

The Lieberman Phenomenon

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Abstract: An examination of Senator Joseph Lieberman's model of integrating religious commitment with public service in American society, and its implications for Modern Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox ideologies.

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Americans have become quite used to Jews holding high public office in all the branches of government. Beginning with Louis Brandeis, there have been seven Jewish justices on the U.S. Supreme Court. So common has this become that most Americans are probably unaware that the last two appointed justices were both Jews and that at present there are an unprecedented two seated on the court. Indeed the fact that both Justices Ginsburg and Breyer are Jews is probably of less symbolic importance to most Americans than the fact that Justice Ginsburg is the second woman on the court. In the U.S. Congress, Jews have long been over-represented, and often from states where Jews constitute a minority even smaller than the 2% that they make up of the total American population. They have, moreover, held influential leadership posts, and during the tenure of Tip O'Neill as House Speaker, his chief legislative aide was a Modern Orthodox Jew whose *kippah* was as visible as his power and influence. In many state houses and in all levels of local government Jews are found in ample numbers. In the executive branch, this generation has seen a number of Jewish cabinet secretaries including perhaps most prominently the powerful Jewish Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who was also a European refugee; and of course, the current Secretary, Madeline Albright, would be considered a Jew by many rabbinical authorities.

One might therefore conclude that the idea of Jews serving in positions of governmental power is not something all that new either to Americans or the Jewish community. Nevertheless, the unprecedented selection of Senator Joseph Lieberman as a candidate for Vice-President of the

United States has captured the imagination of the nation, even though one might easily make the case that of all the public political offices that Jews have held, the vice-presidency is the least powerful post. Part of that fascination of course has to do with the symbolic importance of the selection of a Jew who will be the proverbial “heartbeat away” from the most powerful office in the land and with the fact that of all government positions, only the President and Vice-President are chosen by all the voters and therefore must answer to all of them.

Yet it is not simply the fact that Lieberman is a Jew that has captivated the nation, but rather it is the character of his Jewish identity and commitments that beguiles so many. For Joseph Isadore Lieberman, unlike all those other Jews in public office, is by his own description “an observant Jew.” It is an observance he takes seriously, one that he displays prominently and that puts him in sharp contrast not only to the other Jews who have held high national office but no less to most other American Jews for whom Jewish observances have devolved to a relative few like fasting on Yom Kippur, going to a Passover seder or lighting Hanukkah candles. Unlike most American Jews, Senator Lieberman observes the sabbath, and *kashrut*, regularly attends the synagogue, prays each day, and has seen to it that his children receive a serious Jewish education. In both beliefs and practices he is part of a minority among American Jews, and his selection implies that these beliefs and practices—which many American Jews have considered an obstacle to their full-fledged engagement in American life and society—do not disqualify one from being fully in and of America.

Yet there is more that this selection has accomplished. For many Americans, the working assumption has been that any religiously observant and fervently faithful person must also embrace the political values and worldview of the conservative right wing in this country. During the last twenty years, this has been the argument most prominently of the Christian right. A close look at Joseph Lieberman, however, reveals that while he shares their respect for religion and many traditional values, his sincere religious commitments have not necessarily led to his embracing their politically conservative ideology or views. On the contrary, on the basis of his record and statements, Lieberman demonstrates that one can be serious about his faith and its commitments yet still support liberal democratic principles with regard to people's personal status, treatment of the poor and the powerless. In effect, Lieberman's religiousness challenges the assumption that there is an ineluctable contradiction between the values of faith or religious commitment and those of a liberal democracy. In effect, by his example he helps rescue religion from what has been the exclusive, even jealous, grasp of both the Christian and the political right. As such, he shows America that one can embrace faith without at the same time having to choose policies that scorn or spurn the values of liberal democratic values. That will perhaps allow a whole new sector of America to reconsider their resistance to religion, its values and commitments.

Just as his example challenges these American political assumptions, so too does it challenge certain truisms that have in these same last twenty years become current in the Jewishly observant community. It is no secret that the view that has increasingly dominated certain precincts of observant Jewry is that genuine Jewish commitments require nothing less than a full time engagement in Judaic activity. For many who espouse this point of view the goal of Jewish learning and observance has become nothing less than more Jewish learning and more punctilious observance. So powerful has this trend become that the old maxim of, *"yafeh Torah im derekh erets,"* which means that Jewish learning and observance should be integrated with a positive attitude toward and activity in the world

that we inhabit, has become increasingly ignored. In its place, the metaphor of *"vehagita bo yomam va leila,"* one should meditate on and be engaged by the Torah night and day, has taken over and become interpreted as the dominant recipe for ideal Jewish observance and life. This metaphor has been used by many young observant Jews and their mentors as a mandate to advocate an active retreat from the American public square, to be in contemporary society but not a part of it. This tendency to dwell in America but not truly share in its culture or life has often evolved into a devaluation of American society and culture or to view it at best as, in the words of one prominent Rosh Yeshiva, a "handmaiden" to Jewish life. Nothing perhaps symbolized this better than the case of the Yale students who were prepared to get a Yale degree but wanted little to do with Yale culture and life, as it was to be found in its dormitories. Of course to many among the Orthodox, the very decision to even go to a place like Yale, which represents to some an apex of what American culture has to offer, was viewed as wrong-headed. Better to stay in a Jewish environment, go to a yeshiva.

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Not only has this attitude transformed the yeshivas and Jewish study halls into fortresses and many Jewish neighborhoods into virtual ghettos, but more insidiously it has also given birth to a posture of disdain to any Jews who do not share in this radical parochialism. The assumption here is that true Jewish commitments and sincere observance cannot allow room for anything else and demands an active turning away from the American (read: *goyish*) public square.

