

Celebrating Washington's Birthday: Founders Matter

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Although we celebrated on Monday, George Washington would be 287 years young today, February 22. The meaning of President's Day is rather obscured by its being assigned a roving date on a Monday, and few of us consider President Washington, President Lincoln, or others whom the holiday is meant to honor. Tonight, I would ask us to consider the first President's importance to us as Americans and as Jews. This week's Torah portion even speaks to the matter.

President Washington's "Letter to the Jews of Newport" is critical to understanding American Jewish history. The President visited Newport, Rhode Island in August, 1791, in the midst of his campaign seeking adoption of what would become the Bill of Rights in our U.S. Constitution. Among the dignitaries invited to address the President in Newport was "Moses Seixas, one of the officials of Yeshuat Yisrael, the first Jewish congregation [there]." Seixas spoke of the harsh history of the Jewish people, in contrast to the condition then current in Newport: "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."ⁱ

When the President returned to the capitol, he wrote to thank his Newport hosts, beginning with the Jewish community in a letter penned on August 21, 1790. The history of the Jewish community of Newport teaches: "Washington's commitment to religious liberty, the involvement of all the people in the new democracy and the campaign for passage of the Bill of Rights combined on that August day in Newport."ⁱⁱ Borrowing a key phrase from Seixas's speech, President Washington wrote: "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."ⁱⁱⁱ

Jews have thrived in the United States as in no land of our previous sojourns outside the Land of Israel. Yes, antisemitism has reared its ugly head in this country – including most recently, in the deadliest anti-Semitic killing in American history. However, one cannot compare even the worst times for Jews in the United States to the persecution, expulsions, and genocide that our people faced in the Old World for 1900 years. By clearly expressing himself on the matter of religious

liberty, President Washington set a precedent that only a founder can. By contrast, imagine America of the last 243 years had our first President been as committed to racial equality as he was to religious equality.

President Washington is also credited with establishing a custom that presidents serve no more than two terms. Historian Mary Stockwell has written, “Washington was well aware that he had been given the power to shape the American presidency... Washington believed that the precedents he set must make the presidency powerful enough to function effectively in the national government, but at the same time these practices could not show any tendency toward monarchy or dictatorship.”^{iv}

Many people consider Washington’s decision not to seek a third term to be his most important step toward accomplishing that latter goal. He would not be a king or a dictator, but a president, in a constitutional republic, with significant but limited power, and only for a period of time. While Presidents Grant and Theodore Roosevelt would unsuccessfully attempt to secure third terms, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt would uniquely be elected to four terms as President, Congress and the states would ultimately establish Washington’s founding precedent in the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting presidents from serving more than two terms.

Not everybody is meant to be a founder. In fact, in this week’s Torah portion, the greatest leader in the history of the Jewish people, Moses, explicitly opts out of being the first Jew. God is angry with the Children of Israel, who have built and worshiped the Golden Calf in Moses’s absence. God proposes to destroy the people, “and make of you [Moses] a great nation.”^v Moses begs God to forgive the people, admonishing God to recall an earlier promise: “Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring the whole land of which I spoke to possess forever.”^{vi}

Moses’s response may be viewed as a plea that God forgive the people, which it certainly is. At the same time, Moses insists that his role is different from that of our founders, who first came to know and serve God. Moses is a leader of an already-established nation. He has been charged to lead the people to freedom and to teach them Torah. Moses embraces those roles – like Abraham Lincoln, “the Great Emancipator,” who was not eager to be a founder, to establish a new nation, relieved of the rebellious slave-holding states, but was determined instead to reunite and refine the nation he inherited.

None of us is a Moses or George Washington, Abraham, Sarah, or Abraham Lincoln. Still, each of us has an important role to play in this life, a significant opportunity to be God’s partners in continuing creation. May each of us, like the “Father of our Nation,” our founding President, examine our role and resolve to fulfill it in the most productive, meaningful, and liberating way we can. Let each of us, like Moses, humbly acknowledge the limits of our role, while still finding, expanding, and fulfilling our place in this life.

Amen.

ⁱ “George Washington and his Letter to the Jews of Newport,” accessed on February 21, 2019 at <https://www.tourosynagogue.org/history-learning/gw-letter>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Mary Stockwell, Ph.D., “Presidential Precedents,” accessed on February 21, 2019 at <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/presidential-precedents/>.

^v Exodus 32:10.

^{vi} Exodus 32:13.