

# Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

**INDEPENDENCE DAY** JULY 4, 2013

## What Matters Most

By Rabbi Doug Heifetz



### Artifact:

Prayer for the country, Richmond, Virginia, 1789

National Museum of American Jewish History, a gift from ARA Services, Inc.

Conservation funds provided by the Robert Saligman Charitable Fund

Located in the Imperfect Freedom gallery on the fourth floor

# What Matters Most

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## Sacred Stories **INDEPENDENCE DAY**

Around Independence Day, an early document of American Jewish life reminds us what matters most about our country. The “Richmond Prayer” of 1789, a Jewish prayer for the country, offers a glimpse of an elated and grateful Jewish community.

Jews in many lands had written and recited prayers for their governments, but this one stands out. Where other versions pray plainly for the well-being of the ruler, this Revolution-era manuscript reflects a wholehearted exaltation. It shows a joyous belief in America. The prayer describes the new nation as ‘us’, reflecting a unique sense of Jewish belonging and commitment. Where other versions refer to *this land*, *its ruler*, and *his enemies*, the Richmond Prayer expresses gratitude for *our country* and *our victories over our enemies*. It asks for wisdom for *our judges* and *our governors*.

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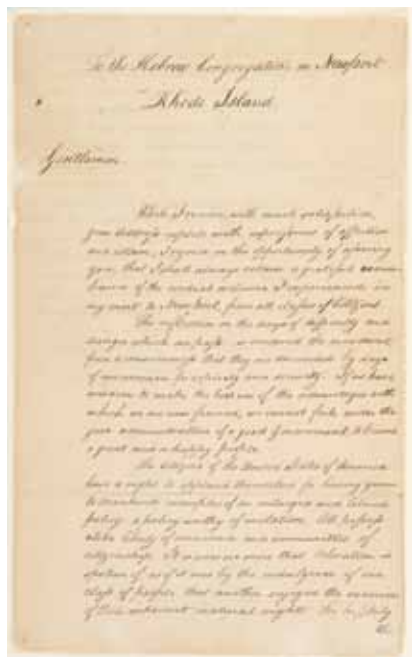
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The prayer’s most striking praise for the new country’s leadership, however, is the acrostic spelling “Washington.” That is, the first Hebrew letter from each of the central lines spells a transliteration of the president’s name. Traditionally, acrostics in Jewish poetry encoded the names of that work’s own Jewish authors or the community’s highest Jewish patron. Thus, the manuscript demonstrates an unprecedented esteem for a gentile leader, the new president.

Why did our Jewish forebears feel such a unique appreciation for Washington? Surely they appreciated and shared his passionate beliefs in religious tolerance, and freedom and opportunity for all. Indeed, President Washington wrote to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, responding to a letter presented to him by the congregation’s warden, Moses Seixas, that “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.”

These documents strongly echo the conviction that Jews – and people of all origins – should feel at home in America. Unfortunately, this belief is of course

aspirational and not fully realized, then or now. President Washington failed to fully live up to his own words, as evident by his record of slave ownership.



Today, too, we live in a country where discrimination and injustice are still present. However, these documents remind us that we may aspire to a vision no higher, in Jewish and American terms, than to give “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”

This aspiration for our country deserves celebration, especially on Independence Day. May the flash of fireworks and their thundering, and the sights and sounds of celebration everywhere rededicate us to this, our mission of America.

Rabbi Doug Heifetz serves as the rabbi of Oseh Shalom, a 300- household Reconstructionist congregation in Laurel, Maryland. He received his ordination from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 2005. He teaches with the goal of creating a more compassionate, balanced, reflective and healthy world. He often speaks and writes about immigrant rights, global warming, food, health and the spread of chronic disease. He lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, with his wife and two young children.

**ARTIFACTS:**

Prayer for the country, Richmond, Virginia, 1789 (Cover)  
National Museum of American Jewish History, a gift from ARA Services, Inc. Conservation funds provided by the Robert Saligman Charitable Fund

Letter from George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, August, 1790  
Courtesy of the Morris Morgenstern Foundation

Both documents are located Imperfect Freedom gallery on the fourth floor



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## About this partnership:

Both the Jewish People and the United States of America are rooted in a quest for greater freedom and human dignity. Inspired by this parallelism, the National Museum of American Jewish History is collaborating with Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and its Rabbis Without Borders program to launch a new initiative, **Sacred Stories: A Living Commentary on the Hebrew Bible and American Jewish History**.

**Sacred Stories** weaves together Judaism's foundational sacred text, the Torah, with one of the most successful expressions of freedom in human history, the story of Jewish life in America. **Sacred Stories** explores our shared values by linking these two vital and compelling stories through contemporary commentary and 21st century media.

The **Torah** is a central feature of Jewish tradition. Used to refer generally to Jewish wisdom, it also refers specifically to the 5 Books of Moses which makes up the Hebrew Bible. A portion of the Torah text, a **Parsha**, is read on **Shabbat** (Sabbath). The whole Torah is read sequentially over the course of the year. Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest and begins on Friday evenings and ends Saturday night. Many Jews observe Shabbat to emulate God's resting on the seventh day of Creation. The fourth commandment is to keep Shabbat holy which Jews do with festive meals, resting, and learning.



The National Museum of American Jewish History, on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, presents educational programs and experiences that preserve, explore and celebrate the history of Jews in America. Its purpose is to connect Jews more closely to their heritage and to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for the diversity of the American Jewish experience and the freedoms to which Americans aspire.



Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership is a think tank, leadership training institute, and resource center. Bringing Jewish insights to a wide American audience, Clal makes Jewish wisdom an accessible public resource. A leader in religious pluralism, Clal builds bridges across communities to encourage diversity and openness. Linking Jewish texts and tradition with innovative scholarship, Clal promotes Jewish participation in American civic and spiritual life, reinvigorating communities and enhancing leadership development.