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**The Choice**  
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It has been several years since Jews have been as excited about politics as we are this year. An uninspiring presidential race became energized by the selection of Senator Joseph Lieberman, as the Democratic Vice Presidential candidate. Happily, this selection has been warmly greeted not only by Jews, and not only by minorities, but by all Americans.

Joe Lieberman's story is an original American Folk Story. It is an apocryphal tale that reminds us of our nation's immigrant heritage. It is a living example that America is a country where anything can happen; where our children can grow up to become President. And what is most inspiring to me is that this is the first time that a Jew has had a leading role in this drama.

Not so long ago, the idea of a Jewish President, or Vice President, was truly inconceivable. Our parents and grandparents grew up in an America where anti-Semitism, prejudice, and discrimination were daily facts of life. It wasn't only country clubs and neighborhoods that were restricted. Colleges were closed to us, and opportunities were limited. Doctors and lawyers had no place to practice their profession. Indeed, the reason that so many Jewish Hospitals exist today is because, just a few years ago, no one else would hire us – there were *quotas*. Even today Jews continue to have a fear of quotas because we still remember how they were used as a means of discrimination against us. By keeping Jews out of this country, by keeping us out of the universities, by keeping us out of our chosen professions, by limiting our opportunities, quotas restricted lives.

But today those restrictions are gone. If anything, we see an opposite situation. In today's America, Jews, who make up barely two percent of the population, are clearly over-represented in positions of power and influence. We hold over 30 seats in the House of Representatives and 11 seats in the Senate. We are represented on the Supreme Court and in the Executive Branch of government as well. We are *over-achievers*.

Clearly America is a different country today than it was two generations ago. We live in an era in which Jews are prominently represented in every influential aspect of our society.

In his book, [The Vanishing American Jew](#), Alan Dershowitz offers statistics that demonstrate how Jews have prospered, perhaps more than any other ethnic group in America today. Let me summarize some of the information Dershowitz collected. His research shows that:

1. The wealth of individual Jews grew perceptibly during this decade, with 25 percent of America's richest people being of Jewish background. And if we were to count only earned wealth, as opposed to wealth that was inherited, the percentage would be even higher.
2. An American Leadership study in 1971–72 found that Jews represented more than 10% of America's top "movers and shakers in business," a higher percentage than any other ethnic group.
3. The per capita income of Jews is nearly double that of non-Jews. And Jewish charitable giving has increased along with our wealth. Jews are now among the largest contributors to universities, museums,

hospitals, symphonies, opera, and other charities. In fact, in 1991, the United Jewish Appeal raised more money than any other charity in America, including the Salvation Army, the American Red Cross, Catholic Charities, or the American Cancer Society. Yet while Jewish charities have grown, only one-tenth of Jewish philanthropists limit their giving solely to Jewish charities, while one-fourth give solely to non-Jewish causes.

4. Of America's Nobel Prize winners in science and economics nearly 40 percent have been Jews.
5. Of America's 200 most influential intellectuals, half are Jews. Of America's 25 most influential women, as ranked by the 1986 World Almanac, 8, or 32 percent, are Jewish.

In short, we American Jews have reached the apex of our societal climb. We hold high government office, we are captains of industry, and we are prominent in the press, in courts of law, in theater, television and the arts. We have taken advantage of America. It has truly been the land of opportunity!

Jews are not only successful in America today, but we are also popular. Our popular culture, our television and movie screens are dominated by Jewish characters. Even in the most unlikely of places, we can find examples of Jewish acceptance and success. In fact, think for a minute of where you would least expect to find a Jewish success story. Where would it be least probable for a Jew to succeed? How about the world of Professional Wrestling – a form of entertainment popular with young boys all across this country, an environment dominated by characters called Hulk, and Sting, and the Undertaker? Now who is their greatest champion? What name is on the lips of hundreds of thousands of teenage boys, who fill amphitheaters week after week, all over this country? GOLDBERG. GOLDBERG! A former Atlanta Falcons lineman, Goldberg is the idol of the moment, and he has been for several years now.

Yes, from the halls of congress, to corporate America's boardrooms, from Wall Street to Hollywood, from the Movie Theater to the amphitheaters, wherever you look you find Jews. In fact, we are so prevalent in America today that it's not only our kids that don't realize how few in number we are. No, according to the polls, most Americans believe that Jews make up around 20 percent of our country's population.

America has been so hospitable a country to us that Jewish scholars have begun to debate if we should still consider it the "galut" – that is, if living in America should still be considered living in exile. After all, today there is a State of Israel. If we desired we could pick up and move there tomorrow. But we don't! We are comfortable here, happy here. Is it possible that America has also become a Promised Land, a country where we Jews can live free lives, fully express ourselves, and take an active role in all aspects of society? Isn't it possible that America is truly a golden country?

