

“A Community to Which We Belong”: An Election Season Text Study

In an election season we reflect on the participatory nature of democracy and the vital role of everyday citizens in the continual formation of our society. Since the ratification of the Constitution, the guiding document for the creation and operation of the United States government, leaders of the Jewish community have articulated the critical need for being an active participant in the democratic process. They expressed this both in terms of upholding good and just laws, as well as working to address injustices in the system. Below is an example of just such an articulation, the conclusion of a sermon given by Gershom Mendes Seixas (pronounced “SAY-shahs”), leader of New York’s Shearith Israel congregation, in November of 1789¹. The text of this sermon is a remarkable historical artifact that speaks to the particular experience of the Jewish community as the early United States government was forming, as well as to broader themes raised by the newly formed democracy taking shape then. It also provides insights into the sentiments of the time, together with an opportunity for conversation and inspiration in this season of our own.

To help create this conversation with this text and learners, you will find multiple resources. This includes words that have been defined in parentheses, *italicized*, in the text. On the final page you will find helpful, additional, historical context. You may even wish to review this before looking at the text itself. Finally, the next page is a learning routine to support you and those you are studying with, to draw out important details, consider multiple interpretations, and finally, reflect on what takeaways the text and your conversation leaves you with personally.

¹ The Constitution was ratified in June of 1788 and became operative in March of 1789. The Bill of Rights, around which the Jewish community participated seriously in the civil discourse of the time, would be ratified two years later in 1791.

Protocol: Is There Another Way of Understanding That?

IN HAVRUTA

1 GREET YOUR PARTNER(S):

Take a couple of minutes to say hello and catch up socially.

- 2 Take turns reading sections of the text out loud. When it is your turn to read, do your best to give the text a voice so that the listener can hear and try to understand it.

When it is your turn to listen to your partner reading the text, write down or note 2-3 words or phrases that stand out to you from the text. These might stand out because of curiosity, appreciation, discomfort or uncertainty.

3 SHARE:

a Partner A: Read aloud one of the words/phrases you noticed and articulate why this detail stood out to you. What do you think it could mean? Pose any questions it might raise for you.

b Partner B: Use listening moves to help your havruta formulate their ideas and to understand what they are saying. Then ask, "Where do you see that in the text?"

4 "Is there another way to understand that?"

Together, come up with an alternate interpretation of the word or phrase that can also be supported by evidence in the text. As you consider other possible interpretations, consult the historical context provided to help the voice of the text stay present.

5 SWITCH ROLES AND REPEAT steps 2 and 3

6 ZOOM OUT AND DISCUSS:

Based on your conversation thus far, discuss some big questions.

You may want to discuss:

- What does this text teach about what it means to participate in democracy?
- What does this text teach about being Jewish and American?
- What does this text teach about the relationship between working to improve yourself and working to improve society?

7 PERSONALIZATION:

Consider: In what ways does this text speak to my own experience of the current election at this point in our US history? What makes my own experience at this moment feel different?

Share a new insight or question the text evokes for you.



Gershom Mendes Seixas², *Thanksgiving Day Sermon, November 26, 1789*

...it now remains to point out the duties which we owe to ourselves, the community to which we belong.

In the first place, it is necessary that we, each of us in our respective stations, behave in such a manner as to give strength and stability to the laws entered into by our representatives; to consider the burden imposed on those who are appointed to act in the executive department; to contribute, as much as lays in our power, to support that government which is founded upon the strictest principles of equal liberty and justice. If to seek the peace and prosperity of the city wherein we dwell be a duty, even under bad governments, what must it be when we are situated under the best of constitutions? It behooves us (*it is a responsibility for us*) to use our utmost endeavors...to unite, with cheerfulness and uprightness, upon all occasions that may occur in the political as well as in the moral world, to promote that which has a tendency to the public good...

And lastly, to conclude, my dear brethren and companions, it is incumbent on us (*it is necessary for us*), as Jews, in a more especial manner, seeing we are the chosen and peculiar treasure of God, to be more circumspect (*careful and considerate*) in our conduct [Isaiah, ch. 44, v. 8.]³—that as we are at this day living evidences of his divine power and unity: so may we become striking examples to the nations of the earth hereafter, as it is mentioned in several passages of the sacred scriptures, and particularly in Exodus, ch. 19, v. 6. “And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation;” meaning thereby that we should, in the latter days, teach the law to those who shall then enter into the covenant made with Abraham our father, for in him “shall all nations of the earth be blessed.”⁴ For this purpose, let me recommend to you a serious consideration of the several duties already set forth this day; to enter into a self-examination; to relinquish your prejudices against each other; to subdue your passions; to live, as Jews ought to do, in brotherhood and amity (*friendly relationship*); “to seek peace and pursue it:”⁵ so shall it be well with you both here and hereafter; which God, of his infinite mercies, grant.—Amen.

² Pronounced “SAY-shahs”, from the Portuguese word meaning “stone”

³ “Do not be frightened, do not be shaken! Have I not from of old predicted to you? I foretold, and you are My witnesses. Is there any god, then, but Me? “There is no other rock; I know none!”

⁴ Genesis 22:18

⁵ Psalms 34:14



IMPORTANT HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gershom Mendes Seixas: Gershom Mendes Seixas and his older brother, Moses, were active conversation partners with the early US government. A few years after this sermon, Moses would have a famous letter exchange with George Washington, producing the famous phrase “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance” which Washington would go on to make his own. The civil liberties of minority groups was a major topic on minds of the Seixas’ and other Jewish community leaders.

New York: At the time of this sermon, the Constitution has already been ratified by a majority of the original 13 colonies. In the July before, New York became the 11th of the original 13 colonies to ratify the Constitution. New York City also served as the capital of the United States at this time, and would continue to do so until 1790.

“to seek the peace and prosperity of the city wherein we dwell”: This is an idea rooted in the Tanakh, “And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to GOD in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7) and has been seen as the source for Jewish communal commitment and participation in whatever society it finds itself.

“seeing we are the chosen...”: Chosenness is an especially important notion at this time. As a persecuted minority, the Jewish community often sought to articulate its particularity instead, in unequivocally positive terms. In the case of Seixas, his grandparents were *conversos* (Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism, and their descendents) born in Portugal at a time of severe activity by the Inquisition (an office established by the Catholic church of the time, dedicated to seeking out heretics and others breaking church law). Viewing difference as a source of special value was a common and important aspect of *converso* identity and Jewish identity in general at a time of widespread discrimination.

