

God's Providence and the United States

A Thanksgiving Reader on Judaism and the American Idea

Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveichik

Director, Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University
Rabbi, Congregation Shearith Israel

A miracle occurred, and they were able to light from the flask of oil for eight days. The next year, they established and made it a holiday, with thanksgiving and praise. –Shabbat 21b

*Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be—that we may then all unite in him our sincere and humble thanks...
–George Washington, Thanksgiving Proclamation, 1789*

Introduction

Much has been made in the media of the fact that the American holiday of Thanksgiving occurs this year on what is, for Jews, the first day of Chanukah. While this has provided much fodder for humorous remarks about "Thanksgivikah," in fact, the convergence of calendars ought to inspire us to ponder how the Jewish approach to expressing thanks and gratitude to God may have impacted America millennia later. As millions of Americans prepare to observe Thanksgiving, The Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought presents this essay, and the sources that follow, to help provide a framework for reflecting on the American holiday that is upon us, and on the Jewish ideas that may have inspired it.

America, the *Korban Todah*, and the Origins of Thanksgiving

Any Jewish analysis of Thanksgiving must certainly begin with the *korban todah*, the sacrifice brought as an offering of thanks to God. Ostensibly a *shelamim* like any other, the *todah* is mainly distinguished by the bread that is brought and eaten alongside it: three forms of unleavened matza—10 each—and 10 loaves of chametz. As Vayikra prohibits the offering of chametz on the *mizbeach* itself, the inclusion of chametz in a sacrificial ritual has intrigued many *meforshim*, from Ramban to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. One very interesting approach to the *todah* has been offered by Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, who explained that unleavened bread “represents a station in mid-

process, before the end result is achieved. It represents a deficiency that is waiting for completion.” Chametz, then, represents the conclusion of a process. The one communal *korban* that utilizes leaven is the *shte ha-lekhem* of Shavuot; this, he argues, embodies the completion of the seven-week journey from Pesach to *kabbalat Ha-Torah*. He further suggests that if the sole individual offering in which chametz is included is the *todah*, it is because it serves as a symbol of the salvation that follows distress:

*An offering of thanksgiving is brought by a person who faced some danger or predicament and was delivered from it. Therefore, when he is saved, it is indeed proper that his offering include both chametz loaves and matzot. The matzot symbolize the trouble that he was in, the bitter cry that he uttered, and the process of redemption from that predicament to an open space of relief. The chametz represents the completion of his deliverance and his current state of tranquility; it is an expression of reaching the end of this particular road, the attainment of peace and satisfaction.*²⁴

It is with this in mind that Rabbi Bin-Nun further explores the three sets of matza included in the *todah*. The halakha distinguishes four cases of divine salvation in which one is required to offer this *korban*. All are derived from a prayer of thanksgiving contained in the 107th chapter of Tehillim. The *perak* begins with the exclamation, “Give praise unto God, for He is good, and His mercies endure forever.” The psalm then delineates situations in which individuals find themselves in various forms of distress: those who have “wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle; (107:4)” those who “suffered affliction; (107:18)” the “prisoners suffering in iron chains; (107:10)” and those “went out on the sea in ships. (107:23)” The halakha thus distinguishes those who survived a journey through the dessert or the sea; those who were released from prison; and individuals who survived an illness. In describing each of these crises, Tehillim depicts individuals who find themselves mired in distress, turning to God in prayer, experiencing salvation, and responding with joyous thanksgiving: “Let them give thanks to God for his loving kindness, and for his wonderful works before the sons of men.” Rabbi Bin-Nun suggests, in the spirit of *derush* (homily), that the three types of matza are

. . . parallel to the three stages that precede the thanksgiving: the stages of distress, crying out, and deliverance . . . Along with the matzot, this offering also includes the loaves of chametz, which correspond to the fourth stage—the singing of thanks to the Master of the world Who redeems and saves—for having brought this person to his state of tranquility.

With the destruction of the Mikdash, the concept of the *todah* endures in the *birkat hagomel*, which, according to the halakha, is pronounced for the same four cases of salvation seen in Tehillim 107. It is this halakha of *berakhot* that brings us to one of the origins of the American Thanksgiving.