We Jews have been incredibly successful in America. And yet, unfortunately, unbelievably, there is a problem – a serious problem, and a truly great irony. For if life in America is so good, if we're really so successful and happy, and if this country is really such a great place for us to live, then why are we disappearing? If America is so good for us Jews, then why has the conservative American Jewish Year Book projected that by the year 2080, North America's Jewish population will have dropped by one third to four million, while other sources have suggested that our numbers could actually be below one million! How can it be, how is it possible that in the midst of all of this great success, our numbers are declining? Something is not right here.

We have found success in America. Our country has opened its doors to us, opened them wide, and we have walked through them, and are disappearing into the crowd. Assimilation and intermarriage are shrinking our numbers. Today over 60 percent of all marriages are intermarriages. Less than half of these marriages produce Jewish children, and only about 10 percent of their grandchildren identify themselves as Jews.

Now before you turn away from me, before you stop listening to what I'm going to say, I want you to know that this sermon is not about guilt. I'm not standing here telling you that you're bad parents. The fact is that I know first-hand how a family can raise children with a good Jewish foundation, and see one son grow up to be a rabbi, and the other marry a wonderful woman who isn't Jewish. Inter-marriage is a fact of American Jewish life. And it's time for us to bring it out of the closet and discuss it openly. As long as we refuse to look at the problem, we will never find a solution.

Now while I admit that inter-marriage is a fact of life, I'm not prepared to say that we should give up on Jewish marriages. Speaking from a strictly practical point of view, we all know that a successful marriage is hard work. And marriages between people of different religions have to address an additional level of important issues that marriages between two Jews do not.

The emotional stress that strains the couple's commitment begins with who will do the marriage. It continues with the birth of a child: If he's a boy, can he be both baptized and circumcised? How many of these families honestly deal with the question of how they will raise their children? Instead of growing up with one clear set of values and ideals, these children are often exposed to two different, contradictory truths, and expected to sort it all out for themselves. The couple will say: The children will decide their own religion when they grow up – as if this were a simple question with a simple answer that any child could answer for his or herself. If it is such simple a choice, then why doesn't the couple make it themselves? And if the couple puts off deciding because of the stress they feel from their parents, how much less stress will a child feel when they know that they must choose, not only between grandma and grandpa and bubbe and zaydie, but between mom and dad as well. Putting religious identification on the head of a child is no answer.

So no, as I have already said, I do not want to discourage Jewish marriages. I want to strengthen them. But at the same time, I realize, we all realize that inter-marriage is a fact of life. The truth is that the openness of American society that has allowed us the opportunity to achieve unprecedented success, has also introduced us to many good people who are not Jewish. And the teachings of our faith, which emphasize noble and true virtues, like reaching out to the needy, helping the sick, caring for the poor, helping to build a better society, a better world, striving to live good and noble lives, have brought us into contact with other good Americans.

We have preached against prejudice. We have taught our children that all people are equal. We have urged them to be involved in their community. Isn't it natural that as we have become involved and integrated in an open, pluralistic society that we have married those whom we have gotten to know?

The fact is that the world has changed from two generations ago. And as each day passes, and computers and the internet become more and more a part of our lives, even those who wish to wall themselves off from the rest of the world, to live in a cocoon, will find it increasingly difficult to do so. Today's technology will lead to a mixing and mingling of society that will make today's concept of integration look timid. And we Jews are open to exploring and learning about others. We will surely continue to embrace the changes that make the world a smaller place and bring people together.

In ages past, the idea of an open and integrated community presented no problem to the Jewish community. In fact, it was not even a possibility. Jews lived in ghettos, in enclosed societies. To marry out of Judaism was to leave the family. A child who married out of the faith was gone, as good as dead. And thus it came to pass that parents would regard those children as dead. Who can forget the scene from Fiddler on the Roof, a heartbreaking scene that was culled from the real world?

Today such an act by a parent would appall us. What kind of a parent would cut themselves off from the

life of their children, their grandchildren? What kind of a parent would write off their legacy? No, our children don't always make the choices we would hope for, but they are still our children. We still care for them. We love them. We want them to remain a vital, essential part of our lives.

And so, when a child brings home a fiancée, we ask ourselves if the intended is a good person? Do they love my child? Will they care for him or her? Do they have good values? Do we close the door on our children? Do we throw them out of our house? No, we invite them in. We get to know them. After all, they are going to be a part of our family now, and we do want them to raise the children Jewish, so we say a prayer and welcome them into our home.

My friends, it is at this point that we make our greatest mistake. It is at this moment that we shoot ourselves in our foot. We hold a door open to our future children, but we never offer them a key of their own. We welcome them into our home, but we don't ask them to become a part of our family. We don't ask them to convert.

Now I know what you're going to say: Rabbi, I can't do that. I can't impose my own beliefs on someone else. I can't ask them to give up their religion for me. And I respond, why not? They're marrying your son or daughter, they're entering your family circle, and shouldn't you offer them the opportunity to join you. Shouldn't you at least let them know that it is something that they can consider?

