of Deuteronomy

**Sefer Shmuel**

The Book of Samuel

**Sepharadi / Sepharadim (pl.)**

Jews from Spain, Portugal, North Africa, the Middle East and their descendants

**Shabbat / Shabbos**

The Jewish Sabbath, which occurs from nightfall Friday to nightfall Saturday

**Sheva Brachot**

The seven blessings recited during the *Nisuin* (see above) portion of the Jewish wedding ceremony

**Shiva Asar b'Tammuz**

The fast that occurs on the 17 of the Jewish month of *Tammuz*; it commemorates the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem by the Romans

**Shohet**

A kosher slaughterer

**Shtar**

A Jewish legal contract

**Talmud**

The central collection of the Jewish oral tradition interpreting the Torah

**Toshav / Toshavim (pl.)**

A resident or resident alien

**Yamim Noraim**

The Days of Awe or High Holidays; can refer to the holidays of *Rosh Hashanah* (Jewish New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Repentance) or the period of ten days including those holidays known as the Ten Days of Repentance

**Yiddish**

The historic language of *Ashkenazi* Jews (see above), drawn from German, Hebrew, Aramaic, and several other languages

# TIMELINE OF EVENTS

PAST

- 1654 ○ Establishment of Congregation Shearith Israel
- 1736 ○ Jonas Phillips is born in Germany **(Lecture 1)**
- 1756 ○ Jonas Phillips arrives in Charleston, South Carolina **(Lecture 1)**
- 1762 ○ Jonas Phillips marries Rebecca Mendez Machado **(Lecture 1)**
- 1775 ○ Battle of Lexington and Concord
- 1776 ○ Thomas Paine publishes *Common Sense* **(Lecture 3)**  
 July 2 | The Second Continental Congress votes to declare independence **(Lectures 1 & 2)**  
 July 4 | The Second Continental Congress votes to adopt the Declaration of Independence & forms a committee to design a national seal **(Lecture 2)**  
 July 28 | Jonas Phillips writes to Gumpel Samson, enclosing a copy of the Declaration of Independence **(Lecture 1)**  
 The British take control of New York & Shearith Israel flees to Philadelphia **(Lecture 1)**
- 1781 ○ The Battle of Yorktown
- 1783 ○ The Treaty of Paris is signed, officially ending the Revolutionary War
- 1787 ○ Rachel Phillips marries Michael Levy. Benjamin Rush attends **(Lectures 1, 4 & 8)**  
 The Constitutional Convention convenes in Philadelphia **(Lectures 1 & 5)**  
 Jonas Phillips writes to the Constitutional Convention **(Lecture 1)**  
 Pennsylvania ratifies the Constitution **(Lecture 5)**
- 1788 ○ Philadelphia's Jews participate in a parade celebrating the ratification of the Constitution **(Lecture 5)**  
 New York postpones a parade supporting the Constitution due to the fast of the 17 of *Tammuz* **(Lecture 5)**  
 New York ratifies the Constitution **(Lecture 5)**
- 1789 ○ George Washington inaugurated. Gershom Mendes Seixas participates in the inaugural procession **(Lecture 6)**  
 Representatives Elias Boudinot & Roger Sherman propose a national day of thanksgiving to God **(Lecture 5)**  
 Washington issues first Thanksgiving Proclamation **(Lecture 5)**
- 1790 ○ May | The Jewish community of Savannah, GA, writes a letter of congratulations to George Washington **(Lecture 6)**  
 June | Washington replies to the Jewish community of Savannah, GA **(Lecture 6)**  
 August | George Washington visits the Jewish congregation in Newport, RI and receives their letter of congratulations. Washington writes a response **(Lecture 6)**  
 December | Manuel Josephson presents George Washington with a letter of congratulations from the Jewish communities of Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, and Richmond. Washington writes back **(Lecture 6)**
- 1793 ○ Jonas Phillips refuses to testify in court on the Jewish Sabbath **(Lecture 1)**
- 1797 ○ John Adams becomes President of the United States **(Lecture 7)**
- 1801 ○ Thomas Jefferson becomes President of the United States **(Lecture 7)**
- 1812 ○ Adams & Jefferson reconcile and renew their correspondence **(Lecture 7)**
- 1813 ○ President James Madison appoints Mordecai Manuel Noah as Consul to Tunis **(Lecture 7)**
- 1816 ○ Mordecai Manuel Noah is removed from his position as Consul to Tunis **(Lecture 7)**
- 1818 ○ Mordecai Manuel Noah delivers address at dedication of Shearith Israel's new building and sends a copy of the address to John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison **(Lecture 7)**  
 Adams & Jefferson reply to Mordecai Manuel Noah **(Lecture 7)**
- 1819 ○ March | Adams writes to Mordecai Manuel Noah, endorsing the idea of Jewish sovereignty in Israel **(Lecture 7)**
- 1825 ○ Mordecai Manuel Noah acquires land in New York to serve as a Jewish colony—Ararat **(Lecture 7)**
- 1826 ○ July 4 | Adams and Jefferson pass away **(Lecture 7)**
- 1834 ○ Uriah Phillips Levy purchases & begins restoring Monticello **(Lectures 1 & 8)**
- 1839 ○ Rachel Phillips Levy passes away and is buried on the grounds of Monticello **(Lectures 1 & 8)**
- 1879 ○ Jefferson Levy buys Monticello **(Lectures 1 & 8)**
- 1923 ○ Jefferson Levy sells Monticello to the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation **(Lecture 8)**

PRESENT



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The Tikvah Fund is a philanthropic foundation and ideas institution committed to supporting the intellectual, religious, and political leaders of the Jewish people and the Jewish state. Tikvah runs and invests in a wide range of initiatives in Israel, the United States, and around the world, including educational programs and fellowships. Publications supported by Tikvah include the *Jewish Review of Books*, *Mosaic*, *Mida*, *Hashiloach*, *Tzarich Iyun*, and Princeton University's Library of Jewish Ideas.

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