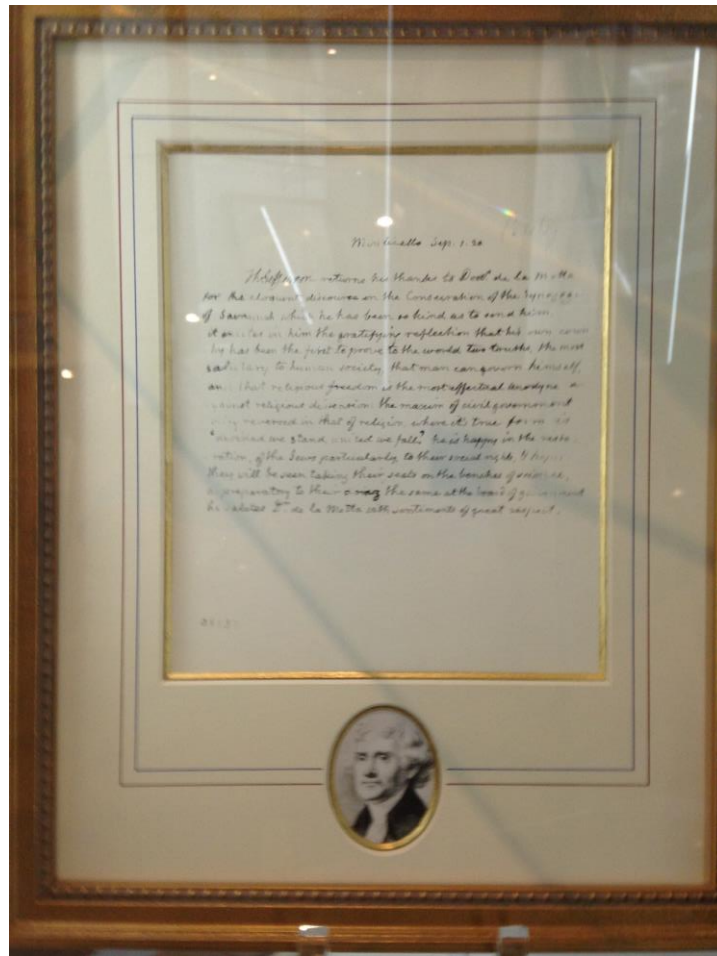


May is Jewish American Heritage Month. To participate, Mickve Israel's History and Heritage Committee is offering brief articles about Mickve Israel and Jewish American history.

JEFFERSON AND THE JEWS – PART I

by Rabbi Saul J. Rubin

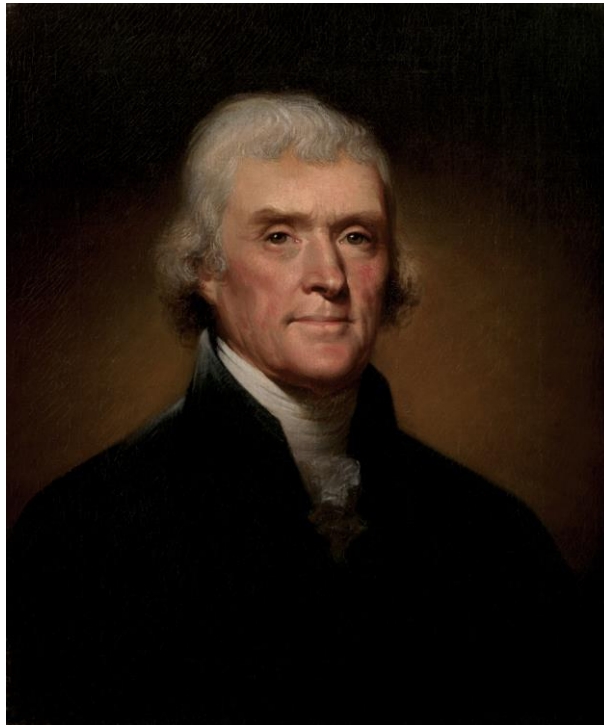
Proudly displayed in Mickve Israel's Nancy and Lawrence Gutstein Museum is the letter our third President transmitted to Dr. Jacob De La Motta of Savannah. It was composed in response to the good Doctor's sermon delivered at the dedication of Congregation Mickve Israel's first synagogue in 1820. Be it known that Jefferson penned only two such letters: the other was sent to Congregation Shearith Israel in New York in 1818. That's how rare our document is!



In it Jefferson declares America has demonstrated two radical truths to the world--unique in history. One...that humans do not need monarchs or dictators to govern them. They have the capacity to govern themselves. Two...that religious diversity is the ultimate answer to religious friction. Jefferson turned the well-known political slogan upside down by declaring when it comes to religion "divided we stand, united we fall".

He concludes the letter by declaring how happy he is that Jews have been "restored" to their social rights and that he harbors the hope that they will devote themselves to the study of science "as preparatory" to serving in the

halls of government (the actual text is more felicitous than this prosaic paraphrase).



Official Presidential portrait of Thomas Jefferson by Rembrandt Peale

Research would indicate that Jefferson's positive views were limited to Jewish religious rights. About Jews as individuals and Judaism as a religion his writings are less felicitous and amazingly uninformed.

As one who served for more than a decade in Virginia (a State where Jefferson is viewed as little higher than the angels), these comments do not flow easily. But read the following Jeffersonian quotes and see if you agree with my analysis:

About the Biblical Priests: "(They are) a bloodthirsty race as cruel and remorseless as the Being whom they represent"

He questioned how Jews could believe in a God who "punished the sins of the fathers upon their children unto the third and fourth generations". Jefferson was not aware of the Biblical Prophet Ezekiel who overturned that concept in the 6th century B.C.E.

He declared Judaism an "inferior" religion because it lacked a notion of the afterlife. Obviously he lacked knowledge of the Mishnaic, Talmudic and Maimonidean writings which contain remarkable passages about immortality.

About Jews the only negative quote is this: "dispersed, as the Jews (are), they still form ...one nation, foreign to the land they live in". Jefferson's point was that there were various groups in his time which resisted assimilation. He may not have been singling out Jews but all minorities.

Disappointing as these lapses are in the education of a man who undoubtedly owned the most extensive library in America, give him his due.

Jefferson created the Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia which shaped the Bill Of Rights and the Constitution. A greater contribution to Jewish rights in America I know not!

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Celebrate Jewish American Heritage Month by exploring the Nancy and Lawrence Gutstein Museum, our sanctuary, and our Slany Torah exhibit to learn more about our congregation's story as well as Savannah and American history.