

## What Lieberman's Nomination Means

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Rosh Hashana Day One  
September 30, 2000*

I want to let you in on a secret. Every so often, at this time of year, I am tempted to give the same sermons I gave last year on the High Holidays. After all, television networks get away with it – they call it reruns. Motion picture companies do it. They call it “reissues.” Record companies do it --- they call it “greatest hits.” And at home, many people do it --- Its called, “leftovers.”

I try to rationalize that the messages I delivered last year are still relevant. And besides, we have many new members and others who weren't here last year. Furthermore, much as I hate to admit it, it might even be possible that maybe, just maybe, some who were here may have forgotten what I said. And on top of all that, I think to myself, things haven't changed all that much.

But upon further reflection, I realize I can't do that, for our world has changed a great deal now that it and we are all one year older.

Just look at what is different.

Who would have ever conceived last year at this time, that our country would be fixated on a tv show about a bunch of people stranded on a desert island? Or by a prime time quiz show where the answers are so simple, but which has introduced into our lexicon terms such as “lifeline”, and “Is that your final answer?” And who would have ever predicted that Regis Philbin would be so “hot”,...as a fashion trend-setter, no less?!

Yes, a lot has transpired in this past year. But pop culture is not the only thing that has evolved. Our political landscape is also radically different. And so, as a result of all these changes, I resisted the temptation, and decided to once again write all new sermons for the new year.

Who would have ever dreamed a year ago that a candidate for national office who speaks out on behalf of the role of religion in America would be Jewish.

If a year ago, I were to tell you that one of the candidates at the national convention of one of the major parties uttered the following words:

“I ask you to allow me to let the spirit move me, as it does, to remember the words from Chronicles, which are to give thanks to God, and declare His name and make His acts known to the people; to be glad of spirit; to sing to God and make music to God, and most of all to give glory and gratitude to God from whom all blessings truly do flow.”

You would have assumed it was from a member of the Christian right at the Republican convention. But as you may know, this is from the acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention of Senator Joseph Isadore Lieberman.

And who would have thought that the first major national organization to criticize and rebuke the first Jew nominated for national office would be a Jewish organization.

Is it any wonder that we still marvel and say, “only in America.”

So, today, I join the ranks of just about every other rabbi in America, and speak with you about the candidacy of Joe Lieberman, and its implications for us as Jews. I speak not to endorse any ticket, but because there are lessons which relate to this holy day which are important for us to pause and consider.

As is true of major transcendental events, I am certain that I, like most of you, will always remember where I was and what I was doing when I first heard the news that for the first time, a Jew was on the national ticket. Regardless of one’s political affiliation or inclination, the announcement was electrifying.

I am reminded of the joke about the mother of the first Jewish president. She is reluctant to come to the inauguration, but her son insists. He sends Air Force One to pick her up. She is seated next to world leaders during the swearing in ceremony, has a front row seat at the Inaugural Parade, sits next to Hollywood stars at the Inaugural Ball, and sleeps over in the Lincoln Bedroom that night. When she gets back home, her friends want to know how everything went when she visited her son, and how it feels to hobnob with celebrities and to have such a powerful, famous son. “It was nice,” she answers. “But, his brother is a doctor!”

Maybe even better than that joke is the true story I read in the New York Times the other day. Senator Lieberman’s 85 year old mother is sending care packages to reporters covering her son. She included in brown paper-wrapped boxes Tylenol, lip balm, tissues, an apple, Manishevitz bagel chips, a news clipping about her son, candles, a pair of sunglasses, postcards for reporters to write home to their mothers, and a handwritten note, “Please be good to my son.”

The initial reaction to the selection of Lieberman in the Jewish community was unbelievable. People were ecstatic. Everyone was on the phone calling each other. I was out of town, and when I called Symcha by 8 am, she said we had already received three phone calls about the news.

This is truly an exciting time to be an American Jew.