The Pilgrims and the Rambam

Perhaps the most famous figure to arrive in North America on the *Mayflower* was William Bradford, who ultimately became the governor of Plymouth colony. His own account of the Pilgrim journey and of the first years in America, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, emphasizes that he and

²⁴ "On Chametz and Matzah," www.vbm-torah.org/pesach/chametz.htm.

his compatriots were obligated by scripture to thank God for their endurance. In so doing, he cites the 107th Psalm:

*May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: "Our fathers were Englishmen which **came over this great ocean**, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and he heard their voice, and looked on their adversity, etc. **Let them therefore praise the Lord, because he is good, and his mercies endure forever.** Yea, let them which have been redeemed of the Lord, show how he hath delivered them from the hand of the oppressor. **When they wandered in the desert wilderness** out of the way, and found no city to dwell in, both hungry, and thirsty, their soul was overwhelmed in them. **Let them confess before the Lord loving kindness, and his wonderful works before the sons of men.** (emphasis added)*

Strikingly, the central motif of Bradford's gratitude to God is the very same *perek* in the Tanakh—the 107th Psalm—that serves for Jews as the scriptural source for the halakhic notion of Thanksgiving. In his book *Exodus from Babylon: The Mayflower Pilgrims and Their World*, Nick Bunker notes that sections of the 107th Psalm were recited in a prayer uttered by the Pilgrims upon arriving in America. Bunker further points out that the connection between this *perek* and the Thanksgiving story is more profound than that. Incredibly, the Bible that Bradford bore with him across the ocean to the Americas contained a commentary that included the Jewish concept of *birkat hagomel*. Written by the Puritan scholar Henry Ainsworth, the commentary cites as a gloss on Psalm 107 a Jewish law of *berkahot*:

And from this Psalme, and this verse of it, the Hebrues have this Canon; Foure must confess (unto God): The sick, when he is healed; the prisoner when he is released out of bonds; they that goe down to sea, when they are come up (to land); and wayfaring men, when they are come to the inhabited land. And they must make confession before ten men, and two of them wise men, Psal. 107. 32. And the manner of confessing and blessing is thus; He standeth among them and blesseth the Lord, the King eternal, that bounteously rewardeth good things unto sinners, etc. Maimony in Misn. Treat. Of Blessings, chap. 10, sect. 8.

This "Maimony" cited is Maimonides, and the work being referenced is his *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Berakhot*, delineating the four cases of salvation for which one is obligated to express public thanksgiving to the Almighty:

There are four who are required to express thanks: an ill person who has been healed, a prisoner who was released from prison, sea travelers that reached the shore and travelers who reach a settlement. They must express thanks in front of ten, two of whom are scholars . . . How does one express thanks and what blessing should one recite? He stands among them and recites "Blessed are You, Lord our God, Master of the Universe Who provides goodness to those who are undeserving, Who has granted me all of the good." All of the listeners say "[He Who] provided you good should continue to provide for you forever.

Hilkhot Berakhot 10:8

ארבעה צריכין להודות, חולה שנתרפא, וחבוש שיצא מבית האסורים, ויורדי הים כשעלו, והולכי דרכים כשיגיעו לשוב, וצריכין להודות בפני עשרה ושנים מהם חכמים . . . וכיצד מודה וכיצד מברך, עומד ביניהן ומברך, ברוך אתה יי' אלהינו מלך העולם הגומל לחייבים טובות שגמלני כל טוב, וכל השומעין אומרים שגמלך טוב הוא יגמלך סלה.
הלכות ברכות י:ח

That Bradford chose the 107th Psalm as the source of Puritan gratitude to God cannot be a coincidence, and it is not too much of a leap to draw an intellectual link between the *todah* and the Thanksgiving that we know today. As Rabbi Moshe Sokolow notes in a wonderful essay on this link, this “vestige of Jewish influence on the religious mores of the U.S. is worth our acknowledgment and contemplation—and, of course, our thanksgiving.”²⁵

Washington’s Thanksgiving: An Acknowledgement of *Hashgacha*

The origins of Thanksgiving, then, can perhaps first be found in the Jewish obligation, derived from the Tanakh, to recognize Providence. With the birth of the United States, Americans extended this concept by comparing their own suffering and salvation as a nation with those experienced in the Tanakh by the people of Israel.

