

Religious Freedom Precedent: America's Pro-Jewish Founding Fathers

"The Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation. If I were an atheist, and believed blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations."

These are the words of John Adams, America's second president. His words are expressive of the pro-Jewish sentiment that prevailed among America's Founding Fathers and throughout the nation at the time of its founding. This respect was rooted in their view of history and the positive role they believed the Jews had played in world history.

The Hebrew Influence on Early America

Many of the early immigrants to America considered themselves a second Israel, and England as their Egypt from which they had fled to the New England wilderness to find freedom. It is, therefore, not surprising that they looked to the story of Israel in the Old Testament for guidance and inspiration.

This respect for Old Testament Israel, led to colonial colleges such as Harvard, Yale and Princeton all offering courses in Hebrew. Several students at Yale delivered their commencement speeches in Hebrew. At the time, Hebrew was not offered in any university in England.

In his excellent book, "On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding," the late Michal Novak documents this influence of the Old Testament on America's founding generation. He says,

Practically all American Christians erected their main

arguments about political life from materials in the Jewish Testament. Early American Protestants loved the stories of the Jewish Testament, and from them took many names for their children For all these reasons the language of Judaism came to be the language of the American metaphysic—the unspoken background to a special American vision of nature, history, and the destiny of the human race.

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This love for the Jewish Old Testament was confirmed by a 10-year study to determine where the founders got their ideas for nation building. The study discovered that they quoted the Bible far more than any other source, and they quoted Deuteronomy more than any other biblical book.

It is then not surprising that Jews were welcomed in July Fourth celebrations from the very beginning. Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, was delighted to see a Jewish rabbi given such open acceptance in a July Fourth parade in Philadelphia. Rush, who was a devout Christian, wrote, "The rabbi of the Jews locked in the arms of two ministers of the Gospel was a most delightful sight. There *could* not have been a more happy emblem of that section of the Constitution, which opens all its power and offices alike, not only to every sect of Christians, but to worthy men of every religion."

George Washington's Pro-Jewish Stance

In 1790, George Washington visited the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, where he was warmly received by this Hebrew congregation. In his official welcome, Moses Seixas compared the Revolutionary War to the struggles of ancient Israel and Washington to King David and to Daniel, saying,

With pleasure we reflect on those days—those days of difficulty, & danger when the God of Israel, who delivered David from the peril of the sword, shielded your head in the day of battle: and we rejoice to think, that the same Spirit who rested in the Bosom of the greatly beloved Daniel enabling him to preside over the Provinces of the Babylonish Empire. rests and ever will rest upon you, enabling you to discharge the arduous duties of Chief Magistrate in these States.

Washington was obviously moved by these sentiments and responded that same day with a letter in which he addressed the members of this congregation as “children of the stock of Abraham.” He assured them that life would be different in the new nation for all who had fled religious tyranny. They would not experience mere toleration, he said, for religious toleration would give way to religious liberty.

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He reassured them that because of America’s commitment to religious liberty they could expect to experience the words of the Old Testament prophet, who in Micah 4:4a, NKJV, said, “But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree. And no one shall make *them* afraid.” Washington went on to say,

“For happily the Government of the United States 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.”

Yaari Taal of George Washington University says that Washington’s remarks to this congregation established a precedent for protecting religious liberty and pluralism in the United States that persists to this day.

Antisemitism Is Anti-American

Early America's embrace of the Jewish people resulted in America becoming a haven for persecuted Jews from all over the world. This resulted in America becoming home to the largest Jewish population in the world. This remained true until 2003, when the Jewish population in Israel finally surpassed that in America.

It is, therefore, disheartening to see the antisemitism that has erupted on college campuses and in the large cities of America. Such antisemitism is completely out of sync with America's Founding Fathers. Such Jewish hatred had no place at America's founding and should be given no place in America today. Antisemitism is truly anti-American. {eo}

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Dr. Eddie Hyatt's books on America's overt Christian origins, "1726: The Year that Defined America," "America's Revival Heritage" and others are being widely distributed and are available from Amazon and his website at .