

## Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island

*August 18, 1790*

### INTRODUCTION

In the first two years of his presidency, George Washington, an Episcopalian, wrote over a dozen letters to various religious congregations—including several Protestant sects, Catholics, and two Jewish congregations—thanking them for their good wishes. In the letter to the Newport Hebrew congregation, at the time the largest community of Jewish families in America, President Washington grounds America's religious and civil liberties in natural rights, and not mere toleration. Further promoting national unity, he adds his own allusions to the Old Testament.

For Washington, dedication to natural rights and common citizenship demands more than mere "indulgence of one class of people" toward those of different faiths. America does not merely offer toleration, which is at the discretion of those in power, but a higher stan-

dard of good citizenship based on common embrace of natural rights. The bonds of common citizenship—as he would elaborate in his Farewell Address—involve mutual duties that stem from these universal rights. In contrast to the approach of contemporary multiculturalism, Washington sees a diversity of faiths arising from a unity of citizenship.

There are, of course, limits to the free exercise of religion. The federal government requires "that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens." Thus one cannot invoke religious liberty to break the law. This would violate the rule of law, which derives from natural rights. But within the confines of the law, all citizens have the same right of conscience.

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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