In 1774, the Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. A proposal that the delegates begin with prayer met with an objection from John Jay, later the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who pointed to the deep religious divisions among those present. Then Samuel Adams stood up and said that he would hear a prayer from “any gentleman of piety and virtue” who was also “a friend to his country.” A clergyman invited to lead the prayer read the 35th Psalm, in which *David Ha-Melekh* seeks the protection of God:

1 A Psalm of David. Strive, O LORD, with them that strive with me; fight against them that fight against me. 2 Take hold of shield and buckler, and rise up to my help. 3 Draw out also the spear, and the battle-axe, against them that pursue me; say unto my soul: 'I am thy salvation.'

Psalms 35:1-3

א לדוד ריבה ה' את יריבי
לחם את לחמי. ב החזק מגן
וצנה וקומה בעזרתי. ג והרק
חנית וסגר לקראת רדפי אמר
לנפשי ישעתך אני.
תהלים לה:א-ג

That evening, John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail:

I never saw a greater effect on an Audience. Who can realize the emotions with which they turned imploringly to heaven for divine interposition and aid. It was enough to melt a heart of stone. It seems as if heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read that day. . . I must beg of you to read that Psalm.

Commenting on this story and others like it, the theologian Michael Novak notes that the sharp denominational divisions among colonial Americans were precisely what made the text of the Hebrew Bible into the central language of the American “metaphysic; the background to the American vision of history and the destiny of humanity.” It was the biblically informed sense of a providential mission, derived from a comparison to the people of Israel, that would enable Americans to overcome their differences and bind their individual selves to a common destiny. Immediately following the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, two of the most famous Founding Fathers suggested that Israelite images of salvation serve as the seal of the nascent nation. Benjamin Franklin advocated that America be forever symbolized by a picture of

²⁵ "Thanksgiving: A Jewish Holiday After All," *Jewish Ideas Daily*, Nov. 23, 2011. I am indebted to Rabbi Sokolow's article for introducing me to Nick Butler's fascinating thesis, and for its providing the full Ainsworth citation of the Rambam.

"Moses lifting up his wand, and dividing the red sea." Jefferson, in contrast, suggested a seal depicting Israel in the desert, guided by a heavenly cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night. After the remarkable military victories against the British, the comparisons between American and ancient Israel only increased. Ariel Abbot, president of Harvard during the revolution, made the case before the legislature of New Hampshire for the adoption of the Constitution by comparing the colonies to the 12 tribes of Israel, and Washington to Moses, concluding that "we cannot but acknowledge that God hath graciously patronized our cause, and taken us under his special care, as he did his ancient covenant people."²⁶

In this context, the celebration of Thanksgiving in America following the ratification of the Constitution emerged as both a recognition of divine salvation and an expression of gratitude for the freedom of religion that was to be found in America. The 1781 Thanksgiving declaration by the Continental Congress specifically sets out events during the war that were deemed providential, if not miraculous. And in 1789, when Washington issued the first Thanksgiving declaration by an American president, he expressed America's gratitude to God for "the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his Providence which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war and the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed," a reflection of the "civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed."

It was only several months before that, writing to Congregation Mickveh Israel in Savannah, that Washington explicitly linked this providence with the Exodus: "May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivered the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors, planted them in a 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." Washington then concludes with the prayer that Americans of other faiths "participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings" of the Jews. In this way, the comparison to ancient Israel served as a uniting force and provided a conceptual framework in which religious freedom could flourish in America.

Our Freedom in America—And Our Obligations to the *Ribbono Shel Olam*

When the Constitutional Convention met in 1787 in Philadelphia, a local prominent Jew by the name Jonas Phillips wrote a letter to the president of the Convention, George Washington, complaining that all public office holders in Pennsylvania were required to affirm that the New Testament was divinely inspired. This, Phillips wrote, "is absolutely against the religious principle of a Jew, and it is against his Conscience to take any such oath." Phillips then asked that the Convention create a country in which "all religious societies are on an equal footing," meaning where all faiths were able to serve in the legislature while remaining true to their beliefs. Phillips then added that, "the Jews have been true and faithful whigs, & during the late Contest with England they have been foremost in aiding and assisting the states with their lives & fortunes, they

²⁶ For more on this, see my article "Blessed Unions," published in the March 2012 issue of *Commentary*.

have supported the cause, have bravely fought and bled for liberty which they can not Enjoy.” He further requested that the Convention create a government devoid of such injustices. Phillips, in other words, audaciously argued to the most famous man in America, Washington, that if the Jews were not able to serve society without violating their conscience, then they were not truly free, because seeking to serve society is itself part and parcel of the Jewish faith, and at the essence of religious freedom, for Jews, is the ability to be part of general society while remaining dedicated to what makes us different. Fortunately for Phillips—and for us—the Constitution produced by the Convention did indeed prohibit any religious test for public office.

