

February 16, 2023

Weekly Message from Rabbi Peltz

On Presidents' weekend, I like to revisit the famous letter written by George Washington to the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island in August of 1790. This letter became well known for its succinct articulation of religious liberty in the new nation of America. Upon receiving a letter of congratulations from the Jewish community of Newport, the new President responded as follows: "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it were 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..."

For 18th century Jewish immigrants from Europe, whose greatest hope was not for freedom, but "toleration," this letter signaled a new paradigm. Washington articulated a vision of an America that would not just tolerate its Jews, it would give them freedom to practice as they wished. This ideal was not just for the Jewish community, but for all people in America. Though we know that this vision has yet to be achieved, it remains the ideal for which we strive. Striving towards it means standing up to the antisemitism and hatred that we see all too frequently in our society. It requires us to continue to work to keep our community strong, safe, and thriving. We do this every day here at TBS, in our schools, our services, our programs, and by living our values. In a time when antisemitism and other forms of hatred persist in our world, this weekend let us spend some time considering the challenge laid out to us by our first President.

Do we give "bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance," regardless of where it comes from? What are we doing to move closer to achieving this vision? And, in the words of our great teacher Hillel, "if not now, when?"