

What America Owes the Jews, What Jews Owe America



Yeshiva University
THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

**WHAT AMERICA OWES
THE JEWS,
WHAT JEWS OWE AMERICA**

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Contents

Preface vii

Adams, Jefferson, and the Jews

Meir Soloveichik 1

Zionism and Americanism:

What Brandeis Saw and Why It Matters

Rick Richman 9

Toward a New American Jewish Language

Dara Horn 17

What Do Jews Owe America?

Norman Podhoretz 27

The Price of Ownership for America's Jews
Jeffrey S. Gurock 35

Jewish Artists and the American Way
Tevi Troy 45

Abraham Lincoln and the Jews:
A Conversation with Jonathan Sarna 55

Contributors 69

Preface

With the exception of the chapters contributed by Jeffrey S. Gurock and Tevi Troy, the essays in this book were originally presented as talks at a conference titled “What America Owes the Jews, What Jews Owe America.” The resulting ebook, published by Mosaic Books, is available in all major ebook formats.

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Preface

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For more information about the Zahava and Moshael Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought of Yeshiva University, please visit yu.edu/straus.

Adams, Jefferson, and the Jews

Meir Soloveichik

To what extent was the American idea founded on faith, and on the Hebrew Bible, and to what extent was it a product of reason, of philosophy, of natural law?

To put it slightly differently, to what extent was the American Revolution an achievement of Judaism?

Strikingly, this question would be answered very differently by two Founding Fathers: Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. They were, as Joseph Ellis writes in *Founding Fathers*, the odd couple of the revolution: “Adams, the highly combustible, ever combative, mile-a-minute talker...Jefferson, the always cool and self-contained enigma.” It was Jefferson who composed the words of the Declaration that changed the world, but Adams was “the man...who sustained the debate, and by the force of his reasoning demonstrated not only the justice, but the expediency of the measure.”

The two were the best of friends until the end of the eighteenth century, when they turned into rivals, and then ultimately enemies, before being reconciled in 1808 and beginning one of the great correspondences in American history. One issue that came up in their letters was religion in general, and Judaism in particular. Jefferson was long a hero to Jews; they were greatly indebted to his single-minded defense of religious freedom. And yet his own views of historical Judaism, and of the contributions and temperament of the Jewish people, remained negative, indeed virulently so. Adams, on the other hand, had great admiration for the Israel of the Bible and for the rabbinic tradition. This is interesting in its own right; but I would suggest that their disagreement on this matter actually relates to their different worldviews more generally.

Let us begin with a brief analysis of the beliefs of Adams and Jefferson. In their dogmas and doctrines they may have seemed similar, as they both called themselves Unitarians – that is, believers in God who denied traditional Christianity’s notion of the Trinity. But Jefferson was essentially a deist; in his scheme, as the historian Richard Samuelson put it in *Commentary*, “God was the creator of the universe...but the idea that God was an active presence in the world he dismissed as mere superstition.” Indeed, though Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence did mention rights endowed by our Creator, the phrase at the end of the Declaration, invoking a “firm reliance on the protection of divine providence,” was not in his original draft but was inserted by the Continental Congress. Jefferson, as an adult, never prayed. For him, reason and only reason was to serve as man’s guide.

Adams, while also a great believer in human reason, adhered strongly to the importance of religion in forming a moral life, and especially so in a democracy. If the power of

the state was to be vested in the will of the people, then nothing prevented the populace from running morally amok except their own self-restraint. Whereas Jefferson once wrote that the American mission was “to show by example the sufficiency of human reason for the care of human affairs,” Adams, for his part, wrote that “We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion.... Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

Where did biblical Judaism fit into these two divergent views? For Jefferson, who considered reason the foundation of all progress, biblical Judaism, which was founded on the doctrine of hundreds of divinely inspired commandments that must be obeyed, was the epitome of all that was wrong with religion. “The whole religion of the Jew,” wrote Jefferson in a letter in 1820, “was founded in the belief of divine inspiration. The fumes of the most disordered imaginations were recorded in their religious code, as special communications of the Deity.... [T]he religion of the Jews, as taught by Moses,” he wrote further, “had presented for the object of their worship a Being of terrific character, cruel, vindictive, capricious, and unjust,” and “had bound the Jews to many idle ceremonies, mummeries, and observances, of no effect toward producing the social utilities which constitute the essence of virtue.” Therefore, Jefferson asserted, biblical Jews were “a bloodthirsty race, as cruel and remorseless as the Being whom they represented as the family God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, and the local God of Israel.”

Jefferson, you might say, was not exactly a fan of Judaism’s intellectual heritage. And yet here I can’t help pausing to point to a delicious irony. About fifteen years ago, researchers began

investigating Jefferson's genes and discovered a match between the Jefferson family chromosome and a male descendant of Sally Hemings, one of Jefferson's slaves. This is well known; less well known is that the same research led to another discovery: Jefferson's Y chromosome was of a genetic branch that is quite rare and that originates in the Middle East. As the *New York Times* reported:

Michael Hammer, a geneticist at the University of Arizona, said he had compared the Jefferson Y chromosome with those in his database of Y chromosomes and found a perfect match to the Y chromosome of a Moroccan Jew.

It is indeed delicious to contemplate the possibility that none other than Thomas Jefferson himself was a genetic descendant of that same "bloodthirsty race, as cruel and remorseless as the Being whom they represented as the family God of Abraham."

But now for the Adams family. To them, it was an undeniable fact that there had been many nations of great achievement in antiquity, but the transformative idea of an omnipotent, just God had never occurred to those nations. John Quincy Adams, in a letter to his son, once wrote:

The ideas of God entertained by all the most illustrious and most ingenious nations of antiquity were weak and absurd.... Thus far and no farther could human reason extend.... The blessed and sublime idea of God, the creator of the universe...is *revealed* in the first verse of the Book of Genesis.

And here is how John Adams put the same thought in a famous letter of 1812:

England and France are the two nations to whom mankind are under more obligations than to any other except the Hebrews. I excepted the Hebrews for...I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation. If I were an atheist...[and] believed that all is ordered by chance, I should believe that chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of morality and all civilization.

Moreover, Adams's admiration did not stop with the Bible. It extended to the rabbinic tradition as well. Responding to Jefferson's negative assessment of the rabbis, Adams wrote plaintively that he wished he had the time to "examine the Mishna, Gemara, Cabbala [Kabbalah], Jezirah [*Sefer Yetzira*], Sohar [Zohar], Cosri [*Kuzari*], and Talmud of the Hebrews," but the task "would require the life of Methuselah." For Adams, indeed, rabbinic tradition might show the errors made by Christianity. "[T]wenty cartloads of Hebrew books were burnt in France" in the Middle Ages, he wrote. "How many proofs of the corruptions of Christianity might we find in the passages burnt?"

This is not to suggest that Adams was anti-Christian, let alone that he was an adherent of Judaism. He was neither. But neither did he despise the traditionalists of either faith, or of other faiths. He strongly valued faith's role in society, and he recognized that not everyone would have the same religious beliefs as himself.