

Joe Lieberman's Old-Time Religion

Vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman is attracting Christian votes because he talks about God more than your average Democrat.

Regardless of who wins the November election, the Bush-Gore contest will go down in the history books for one thing: the nomination of Joseph Lieberman, the first Jew to run on a major party's presidential ticket. Religious barriers were shattered in August when the Connecticut senator was tapped to be Gore's running mate. Another record was broken when Lieberman mentioned God a total of 13 times in his acceptance speech on the steps of the Tennessee Capitol in Nashville.

Sounding like a rabbi as he quoted the Old Testament, Lieberman said his selection by Gore inspired him to "give thanks to God and declare His name and make His acts known to the people." Since then, Lieberman has thanked God, praised God and honored God so many times in his speeches that his supporters began asking him to tone down the rhetoric. He was starting to sound more like Jerry Falwell than a liberal Democrat.

At a black church in Detroit in August, Lieberman had folks standing in the aisles and shouting amen as he talked about religious freedom and the power of faith. He told worshipers that if elected he would encourage all of God's people "to study together, to pray together and ultimately to sing together His holy name."

This is a politician talking? Actually, Lieberman's conservative critics say that's the problem. The man sounds like an Orthodox Jew, but his voting record doesn't always match his religion.

For example, Orthodox Jewish teaching explicitly forbids abortion—yet Lieberman is pro-choice. He says he personally believes that life begins at conception, but he stated on Larry King Live that abortion is “a matter of personal judgment.” He added: “And like everything else in Judaism, ultimately it’s up to each of us to decide what we think is right.”

But that isn’t what Orthodox Jews teach. And Orthodox rabbis were probably squirming when Lieberman’s wife, Hadassah, told Time magazine in August that her faith is of the squishy, relativistic variety. “There are a lot of people,” she said, “who find their centering in various ways. I’m not suggesting that it has to be through God. I’m saying that’s what works for us. And we’ll share that with the whole country.”

In recent years Lieberman has made pious denunciations of Hollywood sleaze and raunchy rap songs—winning Christian support in the process. He also is one of the few Democrats who publicly criticized President Clinton for the Lewinsky affair. Yet when it came time for punishment, Lieberman voted against impeachment—then later in a campaign speech he compared Clinton to Moses.

So, is Lieberman a practicing Jew who takes his faith seriously? Absolutely. He keeps a kosher kitchen and won’t drive a car or use a telephone on the sabbath. On more than one occasion he has walked the two miles from his home in the District of Columbia to the Capitol because he was needed for an important vote on a Saturday.

He has consulted with Orthodox rabbis about how he can fulfill his obligations as vice president without violating Jewish laws. They assured him that it is acceptable for a Jew to work on the sabbath if life is at stake. (If Gore wins the election, however, it is possible that Lieberman will not attend the inauguration since this year’s ceremonies are scheduled on a Saturday.)

Lieberman has Christian friends in Washington, including evangelical Sen. Dan Coates of Indiana and conservative Catholic activist William Bennett. He also has overwhelming support from African American Christians.

On September 21 in Washington, D.C., President Clinton urged a group of Church of God in Christ bishops to elect Gore-Lieberman. The Pentecostal ministers pledged to “continue the Clinton legacy” of helping the black community by backing Gore.

But most Messianic Jews—those who believe in Jesus—aren’t supporting Gore even though they’re happy that a Jewish person is on the Democratic ticket. “We aren’t thrilled with his stand on the issues,” said Robert Cohen, a Messianic rabbi at Congregation Beth Jacob in Jacksonville, Florida.

“Most Messianic Jews are not pro-choice, and we are not in favor of partial-birth abortion,” said Barry Rubin, rabbi at Emmanuel Messianic Congregation in Columbia, Maryland. While he believes Lieberman’s faith is sincere, Rubin told Charisma that he will vote for Bush, adding: “Maybe one day we will have a Messianic Jewish vice president.”