Craig Horowitz writing in *New York* magazine chronicles the outpouring by saying, “Emotions spilled out. Some people cried. Others had a hard time sleeping. They said things like, ‘God, I wish my parents were alive to see this day.’”

I want to take us back to the emotions of those first few days. There was a unity and sense of pride among our people that is all too rare, and which we need to recapture and preserve. Perhaps on this day when we join Jews around the world in celebrating the New Year and know that we stand together in judgment, we can reflect on that which brings us together.

Despite the excitement in our community, I am troubled this morning by the differences and divisiveness which threaten to tear us asunder and pull us apart.

In Israel, secular and religious Jews are constantly in a state of tension, disagreeing over just about every thing imaginable. We hear about the efforts of the ultra Orthodox to impose their will on the rest of the country, but as I have pointed out before it cuts both ways, with plenty of blame and despicable provocations emanating from both sides.

It is not just overseas or in Israel where our divisions are so strongly felt.

Samuel Friedman documents in his new book Jew vs Jew what happened when Orthodox Jews wanted to build communal institutions in a nice suburban neighborhood in Cleveland. They encountered hostility, animosity, and ultimately were met with well-organized opposition who feared what would happen to their town's identity if this intrusion were allowed to occur. The interesting thing is that the opposition came from other Jews.

He writes that for almost half a century, a "civil war" has raged within the enclaves of American Jewry, pitting secularist against believer, denomination against denomination, gender against gender, liberal against conservative, traditionalist against modernist, and is fought even within each branch of Judaism.

I recently saw photographs of an Israel Day Parade I remember attending in Baltimore, from 1969. Cars were draped with Israeli flags. We celebrated Israel's 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary with the theme, "Israel turns 21: Israel comes of age." It was a time of innocence and of unity. As we face this new century, we need to go forward with a renewed sense of love for each other, for what we have accomplished as a people, and an appreciation for the shared values we hold dear.

A midrash teaches that the reason the grape is chosen to sanctify the sabbath and Jewish holy days is because, whereas other fruits grow individually, grapes grow together in clusters.

Rather than emphasize what we dislike about each other, let us learn to embrace that which we have in common, such as a common destiny and fate. Rabbi Daniel Brenner of CLAL pointed out in a recent article that we share, among other things the love of the history of our people; the pursuit of learning, including the study of Torah; and the desire to celebrate the seasonal and life cycles in ways that connect us to our tradition.

Writing in *New York* magazine, Craig Horowitz describes the reaction of American Jews to the nomination of the first Jew. "Even secular, assimilated, successful Jews who don't

usually give their religious identity much thought gushed about smashing barriers, breaking glass ceilings, and the special historic significance of the moment.

“Every once in a great while”, he writes, “an event occurs that transcends the pettiness, cynicism and sensory overload that distorts so much of our public discourse.”

It is my prayer in this new year that the sense of pride we felt for Lieberman will help us realize that the success of any Jew, of any synagogue, is cause for celebration.

We need to move away from a sense of triumphalism which emanates from certain quarters and from resentment which comes from others. This does not mean we should abolish or even minimize our differences, only that we need to respect each other despite those differences and develop a greater sense of tolerance and civility in our discourse. Let us learn to appreciate that the things which bind us together are greater than that which divides us.

This is one reason why I was pleased to read recently that Lieberman prefers to identify himself as an observant Jew, rather than as an orthodox Jew. This appears to me to be a more inclusive term, for any practicing Jew can strive to be observant, and still be faithful to their affiliation. The truth is that rabbis of all denominations encourage their members to strive to be more observant.

So what about the dispute with the ADL? Is it right for a candidate to advocate a spiritual foundation to American public life, or to proclaim that belief in God is the basis of morality?

Many of us may have mixed feelings on this issue, for on the one hand, Jews have been among the most zealous protectors of the separation of church and state. Yet on the other hand, it is refreshing to have a Jew openly profess his religious faith. It is nice to see that no one religion, political party, or philosophy has a monopoly on moral piety. There is and should be a connection between morality and religion, and we can all agree that we most definitely do need greater morality in our society.