Think about this for a minute. Your future son or daughter in law knows that you're Jewish. They know – that you attend temple for the holidays, that you light the menorah, have a Seder, and that you have a mezuzah on your door and a Kiddush cup in your house. They know that your religion is important to you. And yet, you don't ask them to consider joining it. What are they to make of this? You are Jewish, your child is Jewish, and you don't ask them if they want to be Jewish too? The message that we're sending, ever so subtly is, you can have my child, but don't even think about joining my religion. By not asking the question, by not raising the possibility, we are creating the impression that they are not wanted.

Raising the question, offering the option, suggesting a meeting with the rabbi, speaking of how much Judaism means to you, and how much meaning it can bring into his life, and that of his family, these are natural things. And if these conversations never happen, then what is he or she to think? She'll think that we don't want her, or that, it's really not that important to us, after all.

Friends, I'm not suggesting that we take to the streets and start handing out pamphlets to the unchurched. I'm simply asking you to be confident and comfortable in who and what you are. I'm asking you to speak out about what is important to you. To make an offer to people who may not even know that it's an option.

Today, Jews are an admired people. We are smart, successful, and powerful. After Lieberman was nominated, it became a status symbol in Hollywood to show that you had Jewish blood in you.

People all across this great land of ours are interested in learning about Judaism. Look at the best sellers list and you'll still find the beautiful, simple story, Tuesdays with Morrie, where a Jewish man shares his Jewish soul, in humanistic language. Walk into the bookstores and see how many new Jewish books are published. Listen to the Grammy Awards and hear Santana thank and praise God in Hebrew for the winning album of the year. Not only are Jews and Judaism popular, but we are hip.

We live in an open culture, an open society, where people are looking for truth; people are seeking answers to their questions. And Judaism has some very good answers. We wouldn't have survived for

4,000 years; we wouldn't be a good, proud, and successful people today, if Judaism didn't have something valuable to offer.

Judaism has provided us with a foundation for family. It has taught us the value of education. It has instilled in us a sense of justice and compassion. It has taught us to see ourselves as partners with God in the work of the world. We do not wait for others to help us solve our problems; we look for answers ourselves. Judaism has taught us to look at one another with respect. To care for the poor, the orphan and the widow, to heal the sick, to live a good and worthy life, to strive to be holy. Judaism is the foundation on which Western Society is based.

We are the source for the Western World's understanding of God. We have endured oppression, persecution, and exile. We have faced villains who sought to destroy us, to wipe us off the face of the earth, and yet we have survived to this day. And we will continue to survive. But we must seize the moment!

American Judaism is going to be up for grabs, unless we take this task upon our shoulders and truly reach out to those people who have, and will continue to become parts of our family. Unless we give them the key, then we are putting too much faith in chance!

Two thousand years ago, while the Second Temple stood in Jerusalem, Judaism was flourishing throughout the Roman Empire. An historical text from that time, Against Apion, tells us that large sections of the Jewish nation made it their concern to convert non-Jews, and also took pride in the fact that Jewish customs were to be found everywhere. The text states:

There is not one city, Greek or barbarian, nor a single nation where the custom of the seventh day, on which we rest from all work, and the fasts, and the lighting of candles, are not observed...And as God permeates the universe, so the Law has found its way into the hearts of all men. Let each observe his own country and his own household, and he will not disbelieve what I say...

The historian, Ben Sasson continues:

Explicit evidence of a systematic attempt to propagate the Jewish faith in the city of Rome has been found as early as 139 BCE. With the increase of the Jewish population of Rome, the Jews intensified their efforts to make converts among the Romans...The great cities of Syria were particularly full of Jewish converts. One of the great successes in the history of the proselytizing movement was the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene in Mesopotamia. King Izates not only adopted the Jewish faith but also sent his sons to Jerusalem so that they might gain a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew language and the Jewish religion.

We have been brought up with the impression that Jews never sought converts. But this is not true. During those times in our history when Jews were free to mix and mingle with the population at large, when Jews were free to practice their beliefs and share their wisdom, without fear of persecution or punishment, our religion flourished.

We stopped sharing our religion with others, not because we had nothing to share, and not because we were opposed to having others join with us, but rather due to the harsh and severe retribution, which we suffered if we were caught teaching our religion. In the ancient world, when Jews were free to share our knowledge with others, Judaism flourished.

I have no doubts that Judaism will flourish again today. Indeed, it is flourishing already. Just look around us. Look at the city where we live. Northbrook has become a new center of Jewish life. We have five congregations, a new Bureau of Jewish Education, the headquarters of the region's Reform movement, a J.C.C., and a Lubavitch rabbi, all located within three miles of each other.

Judaism is flourishing and can continue to blossom and grow. If only we will have the courage of our ancestors. Let us be proud of our heritage, of who we are and where we come from. Let us invite those who are joining our families, our husbands and wives, our fiancées, our future sons and daughters in law, to join with our people. Let us build a strong foundation for the future, a future in which the Jewish family survives and flourishes.

The truth is that the future of Judaism is not in my hands. Truly, it is not. The future of Judaism is in your hands, all of your hands. Today we number less than six million, two percent of America. Yet we have much to say, much to be proud of, much to be thankful for, and much to look forward to. Let us this day, make a commitment to seeing that future come to be. Amen.