Senator Lieberman's embrace of the American public square, his active engagement in political life, his attachments to Yale University, his concern for minorities other than his own—as illustrated, for example, in his activities

in the black civil rights movement as well as his voting record—his engagement in American political culture and social life, even while maintaining his high level of Jewish engagement and identity shows his fellow observant Jews that there is room in the life of the committed Jew for activities that are not parochial. Even as he defers some of his pursuits in the American public square in favor of his Jewish commitments and observances, he also reminds us by his example that there are times when even an ardent Jew has other legitimate concerns, that indeed, “*yafeh Torah im derekh erets.*” Observance and Jewish responsibility do not demand parochialism and the retreat from this-worldly activities. On the contrary, the genuine test of Jewish faith and commitment is the extent to which the observant Jew finds a way to maintain his religious obligations in this world rather than hiding within the four cubits of the *halakhah* or the citadels of Jewish learning. It is no trick to remain observant and Jewishly committed within the walls of the yeshiva or the boundaries of the virtual ghetto; everyone there does so. The true test of faith comes for those who experience the tug of other engagements and who still are able to hold fast to that faith and commitment.

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This is something that Modern Orthodoxy long ago realized and it is the premise of the way of life its followers champion. That is why Senator Lieberman finds a Modern Orthodox synagogue to be the Jewish institution in which he feels most at home. And that is why his new prominence has so energized many of his Modern Orthodox counterparts who see in him a projection of so much that they hold dear. Even more than a rabbi—who is after all primarily attached to the Jewish domain and concerns and therefore cannot act as a role model of how to inhabit two universes—someone like Mr. Lieberman

can demonstrate the capacity of the Jew to be both observant and integrated in American life. This is no small matter to today’s Orthodox Jewry. And of course, it is a message that will not be lost on other Jews who will, perhaps, take another look at their religion.

Orthodoxy in America, although shrinking as a proportion of this country’s Jewry (down from about 15% thirty years ago to about 10% at last count), has during the last twenty years become far more visible and assertive than it was during the 1950’s and 1960’s when it was rebuilding itself in this country. Part of this change is a result of its surprising (surprising only to those in the Jewish majority who predicted its decay and decline) success in building institutions (particularly day schools and *yeshivot*) and its refusal to confirm the predictions of its imminent demise. Part, however, is also a result of a changing America, an America that departed from its mono-cultural melting pot ideal in favor of a far more ethnic and culturally pluralist salad bowl model. In this sort of America, Orthodox Jews could, like other ethnic groups, proudly stand out and still be part of the mosaic of American society. Here they could build their lives without the prejudice and obstacles that so many other Diaspora communities experienced. Paradoxically, this cultural condition which made Orthodoxy feel freer to be itself than ever before led in most cases to an Orthodoxy that actually segregated itself more from America in many ways. This Orthodoxy, increasingly *haredi* in character, effectively asserted thereby that it did not truly trust American tolerance for pluralism and was therefore best off seeing to it that observant Jews kept themselves to themselves and became more scrupulous about their Judaism, a Judaism which they believed was being eroded by the open and beckoning society of America. To be sure, they were ready to take whatever resources they could from that America in order to “rebuild” and “fortify” themselves after their devastating demographic and cultural losses during the first half of the twentieth century.

Modern Orthodoxy, however, has displayed a greater trust in the salad bowl version of America. Modern Orthodox

Jews have believed they can keep a foot in both their own communities and the larger American one. Joseph Lieberman's candidacy as well as his previous electoral victories and public engagements prove that, at least thus far, his trust has not been misplaced. One might say that the senator has shown that these days one need not simply be an American Jew but rather can be a proud Jewish American, one whose religious and ethnic identity modifies his American identity rather than the other way around. As such, his selection by Al Gore for this symbolically important co-starring role in the contest for the top electoral prize in America represents for many Modern Orthodox not only a confirmation of their trust in America and its capacity to allow them to be both Orthodox and fully engaged American citizens. It also serves as an implicit reproof to their *haredi* fellow Orthodox, whose life choices have suggested that there can be no such possible intersection.

Yet the matter is not completely resolved. That is why so many of the right wing Orthodox seem to be watching Lieberman for signs that he is actually not "strictly Orthodox." By de-legitimizing Lieberman's *bona fides* as an Orthodox Jew, these Jewish right-wingers implicitly hope to legitimate their own choices to remain aloof from the American public square that Lieberman has so obviously and enthusiastically entered. "See," they seem to say, "he cannot really be Orthodox and do the things he does." For if he could, then their decision to embrace parochialism would be open to challenge.

This sort of challenge is not unlike the one that certain elements of the American political right wing have also leveled at Lieberman. They argue that he cannot truly be religious if he is liberal (or he cannot truly be liberal if he is religious, as the left-wing political secular radicals have conversely argued). But of course if he can be religious and liberal, then the vistas of what is possible for the faithful become far broader—as those who are religious must realize.

The debate will surely go on, growing more agitated as election day nears. While the American voter will ultimately decide Lieberman's fate as a candidate, the legitimacy of the example that his life and choices will be decided only to the extent that others follow that example. The more observant Jews there are who emulate his model—one committed to a serious Judaism but also engaged by contemporary society; one desiring to share in democratic ideals and to embody *torah im derekh erets*—the more that way of life will triumph over its parochialist and innately anxious challenger. Likewise, the more those who are attached to liberal democratic ideals can find ways to integrate religious beliefs and observances into their lives without abandoning those ideals, the more will that combination prevail over those of the political right wing who have commandeered religion for their own ends. Time will tell if Joseph Lieberman will be the forerunner of a new renaissance of Modern Orthodoxy and a liberal democratic religious America or an anomaly that will be a footnote in history.