Several years later, Phillips' loyalty to what made him different was put to the test. He was asked to testify on a Saturday in a trial in Philadelphia, as courts were then in session six days a week. Phillips refused, explaining that Saturday was his Sabbath and that true equality demanded he be allowed to obey the dictates of his conscience, the general law notwithstanding. Stanford law professor Judge Michael McConnell has called this case, *Stansbury vs. Marks*, the “first recorded case raising free exercise issues following the adoption of the First Amendment.” The court record reports the following: “In this cause (which was tried on Saturday, the 5th of April), the defendant offered Jonas Phillips, a Jew, as a witness; but he refused to be sworn, because it was his Sabbath. The court, therefore, fined him 10 pounds; but the defendant, afterwards, waiving the benefit of his testimony, he was discharged from the fine.”²⁷

Phillips' form of honoring Shabbat—refusing to testify in civil court—is itself noteworthy. The *minhag* to stand for at least the first part of Kiddush is based on the law that witnesses in Jewish courts stand during testimony.²⁸ In Kiddush, we are called to witness what our Shabbat stands for, the creation of the world, the Torah that reiterated it, and the Jews who are commanded to observe and honor it. To put it another way, Phillips, in refusing to give testimony in a court proceeding, was testifying for and honoring the Shabbat.

Phillips is a role model to us as we give thanks to the *Ribbono Shel Olam* for the existence of America, and for the freedoms that we experience in the United States. Since 2011, the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University has been constructing and presenting seminars and lectures on the subject of “Jewish Ideas and American Democracy.” Our goal is to bring classic Jewish texts into conversation with the foundational works of American political thought. In that spirit, we present both the above small essay and the sources that follow below. If there is a uniquely Jewish way to mark Thanksgiving, it is to reflect on the impact that Judaism has had on this country, the freedom we enjoy therein, and to ponder our own obligation to communicate Jewish ideas to America and to the world: to serve, like Phillips, as witnesses of the Torah and its values in the United States. We at the Straus Center hope that the study of these sources plays a small role in this endeavor.

²⁷ Michael McConnell, “Free Exercise Revisionism and the Smith Decision,” *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 1109-1153.

²⁸ See *Mishnah Berurah* 271:45.

Appendix: A Collection of the Writings Cited in the Essay

[Editor's note: Original spelling and grammar has been preserved.]

The Psalm that United the Continental Congress:

A Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams

September 16th, 1774

Having a Leisure Moment, while the Congress is assembling, I gladly embrace it to write you a Line.

When the Congress first met, Mr. Cushing made a Motion, that it should be opened with Prayer. It was opposed by Mr. Jay of N. York and Mr. Rutledge of South Carolina, because we were so divided in religious Sentiments, some Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Anabaptists, some Presbyterians and some Congregationalists, so that We could not join in the same Act of Worship. Mr. S. Adams arose and said he was no Bigot, and could hear a Prayer from a Gentleman of Piety and Virtue, who was at the same Time a Friend to his Country. He was a Stranger in Phyladelphia, but had heard that Mr. Duche (Dushay they pronounce it) deserved that Character ... Mr. Randolph our President, waited on Mr. Duche, and received for Answer that if his Health would permit, he certainly would. Accordingly next Morning he ... read several Prayers, in the established Form; and then read the Collect for the seventh day of September, which was the Thirty fifth Psalm. You must remember this was the next Morning after we heard the horrible Rumour, of the Cannonade of Boston. I never saw a greater Effect upon an Audience. It seemed as if Heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read on that Morning ...

I must beg you to read that Psalm. ... It will amuse your Friends to read this Letter and the 35th Psalm to them ...

I long to see my dear Family. God bless, preserve and prosper it. Adieu.

John Adams

Proposals for the Seal of the United States

A Letter by John Adams to Abigail Adams

Philadelphia, 14 August, 1776.

