

Source B: Exchange between Moses Seixas and George Washington, 1790

*On August 17, 1790, Moses Seixas (pronounced SAY-SHUSS), a leader of the Jewish Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, wrote a letter to George Washington asserting that the United States had been founded on the principle of **religious liberty**, and that Jews – and all people – had the right to all of the same freedoms. Four days later, on August 21, Washington replied. In his response, he expressed America’s commitment to freedom of conscience and **religious liberty** for all.*

Moses Seixas’s Letter to President George Washington

Sir:

- 1 Permit the **children of the stock of Abraham** to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person and merits – and to join with our fellow citizens in welcoming you to Newport.
- 2 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: – deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language equal parts of the great **governmental Machine** – This so ample and extensive **Federal Union** whose basis is philanthropy, mutual confidence and public virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the Great God.
- 3 For all these Blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal and **benign** administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the Ancient of Days, the great preserver of Men.

Done and Signed by order of the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island August 17th, 1790.

GLOSSARY

Children of the stock of Abraham:

Jews

invaluable: extremely important; priceless

bigotry: prejudice against a person or people based on their group identity

persecution: targeting or maintaining hostility towards a person or people based on their identity

governmental Machine:

the government of the United States

Federal Union: referring to the newly established United States

benign: gentle and kind

Ancient of Days: God

George Washington's Response

Gentlemen.

- 1 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 was by 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.
- 2 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 figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid**. 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.

Go: Washington

GLOSSARY

natural rights: rights all people are born with and cannot be taken away; rights that should be protected by the government

demean: to behave or act in a particular way

felicity: happiness

“while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid”: Here, Washington references a Bible verse from the book of Micah, which is part of both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament. The verse describes people living safely in peace and free from violence.

*Disclaimer: For readability and comprehension purposes, ICS has updated the spellings, capitalizations, formatting, and some punctuation in these documents to reflect the modern standard. We have shortened each text to help students focus on main ideas. Please visit the [George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom](https://www.georgewashingtoninstitute.org/religious-freedom) for each of the full letters.

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.

Seixas’s Letter to Washington

1. In paragraph 1, who does the “children of the stock of Abraham” refer to?
2. In paragraph 2, Seixas says that the government to “bigotry gives no sanction” and “persecution no assistance.” In one sentence, explain what this means.
3. According to Seixas, in paragraph 2, who should be able to be part of the “great governmental Machine”?
4. In paragraph 3, what does Seixas hope the Jewish people will enjoy under Washington’s administration?

Washington’s Letter to Seixas and the Newport Congregation

1. In paragraph 1, Washington echoes Seixas’s references to “liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.” What might these terms mean?
2. In paragraph 1, what claim does Washington make about “toleration”?
3. In paragraph 1, what does Washington state is the only thing that the government requires of its citizens to secure its full support?
4. In paragraph 2, what is Washington’s purpose in referencing the biblical passage?