It is no wonder that many believing Christians, who may disagree with some of his stands are as enthusiastic as Jews are about Lieberman’s nomination. Here is someone who does not come from their ranks, but who speaks their language, who understands the power of religion, and who does not shy away from speaking about it publicly.

Are we not less than genuine, however, when we praise Lieberman for speaking openly about his religious convictions, but cringe when the Christian right does the same thing.

The ADL may have a point when it says that it is inappropriate to bring religion too much into the forefront of our political discourse. We must be careful that such talk does not exclude others or intrude upon the Constitution’s ban on government establishment of religion.

I know that good people will hold opposing views on this debate.

For too long, Jews have been uncomfortable with the whole notion of the role of religion in public life, and in private life, for that matter, as well. What Lieberman has done is to show us that it is acceptable to discuss and practice our faith, and that it can and should play a role in how issues of public policy are decided.

But by the same token, Abe Foxman is right to remind us that the Constitutional principle that the state shall not favor any religion should not be violated. Our constitution proclaims that there should be no test of religion to hold public office. While many may be upset with Foxman, the fact that he did not shy away from criticizing the candidate is a sign of the maturity and sophistication of our community.

It may sound somewhat strange, and I don't mean to appear equivocal. But I am proud of Lieberman for having the courage to be an advocate of religion playing a greater role in public life, and I am also equally proud of Abe Foxman for not shying away from criticizing Senator Lieberman.

This may be one of those proverbial classic cases where they are both right, or perhaps, more likely, they both may have gone a little overboard, and they might both be a little wrong.

Again, I want to emphasize and reiterate, I am not endorsing any candidate or party this morning.

However, the possibility of a Jewish vice president, does offer certain enticing possibilities. The Annual Easter Egg Hunt will be changed to "find the afikomen". Saturday evening state dinners will be changed to Sunday night Chinese. We will never again pay full retail for nuclear warheads. White House furniture will have plastic covers. "Hava Nagilla" will be played at all state dinners. And my favorite -- whenever "Hail to the Chief" will be played, secret service agents will lift Gore in a chair and dance around with him.

The selection of an openly observant Jew as a candidate for vice president should cause all of us to reflect upon the nature of our personal practice. Most people always assumed that the first Jew to run on a national ticket would be an assimilated Jew. Who could have ever imagined that it was in large part, precisely because of his faithfulness to Jewish tradition that he was chosen?

In point of fact, one reason he is so widely respected, by nonJews as well as by Jews is because of his integrity, and because he is seen as someone who is sincere about his religious conviction. As one person interviewed by the New York Times said, "He doesn't just say it, he lives it." And we are the beneficiaries, for his moral stature is linked to his Judaism and his upbringing.

Regardless of how one votes in November, we can all agree, Senator Lieberman serves as a shining example that Jews need not be afraid to live our Judaism and to celebrate it. He

has shown us that we do not need to choose between being a good Jew or enjoying the fruits of success in the secular world. No longer is it necessary to attempt to live the ideal of Enlightenment of being a Jew at home, and a man in the street.

Here is a man who did not attend his party's convention when he was nominated as senator from the state of Connecticut, because it was held on the sabbath. He did not complain that the convention was being held on a Saturday, or ask to change the date. Instead he sent a videotaped message because he knew that he could not participate due to his observance of Jewish tradition. And this did not prevent them from nominating him.

On this New Year, when we are each asked to conduct our own heshbon nefesh, accounting of our soul and to review our own practices and observance, we should all try to exemplify his commitment to Judaism.

Lieberman is not perfect, nor is he the first Jew to serve in high office, but he is the first to take Jewish observance so seriously.

Jews have served in prominent positions before. In fact, Governor Bush's main spokesperson is a nice Jewish boy named Ari Fleisher.

