

American Jewish History
Handout - Lesson #2

1. Introduction
2. Communal Power
3. Living in Two Worlds
4. Jewish Presence in the Revolution
5. Making It Personal
6. New Realities
7. Financial Aftermath

Reading #1

“They have no synagogue, which is their own fault; the one element hindering the other in this regard. The German Jews believe themselves entitled to build a Synagogue and are willing to allow the Spanish Jews to use it with them in common; the latter, however, reject any such arrangement and demand the preference for themselves.”

Reading #2

The petition of Isaac Touro, late rector of the Jewish synagogue at Rhode Island, humbly sheweth:

That from the distresses which your petitioner suffered from persecution from his attachment to [His Majesty’s] government, and coming to His Majesty’s troops from Rhode Island to this city [New York], he was so reduced in his circumstances, that had it not been for the humane interference of General [William] Tyrone, General [John\ Marsh, and other respectable persons, he must have sunk under the weight of his affliction and distress;

That from their kind patronage, the bounty of government has been extended to him, and he has made shift to support himself and family;

That the petitioner is now anxiously desirous of removing himself and family to the island of Jamaica, but I incompetent to defray the expenses of his passage, etc.;

That the only resource he has left him is Your Excellency’s humanity and benevolence, in the hope that you will grant him an advance of one twelvemonth’s allowance, which would effectually enable him to accomplish his wishes.

Your petitioner therefore humbly prays that Your Excellency will be favorably pleased to order a twelve month’s allowance to be paid to him, to enable him to remove with his family to the island of Jamaica.

And, as in duty bound, he will every pray....

Isaac Touro New York, 12 December 1782

Reading #3 – Virginia Act for Religious Freedom (1785)

“No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever...but that all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities.”

Reading #4

We the members of the ancient congregation of Israelites, lately return from exile beg leave to welcome your arrival in this city, with our most cordial congratulations.

Society we belong to is but small when compared with other religious societies, yet we flatter ourselves that none have manifested a more zealous attachment to the sacred cause of American in the war with Great Britain. We derived therefore the highest satisfaction from reflecting, that it is pleased the Almighty arbiter of events, to dispose us to take part with the country we lived in, and we now look forward with pleasure to the happy days we expect to enjoy under the Constitution wisely framed to preserve the estimable blessing of civil and religious liberty.

Taught by our Divine Legislator to obey our rulers and prompted there to buy the dictates of our own reason, it will be the anxious endeavor of the members of our current negation to render themselves worthy of these blessings by discharging the duties of good citizens...

Reading #5

*...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 Unites 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.***

It would 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 everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, 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.

George Washington
August 1790

Reading #6

"I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize Man than any other nation...Fate has ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilization.

John Adams

"Jews in America" – Address by Ambassador Max M. Kampelman
Washington, DC, May 14, 2002

Reading #7

Adams wrote of Voltaire, "How is it possible [that he] should represent the Hebrews in such a contemptible light? They are the most glorious nation that ever inhabited this Earth. The Romans and their Empire were but a Bauble in comparison of the Jews. They have given religion to three quarters of the Globe and have influenced the affairs of Mankind more, and more happily, than any other Nation ancient or modern."