

## **Under Every Vine and Fig Tree: The Episcopal Diocese of Texas Celebrates 250 Years of Religious Freedom**

***“But they shall sit under their own vines  
And under their own fig trees,  
And no one shall make them afraid,  
For the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.”  
– Micah 4:4<sup>1</sup>***

The hand that remembered these words at just such a time as this was none other than our first President, George Washington, writing on August 18, 1790, to the Hebrew Congregation at Newport, Rhode Island.<sup>2</sup> And the promise of those words belongs to every person of faith, and every person of conscience, who has ever called this republic their home.

A few weeks ago, a parishioner sent me Washington’s letter. I reread it again as if for the first time. He wrote encouraging Houston’s interfaith leaders to call public attention to it. He was right to do so. Today, as we approach 250 years of American independence, Washington’s reply to the Newport congregation deserves fresh attention, especially in a city and state as religiously diverse as ours.

### **The Letter’s World**

In 1658, Jews fleeing the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal established a congregation in Newport.<sup>3</sup> They dedicated America’s oldest surviving synagogue, the Touro Synagogue, a Palladian masterpiece designed by Peter Harrison, on the first night of Hanukkah 1763.<sup>4</sup> So, when George Washington passed through Newport after Rhode Island, the last state to hold out, ratified the Constitution, he was welcomed by the synagogue.<sup>5</sup> Moses Seixas, warden of the congregation, addressed the President with a stirring plea: “permit the children of the Stock of Abraham, to approach you, with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person and merits.”<sup>6</sup> Washington’s reply was more than a president’s courtesy. It was what verges on a theological act and perhaps one of the most important ever stated by a sitting president. Washington refused the language of toleration; he insisted that Americans should instead speak of inherent rights. “It is now no more that toleration is spoken of”, he wrote, “as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Why Texas, Why Now?**

Abraham built an altar at the place where he heard God’s promise. Texas is a state where mosques, synagogues, Christian churches and gurdwara sit within five miles of each other. Not

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 4:4 (NSRV)

<sup>2</sup> <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/george-washington-letter-to-the-hebrew-congregation-in-newport-rhode-island-1790>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/places/touro-synagogue.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.jnri.org/about-touro-synagogue>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/touro-synagogue>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mountvernon.org/education/primary-source-collections/primary-source-collections/article/to-the-hebrew-congregation-in-newport-rhode-island>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

every state is so fortunate. This miracle of diverse worship is easy to celebrate; the fact that it has survived so long is cause for vigilance.

Jon Meacham, writing in *American Gospel*, describes it as "perhaps the most brilliant American success."<sup>8</sup> Meacham notes that the founders were much more generous in their understanding of religious pluralism than we typically remember. Washington, though an Episcopalian vestryman, chose an image from the Hebrew prophets for his closing benediction, the vine and the fig tree.<sup>9</sup> It is a vision of peace made so real you can taste the fruit and feel the shade. He chose it because he understood then what we seem in danger of forgetting in our bitter fighting now: The "father of all mercies" is asked to "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."<sup>10</sup> The civic peace of a republic rests upon that confession much more than upon any political party. Religious diversity is a 250-year value worth keeping.

Washington, and Meacham are right. But there is more. After every election cycle, passions and economic interests conspire to reduce our neighbors to their ballot choices. This inheritance, as President Washington reminds us, is one of neighborliness, of rights by virtue of our humanity, and together we should refuse the hatred that comes with sectarianism, religious intolerance, or religious bigotry.

Washington knew this. When he promised that the government "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no sanction" to the Jewish people of Newport, he was issuing a profound promise about the neighborhood of this America the beautiful, about the safety and dignity of the family next door.<sup>11</sup> That makes Washington's choice of closing benediction so startling. He borrowed an image from Micah's Hebrew prophets, the vine and fig tree. It was a confession that the God who scatters light to our paths affirms his children by their generous witness to one another. Texas's vine and fig tree promise still belongs to the whole of our people because we are still that people.

Washington's word meant generous, enlarged, expansive in policy and principle. Washington meant our country was to be spacious enough to include the Quaker, the Catholic, the Jew, and the American skeptic – and everything is bigger in Texas. Such a large heart is valuable and should be protected by equal vigor; and defended when hate attempts to take such generosity away. Washington's theological inheritance, and ours, is the conviction that since the God who creates all human beings in freedom, human beings may live in this country truly free.

### **The Children of Abraham in Texas**

Washington spoke of "the children of the Stock of Abraham."<sup>12</sup> Our state and cities are large enough now that those children of Abraham are Christians, and Jews, and Muslims; and the conversation has multiplied since Washington penned those words. Interfaith life in this great state of Texas is one of the great treasures of our life lived together. We are known to be so friendly that

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<sup>8</sup> Meacham, Jon. *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*. New York: Random House, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/washington-george/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.mountvernon.org/education/primary-source-collections/primary-source-collections/article/to-the-hebrew-congregation-in-newport-rhode-island>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

we always share a table when calamity strikes. There are organizations large and small that have built trust across our state's religious landscape for decades. The root of our generous heart, from which all love is shared across many religions, was familiar to George Washington. Where citizens enjoy liberty of conscience, people of faith become the most reliable citizens a republic can boast. Servant-hearted people whose motive for generosity exceeds mere self-interest.

Jon Meacham writes in *The Soul of America* that our country's story is the story of our better instincts wrestling with our basest instincts, and that our better angels prevail only when ordinary Americans are willing to insist upon them.<sup>13</sup> Texas's religious communities have been insisting on our better angels for generations. You can see them at work in hurricane relief, aid to the immigrant and migrant alike, support for the refugee. In shelters and food banks and homeless ministry, tutoring programs, soup kitchens, hospice care, hospital visits, and prison ministry. I could go on. Anytime religious people feed the hungry or clothe the naked or shelter the homeless or tend to the sick, we remember the words of Micah and plant another vine. We offer shade to our neighbors, and love over hatred.

### **250 Years of Standing Together**

Washington's promise to Hebrew Congregation of Newport still stands. We intend to keep it standing in Texas. Washington's promise still stands because liberty belongs to every person, and that includes each person who calls Texas home. Liberty is never a purely political proposition. It is and has always been theological.

"I believe in one God, the God of Abraham. He is the Father of mercies; Christians, Muslims, and Jews all worship the same loving, all-powerful, never-changing God. And across the Abrahamic traditions, we believe this God desires his people to live together and worship in safety. Here is where we must begin for all humans who call Texas home and practice a religion. There is no room for religious bigotry in Texas."

250 years into this great American experiment, the vine and fig tree still spring up where we tend them. Texas has always been a state that grows things bigger than the rest. On this anniversary, may our hearts grow to hold together what George Washington promised to all future residents of this great Republic.

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<sup>13</sup> Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels* (New York: Random House, 2018)