

8-22-2010

Touro Synagogue

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TOURO SYNAGOGUE
August 22, 2010
George Washington's Letter On Religious Liberty

WILLIAM PAUL HAAS

Letter to the President of the United States of America

Sir:

Permit the children of the Stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person & merits - and to join with our fellow citizens in welcoming you to New Port.

With pleasure we reflect on those days- those days of difficulty and 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 in 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.

Deprived as we have heretofore been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now with deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all event 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 everyone 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 e the work of the Great God, who ruleth in the Armies of Heaven, and among the Inhabitants of the Earth doing whatever seemetth him good.

For all the Blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the Ancientof Days, the great Preserver of Men - beseeching him, that the Angel who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised Land may graciously conduct you through the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life - And, when like Joshua full of days and full of honor; you are gathered to your Fathers, may you be admitted unto the Heavenly Paradise to partake of the water of life, and the tree of immortality.

Done and Signed by order of the Hebrew Congregation in New Port, Rhode Island
August 17, 1790
Moses Seixas, Warden

Washington's reply.

To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island

Gentlemen,
[skip paragraphs 1 and 2]

[paragraph 3 and 4 follow] The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of 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 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 would demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

.... 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 everyone 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.

G. Washington

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am deeply honored by the invitation to stand in this holy place and to offer you my reflections on the 63rd rereading of George Washington's letter, and the letter, which prompted his expression from the Congregation Jeshuat Israel.

Washington's letter is certainly of great historical, political, social, legal and economic significance, yet, in the light of Seixas's carefully worded approach to Washington, there is a deeper spiritual significance which is too easily overlooked.

This afternoon I will try to draw a parallel between the spiritual journey of Abraham described in the Book of Genesis and the journey to Newport of the Congregation Jeshuat Israel and the journey that brings us all here today.

And I offer you an analogy, which might be useful. It seems to me that we spend our lives wandering between two horizons. One horizon, like the far edge of the ocean or the desert, lies outside us: the other horizon lies within us. Both horizons lie beyond our reach but they are not illusions. The faster we run in either direction, the horizons recede from us, yet everything we discover on the way in either direction is worth the trouble. The sunlight draws us to the outer horizon, while God, by gentle persuasion, draws us closer to the self that is best known by God alone. On this inner horizon God rests quietly, closer to our real selves than we ever are.

You may have noticed in Moses Seixas's letter the several names of the God of Israel

whom he invokes:

- the Almighty disposer of all events
- the Great God who rules the Armies of Heaven and among the Inhabitants of the earth, doing whatever seems to him good
- “the Ancient of Days, the great preserver of men.”, who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised land and who is asked at the time to graciously conduct Washington through all of the difficulties and dangers of this life.

This letter sets all that follows in the context of a God, the Almighty disposer of all events, who does only good, who rules and who preserves us as He accompanies mankind through the vagaries of human experience.

The first recorded journey began with the call of Yahweh to Abram:” leave your country, your family and your father’s house for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and make your name so famous that it will be used as a blessing.” Abraham came from Mesopotamia where the local religion has been described (Leonard Woolley) as a religion “ not of love, but of fear...fear of beings all-powerful, capricious and unmoral.” Such were the God’s he was called to abandon. But it took a long time for Abraham to fathom the unconditional generosity of the God calling him to leave all that was sacred in his early life and to pursue a most mysterious destination. And the journey, with its twists and turns, its pauses and reversals, was indeed not in a straight line; as if getting on a train with a ticket, a time table and a precise destination.

Toward the end of that journey, God called Abraham a second time to offer his son as a burnt offering on a mountain as yet to be pointed out. Another journey into the unknown and perhaps at that moment unknowable. That tortuous Journey toward the horizon of Mount Moriah has been characterized as the greatest test of courage and faith in human history; the endurance of the greatest agony, when the very promise of God appeared to have been abandoned with the death of Isaac. As the angel of God staid Abraham’s hand in the nick of time to save Isaac, Abraham may have realized that the God who called him out of Mesopotamia to this dramatic ordeal was totally and absolutely different from all the other gods he had known about. This unique divine Being, who simply IS WHO HE IS, gives everything out of love, with no price, no quid pro quo, other than the unconditional surrender to accept all of his the gifts as given.

Allow me here to propose a very personal reflection on the Akedah. Perhaps the sacrifice of Abraham himself on Mount Moriah in total obedience, in place of the sacrifice of Isaac, was the sacrifice God intended all along. Abraham’s total surrender of his own being to the fullness of God’s BEING was a sacrifice indeed. Oddly enough, such obedience seems to many to be the ultimate denial of real freedom, yet to many of us such obedience to The Disposer of all Events is the free acceptance with love and self-confidence, of what is given freely in love. Thus to me Abraham’s journey reaches its destination. Surprisingly, at that moment, the long years of intimate dialogue, give and take and even argument between God and Abraham ended in silence. Genesis records no further exchange between God and Abraham. I suspect that the journey of each of us will end in an awesome silence, such as Abraham experienced at the end of his journey, in

which nothing more needs to be said or can be said, except THANK YOU, I ACCEPT.