But the nomination of an observant Jew as vice president means we have less claim to our traditional role as victims, and can now be honest about what we have always known all along ----- that we are important players on the national scene.

Although it still exists, it means we cannot groan about antisemitism lurking in every corner. It means that our children will confront a whole new world. It means that the barriers and glass ceilings which may have held us back in the past are basically non-existent.

But most significant of all, it also has important implications for us as Jews, and how we should live our lives.

Remember the wonderful scene in the Gene Wilder movie "The Frisco Kid", where he plays a Polish rabbi sent to America. He is on his way out west in the late 1800's. Since he must get to his destination, he cannot waste a day. But since it is shabbat, he cannot ride his horse. So he walks next to his horse, and his companion walks with him. When the sun is setting, he squints, and bends, and maybe even fudges a little at the end. His traveling partner respects the fact that the man with the funny accent and funny garb observes Jewish law. When will we start to realize that as Jews we are called by God to be a Holy people and that we do not gain the admiration or respect of others by abandoning or diluting our religious practice?

How many times have parents capitulated to their children's desire to play soccer on a Saturday? How feeble are the reasons offered when kids miss religious school, leave Sunday school early, or when they do not go on with their religious education. In the

larger scheme of things, ask yourself -- is little league, soccer, or even an exam really more important than an eternal binding covenant for which many of our ancestors gave their lives to preserve?

Parents ---- its time to tell our kids it's a whole new ball game. Our new standard should be, "if its good enough for Lieberman, its good enough for us."

Let's be honest, the kids think that soccer is more important than shul because we don't argue with them. We let them decide, and we don't even put up a fight. And we are no better in the way we act. Parents who would never dream of missing a kid's soccer practice don't give a second thought to dropping their kids off at Saturday morning services--- as if the ushers, other congregants, or I am supposed to babysit their kids while they go out. Sometimes I look out and wonder where these kids come from, how did they get here? Did they arrive by helicopter? By parachute? Parents who would never dream of missing kickoff or the final seconds of a Redskins game don't give a second thought to coming to services late, or leaving early.

Are we really any better off by going to the mall on Saturday or by working on the Jewish holidays rather than attend services with our families and celebrate the sabbath and holidays with our community, or at home with our families?

So, I urge you once again, on these High Holy Days, to realize that the time has come for us to put our priorities in order.

Lieberman has demonstrated and shown us what we should have known all along, and what the conservative movement has always maintained --- that it is possible to succeed in the secular world and still be faithful to Jewish tradition.

Make no mistake about it – the Lieberman nomination is a greater challenge to Jews than it is to middle America or even to anti-semites. It forces us to confront the nature of how we live our lives as Jews, of the extent of our ritual observance. In all too many instances, it is hollow and empty.

Too many of us do not know the simple joys of what it means to celebrate shabbat on a regular basis, to take a break from all other earthly demands and activities so that we can renew and refresh our covenant with our people and our Creator.

Here is what he Senator Lieberman has written about what being a Jew means to him.

"My faith is part of me. It's been at the center of who I've been all my life. Without God, I wouldn't be here. That's where it all begins.

My faith, which has anchored my life, begins with a joyful gratitude that there is a God who created the universe and then because He continued to care for what He created, gave us laws and values to order and improve our lives.

God also gave us a purpose and destiny – to do justice and to protect, indeed, to perfect, the human community and natural environment.

In trying to live according to these principles I am helped by daily prayer and religious rituals, such as observance of the Sabbath – a time to stop and appreciate all that God has given us.”

No rabbi could have said it any better.

In this new year, may we also seek to bring our faith into our lives and homes, and to enrich our lives by increasing our level of observance. In so doing, may we fulfill the Biblical prophecy of God’s promise to Abraham: “that the nations of the world shall be blessed through his seed.” May we be a blessing to God and thus bring blessing to others, and to our world.

Amen

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