

## From The Parnas:

By Mark I. Wolfson

July 4th 1776 - Independence Day

This week we celebrate Independence Day - July 4th. We celebrate the Independence of the 13 US Colonies from the monarchy of England. Independence means freedom of self-determination, freedom to live and work, participate in society, participate in and create political parties, hold political office, and freedom to practice religion. When the Colonies declared their independence in 1776 in the form of the Declaration written by Thomas Jefferson, the majorities of the Jews in the Colonies recognized that the freedoms they would enjoy would pave the way to a thriving Jewish existence not known for hundreds of years in any part of the world.

The seeds of independence were sown in the Colonies amidst the tightening of imperial controls from the mother country who was struggling to pay its war debts, in spite of incurring some of that debt defending the American Colonies against the French. The Jews in the American Colonies numbered only 2500 out of a total population of about 2.5 million. As a large number of the Jews were merchants, importers and traders, they were particularly sensitive to import, export, and consumption taxes that were starting to be imposed on the colonies. This made them immediately sympathetic to the colonial cause.

Reluctant as most Americans were to have a war with England, the Jews prayed and fasted in their congregations along with their Christian neighbors. They prayed for war to be averted as requested by the Continental Congress in May, 1776. Little by little, some immediately and some over time, the Jews came over to the loyalist side. Manual Josephson was declared a "disaffected person" because he refused to join the boycotts against the British. A few years later, it was Josephson, then Parnas of Mikveh Israel, who drafted the famous letter of congratulations to George Washington on his victory in the war and his election as President of the United States. The letter was written after seven months of planning on behalf of the Jewish communities of Philadelphia, New York, Charleston and Richmond, a copy of which is on display in lobby of Mikveh Israel. The original is on loan and part of the new exhibit that began June 29th at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

While the Jews who came from England often played both sides and eventually moved to the loyalist side, Jews born in America were often fervent patriots for American independence. Immigrants not of British stock, who came from central and eastern Europe, who had been persecuted in their countries, saw the political, economic, religious, and social benefits of freedom in America and quickly embraced the cause of freedom. The most famous of these was KKMI member of the Board of Adjuntos, Haym Salomon, a Polish refugee, who used his brilliant financial mind and all of his resources to further the American cause.

True religious freedom began to become a reality in 1779, with Thomas Jefferson's Ordinance of Religious Freedom in Virginia, the largest and most populous state. Between 1789 and 1793, Georgia, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Delaware and Vermont bestowed upon the Jews all privileges and immunities. In 1790, George Washington, in a response to Parnas Manuel Josephson's letter, wrote about the Jews, "The affection of such a people is a treasure beyond the reach of calculation". In response to Moses Seixas' letter upon Washington's visit to Newport in 1790, Washington 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 fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid."