

**Americans or Jews?" -
and Other Questions in the Wake of the Lieberman Nomination
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In 1806, Napoleon Bonaparte had a problem. We were that problem. Jews had been living in France for a thousand years, since Charlemagne, but until the French Revolution, they had remained, in Abram Sachar's words, "disinherited politically, restricted economically, and despised socially."

(p. 277). Suddenly, in 1791, they were granted citizenship along with everyone else living in France. But although fifteen years had gone by, it still wasn't clear to many in France how this was going to work. It was one thing to speak of "Liberty," and "Equality." But "Fraternity"? Could the Jews ever be accepted as brothers? Would they ever fit in? After all, they had preserved their own laws and customs and traditions for generations! Could they really become loyal French citizens like everyone else?

And so Napoleon gathered in Paris a select group of over one hundred Jewish notables, including rabbis, businessmen, financiers and scholars to represent all the Jews living in France. They came to be called a "Sanhedrin" -- a Hebrew/Greek term referring to the supreme judicial body in ancient Judea.

Napoleon posed a series of questions to the group, some of which displayed considerable lack of understanding of contemporary Jewish practice. For example, the first was: "Does Jewish law permit a man to be married to more than one wife at a time?" There were other questions, such as, "In the eyes of Jews are Frenchmen brothers or strangers?" and "Do French Jews consider France to be their nation?"

Napoleon was really asking the Jews what citizenship meant to them. "Are you French or are you Jewish? And if you had to make a choice, which would it be? With whom would you side -- your fellow French citizens or your fellow Jews?"

Think what a challenge it was for those Jewish representatives. Think how difficult their task was.



To that question about polygamy, the answer was simple. No, current Jewish law doesn't permit a man to have more than one wife at one time – though one wonders why the French, of all people, would have been worried about that. To the questions about their loyalty to France and their willingness to defend it, the Sanhedrin gave Napoleon the answer he wanted. "France is our country," they said, and "all Frenchmen are our brothers."

Those "loyalty oath" questions, for many of us, seem clearly to come from a different era. For many, the fact that we're Jews and the fact that we're Americans - - and I know that some of us aren't Jews and others are not Americans, but most of us here are both – most of us see the Jewish and the American aspects of our identity to be compatible, even complementary.

Yet the issues raised by Napoleon's questions haven't ever really gone away and sometimes events occur which remind us of them.

The nomination, this past summer, of a Jew to be the candidate for Vice President of one of the major American political parties raised anew many of these issues for us. And, by the way, I bring this up, not to endorse any particular candidate, but to explore the issues this historic moment raises for us.

It was stunning news. Some of us were surprised how strongly we felt. When we heard the name "Lieberman," when we saw it in the headlines, many of us knew and felt something inside.

I can recall that moment at the national convention when the candidate's wife was introduced, and the camera panned to the audience revealing hundreds and hundreds of signs with one word on them: "HADASSAH!" Many of us were wondering, "Is this for real?"

Many of us experienced two very distinct, mingled feelings: exhilaration and anxiety. On the one hand, we were proud: as the punch line in the old joke puts it, "One of our boys made it!" And yet, on the other, echoing yet another Jewish punch line, we were wondering, "Is it good for the Jews, or is it bad for the Jews?"

These reactions are related. The fact is, we've long been a worrying people, because frankly, we've long had a lot to worry about. Concern about our welfare is not surprising.

So is the nomination of a Jew good for the Jews or bad for the Jews? Most of us, who came of age after World War II, feel comfortable and secure as Americans.

True, in the wake of the nomination, there was a spate of anti-Semitic e-mails posted on various internet discussion groups, and there were a few ignorant, prejudicial remarks uttered, such as the one made by the head of the Dallas branch of the NAACP -- for which he was soon summarily dismissed. But we haven't witnessed any storm of anti-Semitism, and the prevailing sentiment in America today seems quite positive toward this nomination.

In the High Holiday Amida^h that we recite many times during these days, there are three petitionary paragraphs that begin with the word, u'v'chen. The middle of the three, uvchen ten kavod l'amecha expresses our prayer that God will grant "honor to your people, acclaim to those who revere you, hope to those who seek you and confidence to those who await you." In reciting u'v'chen ten kavod, we are expressing our hope not only that the Jewish people will be safe and secure in the coming year, but that we will have kavod, we will be respected by those among whom we live.

I am sure that many of us, when the dust settled and we realized how well this nomination was received, felt that, in a significant way, our prayer for kavod, for honor, was being answered in an amazingly positive way.

And yet the Lieberman nomination does pose a challenge to us. It's of a different sort, one that we Jews feel internally. It is a cultural challenge. It is the challenge raised not so much by the sight of a Jew nominated to higher office, but by the realization that Senator Lieberman is a Jew who takes Jewish tradition seriously. A Jew who, in addition to being seen as a person of integrity, a person who cares about the fate of the Jewish people -- qualities we've long been proud to associate with other Jewish political leaders from across the political spectrum -- in addition to these, this candidate is devoted to Jewish observance. And he isn't embarrassed by it. This is a candidate who hopped off a campaign riverboat making its way down the Mississippi River, during the height of campaign season, because it was a Friday afternoon and Shabbes was coming.

How shall I put it? This is a very Jewish Jew.

That's what's new. And that is what might not be entirely comfortable to us. After all, what will happen to all of our excuses? If Senator Lieberman can leave work early on Friday, can we really convincingly argue that we can't? That we're busier than he is?

The challenge is actually deeper than that. For many years, we Jews have assumed that, to make it in America, to truly make it in America, we have to downplay our

cultural and religious differences with those around us. If we want to succeed in this society, we may have to eat what everyone else is eating. We may have to be willing to do business, to socialize at times that may be inconsistent with our own native cultural rhythms.

If we want our kids to make it in this country, our assumption has been that we may have to encourage them to do the same. We may have to enroll them, say, in team sports that compete on Shabbat. We may even have to take an active role in promoting that – if we want to be good and caring parents. We may have to let them, and even urge them, to, say, go to parties on Friday nights. Our premise has been that we and our children have to adopt the language and the values and the rhythm of the greater American society if we are to become accepted in that society. We've assumed that we have to accommodate our Jewish observance to fit in with our American identity, our American lifestyle.

Those assumptions are now in question, as well they should be. Here, after all, is a man who hasn't made those kinds of compromises, and yet he has made it. Here is a man who was voted prom king back in high school even though he didn't ever go to his prom, because it was held on a Friday night. His observance didn't hold him back then and it's not holding him back now. Clearly, the obstacles to being fully accepted in America while remaining different from the mainstream are far fewer than we've ever imagined them to be.

This has, in fact, been true for some time. Over the past few decades, American society has become much more open, much more heterogeneous and culturally pluralistic.

It won't surprise anyone if I tell you that I'm personally more interested in Napoleon's Sanhedrin than in the music of Jennifer Lopez -- even though she is an enormously successful pop singer and performer. But about a month ago, Jennifer Lopez caught my attention and I'll tell you why. I was intrigued to see her co-hosting an extraordinary program on television. It was the first Latin Grammy Awards, the first multilingual broadcast of its kind on a major American network.

It was a risk for the producers. Would Americans watch a program in which some of the performers could be expected to give their acceptance speeches in their native language without any translation, a show in which some of the commercials would be broadcast in Spanish, with English subtitles?

The answer is, "Yes." It was a great show, and it will happen again next year. In an interview, Emilio Este'fan, Jr., a Miami songwriter and producer who just happens

to be the husband of Gloria Este'fan, reflected on what the first Latin Grammy Awards meant to him, and what he felt it meant to Latinos in this country. "It used to be," he said, that "people didn't want to listen to Latin music." It used to be that "people wanted you to change your last name." The Latin Grammys offer proof, he said, that, "in order to be successful you have to be yourself." (Quoted in The New York Times, Wednesday, September 13, 2000).

Think how America has changed! It used to be that we Jews changed our names, too, that we gave up our language, that we felt that we had to bleach out our distinctiveness to make it in this country. That's just no longer the America in which we live.

We are now free to reclaim our cultural treasures without fear that somehow that will impede our security, our acceptance, our happiness. In the words of Senator Lieberman, as reported in a recent interview in The Jewish Advocate, words which sound remarkably similar to those of Emilio Este'fan, "You should feel free to be yourself in America, and know that in doing so, you enrich the country."

Tomorrow we will blow the shofar. When we do, we'll recite the words: "Tka b'shofar gadol l'heruteinu," "Sound the great shofar to herald our freedom." The shofar is a symbol of freedom. But it also reminds us of our covenant as Jews, it reminds us of the shofar that blew at Mount Sinai. "I make this covenant," the Torah says, "with those who are standing here this day and with those who are not with us here this day." That means us.

America is the land of the shofar of freedom. But it's also a land where we're free to listen to the shofar of commitment; we're free to commit ourselves to Judaism.

The question is, do we still want to? Do we want to be committed Jews? In the vacuum resulting from the dropping of our out-dated assumptions, what kind of Jews do we want to be? What kind do we want our children to become? What do we believe and to what are we committed? What mitzvot, what commandments do we understand ourselves to be bound by? What binds us -- to God, to the Jewish People, to the past, to the future?

Do we want to reconnect with what we may have left behind and embrace a distinctly Jewish way of life? That is the question each of us has to ask ourselves.

I think we do. That's why, I think, we're here today. We're here for mutual support in rising to our calling, in becoming who we know we can and should be. Being here today demonstrates a reverence for Jewish tradition, an acknowledgment that

it has claims on us, and – I'd like to think -- a commitment to exploring those claims and trying to live up to them.

Two weeks from today, the holiday of Sukkot begins. Forty or fifty years ago, if you visited an American Jewish community during the holiday of Sukkot, you would likely find a sukkah at the local synagogue but nowhere else. In those years, it was considered too odd, too un-American, for individual Jewish families to construct their own sukkot. And so the sukkah at the shul served as the only place where Jews could experience the holiday.

Today it's a different story. Yes, we have a sukkah at the shul, as we should, but it is hardly the only sukkah around. You can drive through the streets of Needham and Wellesley and Dover and Medfield --and even Weston -- and you will find sukkot in people's backyards and in their driveways. Think what that means! I can't think of a more powerful symbol that true emancipation – cultural as well as political -- is clearly possible in this country. All we need to do is to take advantage of it.

About eighteen years ago, when I was a law student, I attended a gathering at Harvard Law School commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of the great legal scholar and jurist, Felix Frankfurter. I'll never forget one particular presentation at the gathering. Paul Freund, himself a great legal scholar who had been a clerk and a close friend of Justice Frankfurter, told us that, shortly before Frankfurter's death, he was called to his bedside. "Paul," Justice Frankfurter said, "I'm dying. There's something I want you to do for me. I came into the world a Jew and I want to leave it a Jew. Have someone say kaddish at my funeral." And so Paul Freund arranged for someone to say kaddish for Frankfurter after his death.

I was moved by that story. Frankfurter was a pioneer, a hero: a Jew who had risen to the top in the days when a Jew wouldn't even be taken seriously as a candidate for associate in one of the great law firms, much less ever be considered for partnership.

That story was moving. But the more I thought about it, the sadder it seemed. Isn't it a shame that Felix Frankfurter was not as free as we are today to live as a Jew as well as to die as a Jew? That story is from a different era. In the next generation, let us hope, we will be telling different stories about prominent American Jews and the importance to them of their Jewish commitments.

On the eve of the destruction of the first Temple, as the Jews were about to be

dispersed throughout the Babylonian world, the prophet Jeremiah told them, "Pray for the peace of the land to which God is exiling you." The Jews of Napoleon's France took those words to heart. They quoted them to Napoleon as Biblical proof that they would be good citizens. They prayed for the welfare of their government and we should pray for the welfare of ours. We should never take the freedom, the dignity we enjoy in this country for granted. May this wonderful country continue to be a free land, a land where we can flourish as a people, a land whose leaders, whoever they may happen to be, faithfully execute the laws that preserve our precious freedom.

And may we realize fully the blessing of living in this blessed country, not just on Rosh Hashanah but on the days thereafter as well. Let us live up to our mandate as Jews. May we gain the wisdom to behave in such a way that we become the answer to our prayers for kavod -- for honor and dignity -- for ourselves and for our people. Let us be, and let us be known to be, authentic and committed Jews, in all that we do. Amen.