

Commentary

JANUARY 2024 JUDAISM

The Jewish Story Is the American Story

Jewish Commentary

by Meir Y. Soloveichik

ON NOVEMBER 14, DEBORAH LIPSTADT SPOKE BEFORE THE 290,000 ASSEMBLED IN SUPPORT of Israel, and in opposition to Jew-hatred, on the Mall in Washington. In her remarks, the prominent historian of the Holocaust and now the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, made reference to a famous piece of correspondence between George Washington and early American Jewry:



Two hundred and thirty years ago, President George Washington reassured the Jews of Newport that our new nation would give bigotry no sanction and persecution no assistance; his meaning and his message were quite specific. In the United States of America, the bigotry of antisemitism must have no place, no quarter, no haven, no home. Anti-Semitism, or more explicitly, Jew-hatred—the world’s longest, oldest form of prejudice—has pierced and permeated too many countries, too many cultures, faith communities.

George Washington did indeed write these words, emphasizing that America would give “bigotry no sanction and persecution no assistance.” But this was not the first letter that he wrote to American Jews. What’s more, Washington was actually echoing a phrase fashioned by a prominent Jewish leader of the day. Altogether, the story behind Washington’s interaction with early American Jewry is extraordinary, and it is an essential story to tell in the very moment in which American Jewry finds itself.

Washington was sworn into office in New York in April of 1789. Immediately after, leaders from various minority faith communities in America—Baptist, Catholic, Quaker—each sent one letter of congratulations to the president. By contrast, American Jews—numbering perhaps 1,000 in total—sent him three letters and procrastinated in doing so, beginning only a year after his inauguration. This delay, and lack of unity, was a testament to the fact that American Jewry, then as now, had no one organization or position representing it, no chief rabbi or lay leader that spoke in its name.

Washington was no doubt puzzled at the fact that Jewish leaders kept sending him letters. But in the end, we have reason to be grateful for Jewry's failure to unify in this period, as Washington responded to each letter, and his first two responses stand as classics in American civic writing.

The first Jewish community to correspond with the president was that of Savannah; one Levi Sheftall wrote to Washington in June of 1790, glowingly reflecting how “your unexampled liberality and extensive philanthropy have dispelled that cloud of bigotry and superstition which has long, as a veil, shaded religion.” Washington responded in kind, exultantly writing, “I rejoice that a spirit of liberality and philanthropy is much more prevalent than it formerly was among the enlightened nations of the earth.” But then Washington went further, concluding with a scriptural reference, an exegetical interpretation, what Jews would call a *dvar Torah*:



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.

Here, Washington reveals that he was not merely responding to a letter; he was making American Jews feel as if they truly belonged. What he tells them is that he sees the tale of the Exodus and of America as parallel: The God Who performed miracles for Jews in the past is the same Deity Who performed miracles for America in the present. The God Who saved Israel from tyranny saved America from tyranny as well. The Jews were to be welcomed in America not only because of the ideals of equality, but also because of the way in which the Jewish story inspired America itself.

It was only several months later, in August, that Washington visited Newport. There he was welcomed by Moses Seixas, the lay leader of its Jewish community. Seixas wrote to Washington words celebrating the new Constitution:



Deprived as we heretofore 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.
[Emphasis added.]

It was Seixas's words that Washington deliberately echoed in response. "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of," he wrote. Americans of all faiths ought to enjoy equality, and Washington explained why: "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."

The two letters need to be taken in tandem. Washington's words to Newport's Jews express the idea of American equality, but it is Washington's letter to Savannah that reminds us how the Founders revered the Jewish story and sought succor from the Jewish faith. It explains why Jews were so warmly welcomed in America, as well as why so many Americans support Israel today. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reflected, the Founders' reverence for the Hebrew Bible reflects the fact that "Israel, ancient and modern, and the United States are the two supreme examples of societies constructed in conscious pursuit of an idea."

The story of Washington's letters is instructive as American Jews confront the specter of anti-Israel Jew-hate in the United States. It is right to emphasize, as Lipstadt did, that bigotry toward any community in America is un-American, and to cite Washington in making that case. But it is also vital to stress what is also learned from the words that Washington himself composed: the deep and long-lasting bond between Judaism and the American idea, and therefore the deep antipathy of Israel-haters for America.

The pro-Hamas rallies proclaiming their support for jihad are reflecting not only their hatred of Jewry and of Israel, but also their hatred of America itself. The two hatreds are joined; those seeking the destruction of the Jews living "from the river to the sea" instinctively understand that the bond between American and Israel is more than pragmatic, and the rallies' defense of utter evil in the name of "decolonization" reflects a set of ideas proclaiming that America itself is a villain and unworthy of existence. There is a reason why the Jewish gathering on the Mall featured countless American flags, while the mobs in New York, Philadelphia, and the quads of the Ivy League raging "long live the intifada" feature nary a one.

Washington famously concluded his letter to Newport's Jews with the prayer that "the children of the stock of Abraham" dwell in safety and security in America, where "there shall be none to make them afraid." Unfortunately, the children of the stock of Abraham in America *are* afraid, and for good reason. But there is still succor and inspiration to be found: from a Jewry that is experiencing more unity than at most points in American history, and in a vast swath of Americans who understand the bond between the Jewish and American stories. It is this that must be emphasized, as we remind our fellow citizens that what is at stake in this battle is not only the future of American Jewry, but of the American idea—and therefore of America itself.

Photo: AP Photo/Kevin Wolf

We want to hear your thoughts about this article. Click [here](#) to send a letter to the editor.

Meir Y. Soloveichik is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.