The journey of the Sephardic Jews from the cruelty of the inquisition in Spain and Portugal to Holland, then to Curacao in the West Indies, to New Amsterdam and eventually to Newport parallels the journey of Abraham at least in that their obscure destination also was never so clear or specific that all they had to do was to buy a ticket to get there. They had to endure the same twists and turns, pauses and reversals, that Abraham endured: yet, there could be no going back. They sought the freedom to help each other in peace and security to fathom the mystery of God's persistence, not knowing that such a goal of peace and freedom was even possible. They were reluctantly admitted into the colony of New Amsterdam, but on the provision that they would live apart from others, that they would not open shops and that they would not build any house of worship.

Around 1658, when they heard of the strange society emerging in Providence and Rhode Island under the clever influence of Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, John Clarke, William Coddington, and other Baptists and Quakers. The Jewish community was willing to take a chance and to continue further on their journey in the hope that the peace and security they sought was indeed possible in a community of others who shared the same values and who worked together to give shape to the genuine freedom they all sought. It was in their common hope, not put off by their theological differences, that they could learn to live together in a religious harmony that gave the new colony its special place, perhaps, in all of human history. Of course this early hope and the community itself evolved only gradually.

As an example of this evolution, in 1647 the local colonial law provided that "all men may walk as their consciences perswade them, everyone in the name of his God."

John Clarke and Roger Williams, who were expelled from Massachusetts for thinking such revolutionary thoughts, went to England to secure a charter that would guarantee the maximum freedom of religion and of conscience in the new colony. Clarke remained in England for twelve years and, in 1663 succeeded in obtaining from King Charles II the astounding affirmation:

"That our royal will and pleasure is that no person within the said colony at any time hereafter shall be in any way molested, punished or called in question for any differences of opinion in matters of religion.... that all and every person or persons may from time to time and at all times hereafter freely and fully have and enjoy his and their own judgments and consciences in matters of religious concernment".

Could it be that the King's words were actually inspired by Clarke's entreaty? Since it was not the King's habit to dispense such liberal indulgences to the other colonies. In any event, it is quite likely that the royal proclamation proved to be exactly what the Jewish community had so earnestly hoped for. So, fourteen years later, in 1677 after a

brief absence the Jews returned to Newport for good.

I was intrigued to learn of the events that brought Moses Seixas and the Congregation Jeshuat Israel to approach President Washington with their own unique message a century later. In 1790 the Newport Congregation received an invitation to join with the other Hebrew congregations in America in one solemn address to the new president. After careful deliberation the Newport community declined the invitation, so that the congregations of New York, Philadelphia, Richmond and Charleston went ahead and wrote their own letter to Washington. They received a beautiful response expressing his respect and gratitude. Yet, in this exchange there was no mention by these Jewish congregations or in Washington's reply of the profound concern for the full freedom of conscience and religious conviction, which was paramount in the minds of the Newport believers.

Not surprisingly, the Newport Jews faced the issue head on, realizing how powerfully the idea had taken hold in Newport and how valuable it would be to secure the explicit endorsement of the new President of the United States. The "Almighty disposer of all events", in Moses Seixas' reverent term, working with and through those other seekers of genuine freedom brought the community into closer unity with each other and with God's purpose.

Note that many persons and communities were searching for the best way to say clearly and emphatically what exactly it was that they so cherished. In the dialogue in Newport the aspiration gradually took shape, almost as if the refinement of language was the compass by which these very diverse human beings steered a common course. Note too how often in these early formulations religious freedom is coupled with freedom of conscience. For me the most helpful notion of conscience is the personal judgment that it is always better to hold one's self-accountable for the very use of that freedom. I stress this key word and concept - conscience - because for many centuries and even up to the present many religious traditions have stumbled over the notion of conscience or the autonomy of personal moral judgment as somehow hostile to religious orthodoxy. We Christians are no strangers to the tensions between the legitimate claims of conscience and the need for religious coherence or solidarity.

The affirmation of religious and moral autonomy is not easily formulated once and for all. Thus, each generation struggles to rethink exactly what measure of freedom it wants or needs for itself and how to maintain societies, which work to share that gift with the rest of mankind who embrace their responsibility for the gift. Freedom of isolated individual preference does not measure up to the freedom to share accountability with others. This appears to be the kind of shared moral freedom that emerged in the early colonial days in Newport.

In the current controversy about the rights of Muslim citizens of the United States in New York, and also in California, Wisconsin and Tennessee, to express their religious beliefs within the requirements of the law, nothing is more obvious than the need for constant dialogue, definition and redefinition, compromise and negotiation, to bring about the maximum religious understanding that a given community is wise enough to live with. I have no simple solution to the current difficulty, except to invoke the Almighty disposer of all events, the Great God who does whatever seems to him, good, the Ancient of Days, the great preserver of men, to give us the wisdom to find a way at this point on our journey.

And this brings me to my final reflection. Washington's letter to the Congregation Jeshuat Israel was not the last word on the subject of religious freedom, nor is this holy place the end of the journey. It is a place to pause in the presence of God, to be refreshed and then to continue on in the pursuit of what God promises us all. Washington's letter at God's and Warden Seixas' prompting, was an invitation, an exhortation, a command if you will, that we never cease to ponder the point; How really free are we if we are not equally passionate about the freedom of every other person who is willing to hold himself or herself accountable for the use of that freedom.

Thus, with Abraham, we pause in silence in the presence of the "Ancient of Days" for the wisdom we need on the pilgrimage between the outer horizon where we work and endure and the inner horizon where we learn to listen to listen to God and to become wise.