THIS is the anniversary of a memorable day in the history of America. A day when the principle of American resistance and independence was first asserted and carried into action. The stamp office fell before the rising spirit of our countrymen. It is not impossible that the two grateful brothers may make their grand attack this very day. If they should, it is possible it may be more glorious for this country, than ever: it is certain, it will become more memorable. Your favors of August 1st and 5th came by yesterday's post. I congratulate you all upon your agreeable prospects. Even my pathetic little hero Charles, I hope, will have the distemper finely. It is very odd that the Doctor cannot put infection enough into his veins; nay, it is unaccountable to me, that he has not taken it the natural way, before now. I am under little apprehension, prepared as

he is, if he should. I am concerned about you, much more. So many persons about you sick, the children troublesome, your mind perplexed, yourself weak and relaxed. The situation must be disagreeable. The country air and exercise, however, will refresh you.

I am put upon a committee, to prepare a device for a golden medal, to commemorate the surrender of Boston to the American arms, and upon another, to prepare devices for a great seal, for the confederated States ...

Doctor F. [Benjamin Franklin] proposes a device for a seal. Moses lifting up his wand, and dividing the red sea, and Pharaoh in his chariot overwhelmed with the waters. This motto. "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."

Mr. Jefferson proposed, The children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night ...

I shall conclude by repeating my request for horses and a servant. Let the horses be good ones. I can't ride a bad horse so many hundred miles. If our affairs had not been in so critical a state at New York, I should have run away before now. But I am determined, now, to stay until some gentleman is sent here in my room, and until my horses come. But the time will be very tedious.

The whole force is arrived at Staten Island.

Proclamation of a Fast Day

Dec. 11, 1776, Continental Congress

Whereas, the war in which the United States are engaged with Great Britain, has not only been prolonged, but is likely to be carried to the greatest extremity; and whereas, it becomes all public bodies, as well as private persons, to reverence the Providence of God, and look up to him as the supreme disposer of all events, and the arbiter of the fate of nations; therefore,

Resolved, That it be recommended to all the United States, as soon as possible, to appoint a day of solemn fasting and humiliation; to implore of Almighty God the forgiveness of the many sins prevailing among all ranks, and to beg the countenance and assistance of his Providence in the prosecution of the present just and necessary war.

The Congress do also, in the most earnest manner, recommend to all the members of the United States, and particularly the officers civil and military under them, the exercise of repentance and reformation; and further, require of them the strict observation of the articles of war, and particularly, that part of the said articles, which forbids profane swearing, and all immorality, of which all such officers are desired to take notice.

It is left to each state to issue out proclamations fixing the days that appear most proper within their several bounds ...

Continental Congress, Thanksgiving Proclamation

By the United States, in Congress Assembled

October 26, 1781

PROCLAMATION.

Whereas it hath pleased Almighty God, the Father of Mercies, remarkably to assist and support the United States of America in their important struggle for liberty against the long-continued efforts of a powerful nation, it is the duty of all ranks to observe and thankfully acknowledge the interpositions of his Providence in their behalf; Through the whole of the contest from its first rise to this time the influence of Divine Providence may be clearly perceived in many signal instances, of which we mention but a few:

In revealing the counsels of our enemies, when the discoveries were seasonable and important, and the means seemingly inadequate or fortuitous.

In preserving and even improving the union of the several states on the breach of which our enemies placed their greatest dependence,

In increasing the number and adding to the zeal and attachment of friends of liberty,

In granting remarkable deliverances and blessings with the most signal success, when affairs seemed to have the most discouraging appearance,

In raising up for us a most powerful and generous ally in one of the first of European Powers,

In confounding the counsels of our enemies and suffering them to pursue such measures as have most directly contributed to frustrate their own desires and expectations: above all,

In making their extreme cruelty to the inhabitants of those states when in their power and their savage devastation of property the very means of cementing our Union and adding vigor to every effort in opposition to them; and as we cannot help leading the good people of these states to a retrospect on the events which have taken place since the beginning of the war so we may recommend in a particular manner to their observation the goodness of God in the year now drawing to a conclusion in which the Confederation of the United States has been completed,

In which there have been so many instances of prowess and success in our armies, particularly in the southern states, where, notwithstanding the difficulties with which they had to struggle, they have recovered the whole country which the enemy had overrun, leaving them only a post or two on or near the sea,

In which we have been so powerfully and effectually assisted by our allies, while in all the unjust operations, the most perfect harmony has subsisted in the allied army: In which there has been so plentiful a harvest, and so great abundance of the fruits of the earth of every kin, as not only enable us easily to supply the wants of our army, but gives comfort and happiness to the whole people,

And in which, after the success of our allies by sea, a general of the first rank with his whole army has been captured by the allied forces under the direction of our commander-in-chief.

