

In a wondrous display of unity, the American Jewish community rejoiced about Senator Lieberman's nomination as the Democratic Vice Presidential candidate, not because all Jews are necessarily going to vote for Al Gore for president, but because it demonstrates that seriously observant Jews are accepted at all levels of American life.

Last month, Abraham Foxman, the director of the Anti-Defamation League, broke that solid wall of enthusiasm for Lieberman, and became the first major voice in the Jewish community to offer criticism of Lieberman's public religiosity. After seeing Senator Lieberman proclaim his faith in God numerous times, talking about how important faith is to one's character, the ADL sent out a warning that appealing to voters on the basis of religion is violating the church-state separation of our constitution. The concern of the ADL is that religious speech by a politician might lead to government sponsored religious preferences, a clear violation of our constitution.

It is my opinion that the fears of the ADL are not motivated by a pure desire to protect the constitution, but rather represent a kind of ghetto mentality, developed during the centuries that Jews lived in fear of persecution by Christians. At a deep and perhaps even unconscious level, many Jews harbor a fear that non-Jews are secret Jew haters.

We have to break out of this ghetto mentality. Our sacred texts teach us that belief in God is good, and is in fact a necessary precursor to a perfect world. The classical prophecies of the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, teach us that in Messianic times all people will be united in belief in God. The prophet Zachariah teaches:

וְהָיָה ה' לְמֶלֶךְ עַל-כָּל-הָאָרֶץ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהִי־ה' אֶחָד וַיִּשְׁמוּ אֶחָד:

“On that day, Adonai will rule over all the earth; on that day, Adonai will be one and God's name, one.” [Zachariah 14]

The prophet Isaiah teaches:

כִּי-מִלְאָהּ הָאָרֶץ דַּעַה אֶת-ה' כַּמַּיִם לַיָּם מְכַסִּים:

“[On that day,] the earth will be full of the knowledge of Adonai as water fills the sea.” [Isaiah 11:9]

כִּי בֵיתִי בַיִת-תְּפִלָּה יִקְרָא לְכָל-הָעַמִּים

“My house will be a house of prayer for all people.” [Isaiah 56]

Our sacred texts also teach us that we should be an אור גוֹיִם [Isaiah 49:6], a light of the nations, sharing our knowledge and traditions about God with others.

These prophecies do not mean that everyone needs to become Jewish, but just to acknowledge the oneness of God, which many of the great faiths of our world already do. We should not be threatened by Christian expressions of faith in God. I was not bothered in the least when Bush said that his favorite philosopher was Jesus. Good for him! If he would try to behave like Jesus, he would be a much better leader for this country, and Texas wouldn't be leading the nation in executions and environmental destruction.

The old guard in Jewish communal life are still afraid that beneath the surface, every Christian is a Jew-hater. Judith Banki, who has worked in Jewish-Christian dialogue for more than 40 years, said in a Hadassah Magazine article last January:

“The Church has come a long way. Jews, however, are a different story. I don't think Jewish attitudes have changed enough. There's still a very deep-seated suspicion that the Church's changes are expedient, that secretly they're only trying to get our guard down and leave us more open to conversion.”

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, the respected Orthodox theologian and founder of CLAL, a cross-denominational Jewish Center of Learning and Leadership, agrees. Referring to recent steps the Vatican has taken to repair its relationship with the Jewish community, he said:

Many Catholics feel the Jewish community is still giving the stereotyped response, as if nothing has happened. The Jewish community needs to clean up its act..”

I admit, I was bothered by Governor Bush’s Texas proclamation of Jesus day a few months ago, although Christmas, the biggest Jesus day of all, has been a Federal holiday forever. What bothered me was Bush’s call to follow - in his words - Christ’s message. Most of what Jesus said comes straight from the early Rabbinic tradition, and is in fact not problematic for Jews. By using the word Christ, however, Governor Bush was implying that he wants us to embrace Jesus as Christ, or Messiah. To ask me as a Jew to follow this message is offensive, and that kind of government preference of Christianity is a major violation of the separation of Church and State.

We must not let incidents like this deter us, however, from joining the new era in religious freedom, one in which we no longer need to isolate ourselves from dialogue with people of other faiths, but join with them in the religious act of tikkun olam, making the world a better place. Not all Jewish, Christian or Muslim language about God is exclusive of people who follow other religions. Language such as that which Lieberman used, that appeals to a common faith in God and common principles of morality, of which there are many, is a positive step by the Jewish community.

A few weeks ago, a full page ad appeared in the New York Times entitled, “Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity. Dabru emet is a phrase from a verse from Zachariah, “These are the things you are to do: Dabru emet, speak the truth to one another, render true and perfect justice in your gates.” It lists 8 statements about how Jews and Christians may relate to one another. The seventh statement reads:

A New Relationship Between Jews and Christians Will Not Weaken Jewish Practice. An improved relationship will not accelerate the cultural and religious assimilation that Jews rightly fear. It will not change traditional Jewish forms of worship, nor increase intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, nor persuade more Jews to convert to Christianity, nor create a false blending of Judaism and Christianity.

Judaism teaches that belief in one God is one of the fundamental mitzvot for all humanity, and that an ethical system rooted in belief in a Supreme Being is going to be superior to one based on relativistic, humanistic principles. Thus, from a Jewish point of view, those who profess and act on a faith in one God are to be celebrated, not held at arm’s length with suspicion.

Senator Lieberman’s candidacy has done wonders for the self-image of American Jews. Jews who never wear kippot were visible in kippot at the Democratic National Convention, because they were proud to associate themselves publicly as Jews. The media’s focus on Lieberman’s serious Jewish observance has also been good for the Jews. It is going to become more acceptable to be a serious Jew who observes Jewish holidays, even if they conflict with the work week. It will be impossible not to know that the weekends of Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot, and Simhat Torah are festival days when Jews should go to the synagogue.

But if his influence stops with the Jewish community, he will have failed. The most significant result of his candidacy will be that he has deepened the serious discussion of faith in politics, and faith in general. His religiosity is a challenge to other candidates in offices high and low to be equally serious about religion if they are to claim their faith as a reason why they should be

elected. He has given the country an example of a fervently religious person who does not want everyone to become a Jew like him; but rather, to take God seriously, each in our own way. If we take this opportunity to shed our remaining prejudices and fears about non-Jewish religiosity, then win or lose, his candidacy will have been a blessing for our country and its political process.

May this land under the God's providence be an influence for good throughout the world, uniting all people in peace and freedom, and helping them to fulfill the vision of your prophet:

“It shall come to pass in the end of days that the mountain of Adonai's house shall be established at the top of the mountains and be exalted above the hills, and the nations shall flow unto it ... and many peoples shall go and say, ‘Come and let us go up to the mountain of Adonai to the house of the God of Jacob and God will teach us of God's ways and we will walk in God's paths.

Amen.