

Source C: Jacob Cohen on the Act for the Relief of the Jews in Maryland, 1818

Maryland was one of the states that kept religious requirements for citizens holding public office even after the federal Constitution was adopted, preventing Jews and other religious minorities from office. Jacob Cohen, along with other Jewish citizens of Maryland, worked together for many years for these restrictions to be removed. The following source is an excerpt from a letter that Cohen wrote in 1818 to state delegate Ebenzer S. Thomas about the efforts to pass a piece of legislation known as the "Jew Bill," which would allow Jews to hold public office in Maryland. The bill eventually passed in 1826 with the help of delegate Thomas Kennedy, who is named in the letter below. Cohen was elected the same year to the Baltimore City Council.

Dear Sir:

- 1 Noticing the proceedings of the present legislature of [Maryland], I observe a committee has been appointed in the **house of Delegates** to bring in a **Bill** "to extend to persons professing the Jewish Religion the same civil privileges that are enjoyed by other religious sects" and that yourself with Mr. Kennedy, by whom the motion was made, and Mr. Breckenridge compose that committee.
- 2 You cannot be aware Sir from not having felt the pressure of religious intolerance, of the emotions excited in the breast of an **Israelite** whenever the theme of liberty of conscience is **canvassed**. The subject of religion being the nearest and most vital to the soul of every **sectarian**, it awakens every spark of feeling in support of those **unalienable rights** which the very nature of man forbids a transfer. On the question of the extension of religious freedom to any sect or denomination, the Jew feels with **solicitude** for a **Brother sufferer**.
- 3 The grievance complained of and for which **redress** is asked is that part of the Constitution of Maryland, which requires a declaration of belief in the Christian Religion, prevents a Jew accepting any office his fellow men might elect him to or think him deserving the enjoyment of. He is thus **incapacitated** because he cannot **abjure** the principles instilled in him of worshipping the Almighty according to the dictates of his own conscience and take an oath of belief in other tenets, as if such a declaration of Belief made him a better man or one more capable of exercising the duties of the office which the **want** of the declaration would deprive him of because he maintains his unalienable rights with a steadfast and upright hand.

I am, dear sir, yours with great respect,
J.I. Cohen

GLOSSARY

House of Delegates: a group of state representatives

Bill: a proposal for a new law, or to change an existing law

Israelite: a Jew

canvassed: raised as a subject

secretarian: referring to followers of different religions

unalienable rights: rights that cannot be taken away

solicitude: care and concern

Brother sufferer: followers of other religions who are also suffering

redress: to set something right

incapacitated: unable to do something; in this case, unable to take office

abjure: to renounce, to give up

want: lack

1st Read: Read and annotate for any ideas related to **religious liberty**.

2nd Read –Text-Based Questions: Reread the source and answer the following questions to support your understanding.

1. What is the purpose of the bill Cohen describes in paragraph 1?
2. In paragraph 2, how does Cohen describe the feelings a “liberty of conscience” inspires in Jews and other religious people?
3. In the beginning of paragraph 3, what “grievance” does Cohen describe?
4. As paragraph 3 continues, how does Cohen describe the way that Jews are affected by the requirement in the Maryland Constitution?
5. In paragraphs 2 and 3, Cohen mentions “unalienable rights”. What right(s) might he be referring to?

*Disclaimer: For readability and comprehension purposes, ICS has updated the spellings, capitalizations, formatting, and some punctuation in this document to reflect the modern standard. We have shortened the text to help students focus on main ideas. Original conventions can be found in the full primary source document, only available in print: “J. I. Cohen to E. S. Thomas on the Maryland Jew Bill, 1818,” in *American Jewish History: A Primary Source Reader*, eds. Marc Dollinger and Gary Phillip Zola (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2014), 50-51.