

Theodore Roosevelt

Letter to Jacob H. Schiff, Chairman of the Celebration Commemorating
the 250th Anniversary of the Landing of the Jews in This Country
Read at Carnegie Hall, New York, November 30, 1905

The White House, November 16, 1905

My Dear Sir: I am forced to make a rule not to write letters on the occasion of any celebration, no matter how important, simply because I cannot write one without either committing myself to write hundreds of others or else running the risk of giving offense to worthy persons.

I make an exception in this case because the lamentable and terrible suffering to which so many of the Jewish people in other lands have been subjected makes me feel it my duty, as the head of the American people, not only to express my deep sympathy for them, as I now do, but at the same time to point out what fine qualities of citizenship have been displayed by the men of Jewish faith and race, who, having come to this country, enjoy the benefits of free institutions and equal treatment before the law.

I feel very strongly that if any people are oppressed anywhere the wrong inevitably reacts in the end on those who oppress them, for it is an immutable law in the spiritual world that no one can wrong others and yet in the end himself escape unhurt.

The celebration of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the settlement of the Jews in the United States properly emphasizes a series of historical facts of more than merely national significance. Even in our colonial period the Jews participated in the upbuilding of this country, acquired citizenship, and took an active part in the development of foreign and domestic commerce. During the Revolutionary period they aided the cause of liberty by serving in the Continental army and by substantial contributions to the empty treasury of the infant republic. During the Civil War thousands served in the armies and mingled their blood with the soil for which they fought.

I am glad to be able to say, in addressing you on this occasion, that while the Jews of the United States, who now number more than a million, have remained loyal to their faith and their race traditions, they have become indissolubly incorporated in the great army of American citizenship, prepared to make all sacrifices for the country, either in war or peace, and striving for the perpetuation of good government and for the maintenance of the principles embodied in our Constitution.

They are honorably distinguished by their industry, their obedience to law, and their devotion to the national welfare. They are engaged in generous rivalry with their fellow-citizens of other denominations in advancing the interests of our common country. This is true not only of the descendants of the early settlers and those of American birth, but of a great and constantly increasing proportion of those who have come to our shores within the last twenty-five years as refugees reduced to the direst straits of penury and misery.

All Americans may well be proud of the extraordinary illustration of the wisdom and strength of our governmental system thus afforded. In a few years, men and women hitherto utterly unaccustomed to any of the privileges of citizenship have moved mightily upward toward the standard of loyal, self-respecting American citizenship; of that citizenship which not merely insists upon its rights, but also eagerly recognizes its duty to do its full share in the material, social and moral advancement of the nation.

With all good wishes, believe me,
Sincerely yours,
THEODORE ROOSEVELT.