

Lewis Cass, *Senator from Michigan*
To President Franklin Pierce, April 19, 1854

MR. PRESIDENT: It affords me much pleasure to present a petition from a number of American Citizens of the Hebrew faith who desire to unite with their Christian fellow-citizens in asking the interposition of the Government to secure to all our countrymen abroad the right of religious worship. This union in order to promote the accomplishment of this great object, is an apt illustration of the spirit of equality and toleration which marks our institutions. Persecuted for centuries with bitter hostility, subjected to a tyranny, civil and religious, more oppressive than that endured by any other people, driven from the promised land granted to their forefathers, the separate existence to this date of the Children of Israel is a perpetual miracle establishing the truth of their history, as well as of their religion, foretold as it was in the earliest period and seen as it still is in the latest. In their migrations they have at length reached a continent unknown to their patriarchs by whose rivers they may sit down without weeping in the language of their psalmist, even when remembering Zion, and where the law secures equal rights to all, be they Jew or Gentile. Exposed as the members of this persuasion are in portions of Europe and America, both Protestant and Catholic, to the most illiberal prejudices and to religious disabilities, the position of our citizens abroad who belong to it has peculiar claims to the consideration and interposition of the Government. Beside their legal right to equal protection there is no portion of our population whose peaceable law-abiding conduct better proves than theirs does, that they are well entitled to all the privileges secured to every American by our system of government. I repeat, Sir, that I am gratified that they are taking part in this great movement and I trust that ere long they, as well as all our citizens sent by the accidents of life to foreign countries, may receive the benefits of it. I present this petition and another of similar import, and I move that they may be referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations.

Note: They were so moved.

LEWIS CASS

Editor's note: With this cover letter, Senator Cass conveyed a petition, signed by many prominent Jews in America, to President Franklin Pierce. At issue, for the first time, was the principle of freedom from religious persecution for U.S. citizens overseas. In the early years of our country, severe and murderous persecution of Jews was common in the Middle East and in parts of Europe. Though the US stood against it in principle, American citizens were generally not involved. But in the early 1850s, Jewish Americans in Switzerland appealed to the US State Department to protect them from violent persecutions, forced relocations, and banishments from some Swiss cantons. In 1851, a commercial treaty negotiated between the US and the Swiss Confederation, largely to secure the right of American Protestants in the Catholic countries of Europe, contained a provision that limited its benefits only to American citizens who were Christian. President Millard Fillmore objected to that offensive language, as did Secretary of State Daniel Webster and Senators Henry Clay and Lewis Cass. Cass's petition railed against the discriminatory wording, and the treaty was amended before ratification by the Senate. However, the amended treaty still left allowed for discrimination against Jews. In the end, by the late 1850s, President Pierce, and the growing movement behind the original petition, kept up pressure on the Swiss, particularly when Jewish Americans in Switzerland publically protested their treatment. Under the threat of worsened commercial relations with the US, one by one, the Swiss cantons adopted more tolerant laws. This incident established the right of all Americans to be free from religious or other discriminatory persecution everywhere in the world, and defined the US government's authority to protect Americans overseas from persecution.