

Washington and Jewish Rights

BY RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM

A statue in Chicago has as its central figure General George Washington, who is clasping the hand of Haym Solomon, a Polish Jewish immigrant who is a symbol of the Jewish participation in the American Revolution.

On the pedestal of this monument are inscribed words from a letter which President Washington addressed to the Jewish congregation in Newport, Rhode Island in 1790: "The Citizens of the United States 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."

George Washington's letter was more than a perfunctory reply; it affirmed a basic political doctrine of freedom of conscience and equal rights of citizenship. It assumed particular importance because, even though the Jewish community of early America played a significant role in fighting and helping to finance the American Revolution, in most of the States of the Union the Jews were not yet fully emancipated. By 1776 they were free to exercise their religion and pursue their careers, but they were still excluded from the right to vote or hold public office. In North Carolina, for example, Jacob Henry, a Jew who was elected to the State Legislature, was denied the right to his seat because the State Constitution held that no one was to hold office who shall deny "the being of God or the truth of the Protestant religion."

In the State of Maryland, for example, the constitution required a "declaration of belief in the Christian religion" for holding office. It was not until 1825, as a result of the indefatigable campaign waged by Scotch Presbyterian state senator, Thomas Kennedy, that the so-called "Jew Bill" was passed which abolished the religious test for public office. Similar struggles for political equality were waged by the Jewish community in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey and North Carolina who carried this religious discrimination against Jews well into the 19th century.

In recent months, there have emerged national campaigns for restoring America to the good old days of "a Christian America." The birthday of George Washington is a fitting occasion on which to remind ourselves that if the American Revolution stands for anything it stands for the complete religious and political equality of all its citizens who are full partners in the pluralist American democratic republic.

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