

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SUNDAY, MAY 23, 1976

Office of the Vice President  
(Newport, Rhode Island)

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REMARKS OF THE VICE PRESIDENT  
AT THE  
FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SYNAGOGUE COUNCIL OF AMERICA  
TOURO SYNAGOGUE  
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

(AT 5:23 P.M. EDT)

Ambassador Linowitz, thank you very much. Chairman Arthur Burns, Senator Pell, Rabbi Lookstein, Rabbi Seigman, Rabbi Lewis, and thank you Roberta Peters for your beautiful renditions, your excellencies, members and friends of the Touro Synagogue, as a descendant of Roger Williams, I thank you for the honor and the privilege of allowing me to participate in this historic gathering, which is one of the high points of the Bicentennial celebration for our Nation.

To stand in the simple beauty of this historic temple is to return to the very roots of our Nation. Indeed, there was a Touro Synagogue before there was a United States of America.

And Jewish families lived and worshipped here in Rhode Island over a century before the synagogue was completed. They chose Rhode Island with good reason, because the founders of this colony had guaranteed freedom of religion. Those early Jewish settlers made a decision shared by so many millions of immigrants of all faiths who arrived on those shores over the past two centuries. Their loyalty was to the new land, while, at the same time, they determined to remain firm in their religious beliefs.

Nowhere has our Nation's commitment to religious and personal liberty been voiced more eloquently than in the letter which George Washington wrote to the congregation of Touro Synagogue, and which Sol Linowitz read so beautifully and with such feeling, "To bigotry, no sanction. To persecution, no assistance."

This freedom which our forefathers sought in the new world benefitted both the people who found it and the land which extended it. For not only did the openness of American society offer opportunity for a new life to the poor, the oppressed and the persecuted, but those who came here, and their children after them, gave new life to this Nation. As it says in the dreams of the Hebrew prophets, we have been enriched by the gathering of the exiles from all over the world.

The Jewish experience in America is a particularly vivid illustration of opportunity for the individual being translated into betterment for all. We could not subtract the Jewish contribution from American life without impoverishing our science, our literature, our art, our commerce, our law, and, indeed, without vastly diminishing America. The Jewish contribution to the American experience is beyond calculation, and out of all proportion to the numbers of Jewish Americans involved.

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Today, I would like to discuss the American moral heritage which created this environment for individual fulfillment which led, in turn, to our Nation's unmatched achievement. The spiritual and religious forces which inspired our Founding Fathers and shaped life in America from its very beginning. These forces inspired the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.

And, most important of all, these spiritual and religious forces have continued to shape the American character to this day, a character dominated by such qualities as respect for the dignity of the individual, kindness, generosity, neighborliness, equality of opportunity, equality before the law, a restless energy, a willingness to take risks, and faith, hope and love. As the Old Testament says, "The greatest of these is love." The contributions of America to religious freedom are as monumental as its contributions to political liberty and economic freedom.

Settled by people of many faiths, the Church of England, Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, Jews, Huguenots, Quakers and many others, Americans through trial and experience developed not alone an understanding, but a mutual respect of one faith for another. And it is this framework of diversity within unity, of people of so many faiths, which has been the greatest source of America's strength and vitality.

Life for our forebears in early America was rugged. In this testing environment, there developed a belief not alone in individual rights but an equally firm conviction of individual responsibility. Survival depended upon individuals shouldering their responsibilities fully as much as asserting their ambitions and employing their energies in their own ways. The individual was held responsible for his or her actions. They were expected to contribute to the community.

In young America in struggling communities, people's moral and religious assertions were judged by their performance. For his acts, the individual was answerable to himself, to his God and his community. He could take no refuge in blaming others or in blaming society for his actions. He expected to suffer the consequences of his own behavior. This is the unique essence of American life and character.

Today, the basic principles of America's founding and its growth, its dedication to human dignity, the spiritual nature of man, its trust in free individuals taking responsibility for their actions, are being seriously challenged. Totalitarian socialist societies have developed which ignore the concept of man as a spiritual human being. They repress personal liberty and they forbid religious freedom. They deny individual economic freedom.

In the present world, centrally-controlled, Marxist power is on the march throughout the world, supported by subversion, so-called wars of liberation and growing military power. Unfortunately, in this period, we have seen some striking failures of moral example both in public and private life here at home. It is dangerous. Uncorrected, it can weaken the moral fiber of our society.

There is a growing tendency in our times to excuse immoral conduct because we think we understand the forces that produced it. One suspects there is a connection between this kind of thinking and the movement away from the basic American tenet of individual responsibility for one's life and actions.

Every society in the history of man has had its strengths and its weaknesses. But no society can endure for long by allowing criminals to escape penalties for their crimes by reference to some vague theory or concept of a collective guilt, or personal stress, or because it is alleged that "everyone does it."

It is time for all of us, as individual American citizens, each in the discharge of our several responsibilities, to reaffirm the basic concepts that a man's moral and religious assertions are judged by his performance and that he is answerable for his acts to himself, to his God and to his community. For only in this way are we going to preserve our free society, its values, its opportunities, its blessings. Each of us, as an individual American, must return to the basic concept of individual responsibility for our own acts upon which this society was founded.

Your faith, the teachings of Judaism, is based on a moral vision of mankind, on a reverence for individual uniqueness and individual dignity. Judaism teaches, too, that individual dignity and freedom must be accompanied by an acceptance of moral responsibility on the part of the individual.

These convictions are so much in keeping with the moral philosophy of our Nation's Founding Fathers that it is hardly surprising that Jewish Americans have made such an enormous contribution to America's emergence as the greatest, freest Nation on earth.

America is grateful for your spiritual heritage and for those priceless contributions which you have made through two centuries of American nationhood. As those who worshipped here in Touro Synagogue heard in 1776, what all Americans heard in that fateful year still rings with relevance today.

The men of the Revolution declared their commitment to human dignity in these unforgettable words: "With a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor." Dare we do less today? I think not.

Thank you.

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(AT 5:35 P.M. EDT)