

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5787
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Congregation Rodeph Sholom
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The Promise: Jews at the Birth of the American Covenant

When did the Israelites become a nation?

Was it when God spoke to Abraham and told him to go forth and be the progenitor of a clan as numerous as the stars in the sky? Or was it when the Pharaoh, who knew not Joseph, began oppressing the Israelites as a group that he saw as a threat? Perhaps it was when the Israelites took their first steps of freedom as they crossed the Sea of Reeds.

I believe we became a nation at Mt. Sinai. At Mt. Sinai, Moses ascended and received the Ten Commandments from God. It was this moment that the Israelites knew that they were not just **free from** slavery and degradation, but they were **free to** worship God, to live by ethical principles, to build a society based on eternal values.

According to rabbinic tradition, all Jews across time and space were present at Mt. Sinai when Moses descended with the tablets. And in every generation, we renew our covenant with God, our nation, and ourselves.

The first Jews arrived in America in 1654. A group of 23 Sephardic Jews left Brazil and arrived in New Amsterdam in the fall of 1654. They could trace their family history back to Spain, where they had fled in the 1490s due to expulsion and persecution. They first went to Holland, a haven for Jews in the early 1500s. Holland took over the colony of Brazil so Dutch Jews traveled there to build businesses and make a life. In 1653, Portugal, who had kicked their own Jews out shortly after Spain in the 1490s, regained control of Brazil. And the Dutch Jews once again set out to find somewhere they could live in safety and peace.

The earliest Jews' arrival in America (not yet called America) is a story of exclusion and expulsion. They arrived in New Amsterdam with unsteady hope that this could be a place where Jewish community would flourish.

And they were right.

Throughout the next three centuries, Jews would arrive in waves from every corner of the world. Some ran **to** America because of the stories they'd heard about freedom and opportunity. Others ran **from** pogroms and persecution and took a ticket to anywhere they could. Each of us here has stories about our own families' journeys that have led us to be sitting here in 2026.

In August of 1790, the Jews of Newport Rhode Island, wrote a letter to President George Washington. They said:

Deprived as we have hitherto been of the invaluable rights of free citizens, we now, (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty Disposer of all events) behold a Government (erected by the Majesty of the People) a Government **to which bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance**—but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of citizenship—deeming every one, of whatever nation, tongue, or language equal parts of the great governmental machine.¹

The American Jews of 1790 were acutely aware of the power of government to impact their lives. America was the first place that Jews did not have to be emancipated. We were simply citizens of this new nation. We should not be naïve—there was still bigotry and exclusion in the American experience for Jews and others. But for the first time, Jews did not have to be emancipated before becoming citizens and working towards a more equal society.

President Washington wrote the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island back. He quoted their line—to which bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—back to them. And then he wrote:

May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.²

Washington quoted the prophet Micah, who imagined a world where each can sit under the delicate fig tree and live in peace. Micah was an Israelite prophet who spoke to the Israelites centuries after they received the Ten Commandments. His words, and their use by the first president of the United States to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, are only possible because of sacred covenant: the covenant we enacted at Mt. Sinai and the covenant of American citizenry.

¹ “Moses Sexias to Geroge Washington, 17 August 1790,” Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series, Vol. 6, 286.

² “George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790,” *Founders Online*, National Archives.