It is therefore recommended to the several states to set apart the THIRTEENTH day of DECEMBER next, to be religiously observed as a day of THANKSGIVING and PRAYER; that all the people may assemble on that day with grateful hearts to celebrate the praises of our glorious Benefactor, to confess our manifold sins, to offer up our most fervent supplications to the God of all grace that it may please Him to pardon our offense, and incline our hearts for the future, to keep all His laws, to comfort and relieve all our brethren who are in distress or captivity, to prosper our husbandmen, and give strength to all engaged in lawful commerce; to impart wisdom and integrity to our counselors, judgment and fortitude to our officers and soldiers; to protect and prosper our illustrious ally and favor our united exertions for the speedy establishment of a safe, honorable, and lasting peace, to bless our seminaries of learning, and cause the knowledge of God to cover the earth as the waters cover the seas.

To George Washington from Jonas Phillips, 7 September 1787

From Jonas Phillips

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.—1

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 testament 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 Exceellency 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 Enemys as he has done hereuntofore, May God Extend peace unto the united States—May they get up to the highest Prosperitys—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

Samuel Langdon, The Republic of the Israelites as an Example to the American States

And now, my fellow citizens, and much honored fathers of the State, you may be ready to ask *“To what purpose is this long detail of antiquated history on this public occasion?”* I answer—Examples are better than precepts; and history is the best instructor both in polity and morals. I have presented you with the portrait of a nation, highly favoured by heaven with civil and religious institutions, who yet, by not improving their advantages, forfeited their blessings, and brought contempt and destruction on themselves. If I am not mistaken, instead of the twelve tribes of Israel, we may substitute the thirteen states of the American union, and see this application plainly offering itself, viz.—That as God in the course of his kind providence hath given you an excellent constitution of government, founded on the most rational, equitable, and liberal principles, by which all that liberty is secured which a people can reasonably claim, and you are empowered to make righteous laws for promoting public order and good morals...By this you will increase in numbers, wealth, and power, and obtain reputation and dignity among the nations: whereas, the contrary conduct will make you poor, distressed, and contemptible.

The God of heaven hath not indeed visibly displayed the glory of his majesty and power before our eyes, as he came down in the sight of Israel on the burning mount; nor has he written with

his own finger the laws of our civil polity: but the signal interpositions of divine providence, in saving us from the vengeance of a powerful irritated nation, from which we were unavoidably separated by their inadmissible claim of absolute parliamentary power over us; in giving us a Washington to be captain-general of our armies, in carrying us through the various distressing scenes of war and desolation, and making us twice triumphant over numerous armies, surrounded and captivated in the midst of their career; and finally giving us peace, with a large territory, and acknowledged independence; all these laid together fall little short of real miracles, and an heavenly charter of liberty for these United-States. And when we reflect, how wonderfully the order of these states was preserved when government was dissolved, or supported only by feeble props; with how much sobriety, wisdom, and unanimity they formed and received the diversified yet similar constitutions in the different states; with what prudence, fidelity, patience, and success, the Congress have managed the general government, under the great disadvantages of a very imperfect and impotent confederation; we cannot but acknowledge that God hath graciously patronized our cause, and taken us under his special care, as he did his ancient covenant people.

George Washington, Letter to Congregation Mickveh Israel, Savannah, Georgia

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 the expressions you are pleased to use in testifying the confidence that is reposed in me by your congregation ...

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 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 the favor of heaven) have been attained by fortitude in war, they shall conduct themselves with reverence to the Deity and charity toward their fellow-creatures.

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivered the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors, planted them in a 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 make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people ...

George Washington, Thanksgiving Proclamation

[New York, 3 October 1789]

By the President of the United States of America, a Proclamation.

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor—and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be—That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks—for his kind care and protection of the People of this Country previous to their becoming a Nation—for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his Providence which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war—for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed—for the peaceable and rational manner, in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted—for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed; and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions—to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually—to render our national government a blessing to all the people, by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed—to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shewn kindness unto us) and to bless them with good government, peace, and concord—To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us—and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.

Letter to the Hebrew Congregation at Newport

George Washington

August 18, 1790

Gentlemen:

While I received with much satisfaction your address replete with expressions of esteem, I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you that I shall always retain grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced on 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 were 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 fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.

May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy.

G. Washington