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103-1/07

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Sept. 7, 1976

To ^{*}Congregation Mitzvah Israel: In the
year of our Bicentennial the dedication of your
new synagogue carries special meaning.
It marks the continuity of life and tradition
of your congregation. It also reflects the
vision of George Washington and our
other founding fathers that in a free
land, each should be free to worship
as he chooses.

With best wishes.

Gerald R. Ford

SEPT. 7, 1976

MR. PRESIDENT

STATIONERY IS ATTACHED IF YOU CARE TO
COMPLY WITH THE REQUEST FOR A HAND-
WRITTEN MESSAGE AS OUTLINED.

TERRY

*Pls send
to Larry*

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

STRIPPING _

The original of the attached
message was given to David Lissy.

Copy of entire file sent to Eliska
Hasek.

Trudy Fry
9/8/76

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Eliska Hasek -

This did not go in thru us -- just
came out thru us.

I felt that you should have a copy of
the entire file.

Trudy Fry
~~8/8/76~~ 9/8/76

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

September 6, 1976

~~THE PRESIDENT~~

MEMORANDUM FOR:

~~FOSTER CHANOCK~~

FROM:

DAVID LISSY 

As we discussed, I will be going to Philadelphia next Sunday (Sept. 12) to represent the President at the dedication of the new building of Congregation Mikveh Israel--the second oldest synagogue in the country. The new building is in the Independence Mall area near the site of the original synagogue building. The rabbi of this synagogue was one of the six who visited the President in July.

Mikveh Israel has in its archives one of the two handwritten letters from George Washington to the Jewish congregations of the colonial period. In addition to the formal message from the President which has already been prepared, I think it would be appropriate -- and also of historical note -- for the President to send a short handwritten note to the Congregation.

The coincidence of the Bicentennial, the dedication of the new synagogue in the Independence Mall area, the fact that one of the original George Washington letters is in the archives and my presence at the ceremonies combine to make this a lovely and not a forced gesture.

I would suggest something very brief, as follows:

"To Congregation Mikveh Israel--
In the year of our Bicentennial the dedication of your new synagogue carries special meaning. It marks the continuity of life and tradition of your congregation. It also reflects the vision of George Washington and our other founding fathers that in a free land, each should be free to worship as he chooses.
With best wishes, Gerald R. Ford."

teries and public appeals. Among the distinguished non-Jewish contributors to the reduction of Mikveh Israel's debt were Benjamin Franklin, the scientist David Rittenhouse and the political leader Thomas McKean.

Philadelphia's Jews and the Struggle for Equality

The Declaration of Independence had asserted that it was a "self-evident" truth "that all men are created equal," and recognized the endowment of all men "by their Creator" with such "unalienable rights" as "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is not difficult to imagine the response of Jews to so all-encompassing a concept of universal quality. But the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 required that office-holders take a test oath affirming belief in both the Old and New Testaments. This provision, of course, excluded Jews. It was not until 1783 that the leaders of Mikveh Israel attempted to secure a change in this law, but to no avail. Their petition made some significant points. They asserted "that the Jews are [not] particularly fond of being representatives of the people in assembly or civil officers and magistrates in the state; but with great submission they apprehend that a clause in the constitution, which disables them to be elected by their fellow citizens to represent them in assembly [is] a stigma upon their nation [a contemporary Sephardic/Marrano term] and their religion . . ." The petition also set forth the contributions of the Jews to the Revolutionary cause:

. . . the conduct and behaviour of the Jews in this and the neighbouring states, has always tallied with the great design of the revolution . . . the Jews of Charlestown, New-York, New-Port and other posts, occupied by the British troops, have distinguishedly suffered for their attachment to the revolution principles . . . The Jews of Pennsylvania in proportion to the number of their members, can count with any religious society whatsoever, the whigs among either of them; they have served some of them in the continental army; some went out in the militia to fight the common enemy; all of them have cheerfully contributed to the support of the militia, and of the government of this state . . . as a nation or a religious society, they stand unimpeached of any matter whatsoever, against the safety and happiness of the people . . .

