

This week marks the 220th anniversary of a remarkable interaction between the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island, and President George Washington. Recalcitrant Rhode Island finally ratified the Constitution in 1790 and that summer, President visited the state. Upon entry into Newport, the President received addresses from various delegations, among those being the Jewish community. Jews first came to Newport in the mid-seventeenth century and the community was among the largest Jewish communities at the time of the Revolution. Its synagogue was dedicated in 1763, the oldest existing synagogue in the United States – it is well worth a visit.

The address of Moses Seixas on behalf of the congregation was not a mere welcome. He noted discrimination against Jews. (Several leading members had been denied citizenship by Rhode Island.) He goes on to praise the United States for affording liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. Seixas concludes by a biblical reference that is related to where we are today in our reading of the Torah. He notes a parallel between the wanderings of the Jewish people and entry into the promise land with Washington's life. He then compares Washington to Joshua, not Moses, for Washington has been victorious as General and now is President of the new nation – in effect he has entered the promise land. Seixas closes with a prayer that Washington “when like Joshua full of days and full of honor, you are gathered to your Fathers, may you be admitted into the Heavenly Paradise....”

Washington's subsequent response is remarkable for it is a ringing affirmation of religious toleration and tracks much of the language of the Jewish communities' address. “All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.” However, he goes further:

“It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was an 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.”

After thanking the Jewish community for its praises, the President offers his own prayer for the Jewish people – a prayer that still holds meaning:

“May the Children of the Stock of Abraham (the phrase Seixas had used), 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.”

With a universal prayer, President Washington concludes his address:

“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.”

And let us say: Amen.

Composed by: Michael Churgin

Blessing theme: The Jews and George Washington