

Thomas Jefferson
Letter to Isaac Harby, of Charleston, SC
January 6, 1826

Monticello, January 6th, 1826

SIR: I have to thank you for the copy you have been so kind as to send me of your "Discourse before the Reformed Society of Israelites." I am little acquainted with the liturgy of the Jews or their mode of worship; but the reformation proposed, and explained in the Discourse, appears entirely reasonable. Nothing is wiser, than that all our institutions should keep pace with the advance of time, and be improved with the improvements of the human mind. I have thought it a cruel addition to the wrongs which that injured sect have suffered, that their youth should be excluded from the instructions in science afforded to all others in our public seminaries, by imposing upon them a course of Theological Reading which their consciences do not permit them to pursue; and in the University lately established here, we have set the example of ceasing to violate the rights of conscience by any injunctions on the different sects respecting their religion.

I pray you to accept the assurances of
Respect and esteem.
Thomas Jefferson

Note: In the early years of our nation, rabbis and prominent members of synagogues frequently corresponded with presidents and former presidents for a variety of reasons. Washington's famous letter to the Tuoro Synagogue in Newport, RI, was written in response to a letter from the Schul's 'president,' who sought assurances that the Bill of Rights would protect Jews. Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, was a favorite correspondent of synagogue leaders. Isaac Harby sought Jefferson's support for the liberalizing, but contentious, changes proposed in his community - these were the early beginnings of Reform Judaism in America. Considering Jefferson's critical role in guaranteeing religious freedom for Jews and all Americans, a positive response would be a great coup for his position. Jefferson responded in the letter above, written just 6 months before his death on the country's 50th Independence Day.