The Philadelphia Jews, under the leadership of Jonas Phillips, undertook the effort again in 1789, this time with a successful outcome. The 1790 Pennsylvania Constitution prohibited only atheists from holding state office—this was still not complete equality, but at least it applied both to those of Jewish and Christian backgrounds. Jonas Phillips was also the author of a communication to the federal Constitutional Convention of 1787 which urges the recognition of full legal equality for members of "all Religious So-

cieties"—this was, of course, achieved in guarantees established by the first amendment of the Bill of Rights.

The Correspondence with George Washington

Due to procrastination and confusion the several thousand Jews of the United States never succeeded in presenting a united message of congratulations to George Washington upon his election to the presidency of the country. The congregations of Savannah and Newport both grew impatient and acted independently. Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel continued to press the congregations in New York City and Charleston and the newly organized synagogue in Richmond, to participate in a joint greeting which was finally composed by Manuel Josephson of Philadelphia (who, incidentally, owned the only shofar in town) and was presented by him to the President on December 13, 1790:

The Address of the Hebrew-Congregations in the cities of Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, and Richmond. December 13, 1790.

Sir,
It is reserved for you to unite in affection for your character and Person, every political and religious denomination of men; and in this will the Hebrew Congregations aforesaid yield to no class of their fellow-citizens.

We have hitherto been prevented by various circumstances peculiar to our situation from adding our congratulations to those which the rest of America have offered on your elevation to the chair of the federal government.

Deign then, illustrious Sir, to accept this our homage.

The wonders which the Lord of Hosts hath worked in the days of our forefathers, have taught us to observe the greatness of his wisdom and his might throughout the events of the late glorious revolution; and while we humble ourselves at his footstool in thanksgiving and praise for the blessing of his deliverance; we acknowledge you the Leader of the American armies as his chosen and beloved servant; But not to your sword alone is our present happiness to be ascribed; That indeed opened the way to the reign of freedom, but never was it perfectly secure, till your hand gave birth to the federal constitution, and you renounced the joys of retirement to seal by your administration in peace, what you had achieved [sic] in war.

To the eternal God who is thy refuge, we commit in our prayer the care of thy precious life, and when full of years, thou shalt be gathered unto the People "thy righteousness shall go before thee" and we shall remember, amidst our regret, that the Lord hath set apart the Godly for himself; whilst thy name and thy virtues will remain an indelible memorial on our minds.

Manuel Josephson.

For and in behalf and under the authority of the several Congregations aforesaid.

George Washington's letter, dated 1790

In the Hebrew Congregations in the cities of Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, and Richmond

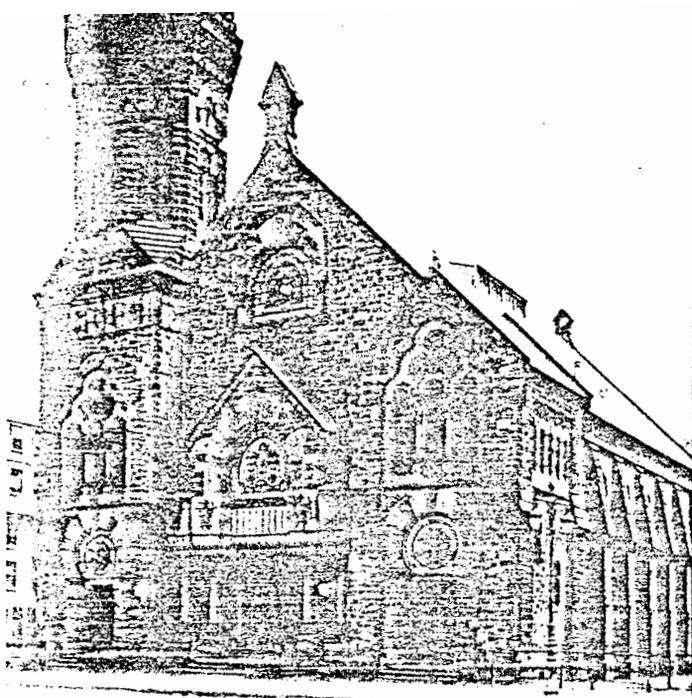
Gentlemen,

The timely favour with which you have received your communications on the above subject, is the more agreeable to me, as it is the first step towards the union of the Hebrew Congregations in the cities of Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, and Richmond, which will be a great advantage to the cause of the Jews in America.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant

As soon as I shall be able to attend to your business, I will be glad to see you, and to hear from you.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant



Rodeph Shalom, circa. 1869

Article from the
JEWISH EXPONENT,
circa. 1899

WOMANKIND

EDITED BY GIUDITTA.

**PHILADELPHIA JEWESES IN
ORGANIZED SOCIETIES EIGH-
TY YEARS AGO.**

**The Pleasurs of Charitable and
Educational Work Were
Women.**

This new event in the lives of American Jewesses, this breaking through the boundaries of our own country and crossing the ocean to "further the interests of Judaism," is apt to lead to a comparison of the task with the present. The result will be all in favor of modern methods. Considering the limitations of the American Jewesses who lived eighty years ago, and the advantages of those who live to-day, it would seem as though they deserve as much praise for the little work that they accomplished as we do for the large projects which we attempt. Their plans did not extend beyond the limits of their own cities, and they benefited a limited number of persons only, in consequence. A glance at the beginnings of three Philadelphia organizations, still in existence, will serve to illustrate what Philadelphia Jewesses did generations ago.

**The Female Hebrew Benevolent So-
ciety.**

One stormy day in autumn, when our great-grandmothers were still young, Mrs. Azrael Levy and Miss Hannah Levy, moved by an instance of suffering more pitiful than usual, resolved to ask their sisters in faith to assist them in relieving distress. At that time, it was before the German immigration commenced, there were not many Jews in the city, and no charity society existed. One month later, November, 1819, the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society was formed. In 1820 it was regularly instituted, and in 1827 it received its articles of incorporation.

General Washington's reply is still a cherished possession of the Mikveh Israel Congregation:

To the Hebrew Congregations in the Cities of Philadelphia, New York, Charleston and Richmond

Gentlemen,

The liberal sentiment towards each other which marks every political and religious denomination of men in this country stands unrivalled in the history of nations—The affections of such a people is a treasure beyond the reach of calculation; and the repeated proofs which my fellow citizens have given of their attachment to me, and approbation of my doings form the purest source of my temporal felicity—The affectionate expressions of your address again excite my gratitude, and receive my warmest acknowledgements.

The power and goodness of the Almighty were strongly manifested in the events of our late glorious revolution.—and his kind interposition in our behalf has been no less visible in the establishment of our present equal government—In war he directed the sword—and in peace he has ruled in our councils—my agency in both has been guided by the best intentions, and a sense of the duty which I owe my country; and as my exertions hitherto have been amply rewarded by the approbation of my fellow-citizens, I shall endeavor to deserve a continuance of it by my future conduct.

May the same temporal and eternal blessings which you implore for me, rest upon your congregations.

G. Washington.

*The Creation of
Rodeph Shalom Congregation*

During the Colonial and early National periods the Jewish community and Mikveh Israel Congregation were coextensive. If a person intended to remain a Jew, membership in the congregation was mandatory. This membership in turn implied the acceptance of *halacha* and submission to the authority of the constitutional leaders of the congregation. Defiance of the congregation, disobedience to Jewish law or avoidance of the responsibilities of membership could lead to the withholding of the privileges of marriage, burial, or conversion and the honors of the ritual all of which were within the control of the congregation's leaders. So long as Mikveh Israel was the single, all-inclusive Jewish institution in town, every Jew was required to accept its authority. But about 1795 some newer immigrants who perhaps felt uncomfortable in the unfamiliar Sephardic atmosphere of the synagogue instituted their own independent Ashkenazic worship, probably in the form of a *hevra* at first—the German Hebrew Society. (This may not have been the first effort in this direction, howev-