

Keeping the faith? Candidate Lieberman fails the test of his heritage

The Jewish New Year begins tomorrow night. Rosh Hashanah, symbolized by the blowing of a ram's horn, is a blend of hope and fear, possibility and failure, daring and disillusionment.

Never have Jews been less exotic than this year, as Joe Lieberman runs for the vice presidency and reporters and photographers gather around him at the entrance of a synagogue. He exults in speaking of his faith as he "educates" Americans in the nature of Orthodox Judaism, although, perhaps in deference to the other more skeptical Orthodox, he has changed his self-description from "Orthodox" to "observant."

I find myself sadder rather than wiser, watching him compromise his testimony in the spotlight of a campaign, sacrificing himself through the hypocrisy and pragmatism that seem to be the

requirements of a politician. Now I know how the evangelical Christians felt as they watched their beliefs fed into the trivializing maw of politics two decades ago when Jimmy Carter became the candidate.

The man who broke the silence in his party to criticize the president's tawdry behavior could not break from party lines on a single impeachment issue. The man who has been so concerned with the corrupting influence of the entertainment world now socializes with the rich and famous with hat — a yarmulke is too small to carry the swag — in hand.

What's worse is that he deliberately distorts his own heritage. When asked by Don Imus whether Judaism has a ban on interracial

marriage or dating "or that sort of thing," he replied: "No, there is no ban whatsoever. Certainly not on interracial. And not on interreligious."

That's simply not true. "There is a 'clear and irrevocable Torah prohibition' against a Jew intermarrying," Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesman for the Orthodox umbrella group Agudath Israel of America, told Binyamin L. Jolkovsky of the JewishWorldReview.com, an Internet news site. "It has nothing to do with race, as anyone from any ethnicity can become a Jew if he

or she is sincerely motivated and willing to undergo Halachic conversion."

The rabbi offered a reminder to the senator: "He is running for vice president, not chief rabbi." Of

course, that's all the more reason, he concedes, that in "his new prominence he must be very concerned not to seriously mislead anyone, Jew or gentile, about Jewish religious belief or practice."

When Joe Lieberman was nominated Jews joked that the Democratic Jewish vote would soar from 99 percent to 100 percent. That was an exaggeration, but only to a degree. Only the other night at a Washington dinner party several Orthodox Jews who regard themselves as conservative Republicans told me they'll probably vote Democratic this year because there's an Orthodox Jew on the ticket. This was, however, before Mr. Lieberman told Don Imus that he "mumbled" over certain synagogue prayers he didn't agree with.

The day after that an Orthodox believer called me close to

despair, wondering what has happened to this wonderful man who no longer seemed to believe what he had always said he believed. "He's selling out everything, the very basis of his faith, the essence of his faith." No man can say what is in another man's heart, of course, and it's both arrogant and foolish to try to plumb another man's relationship with God, and this is why mixing faith and politics can have such disastrous consequences.

You don't have to be Jewish to be puzzled by Mr. Lieberman's performance on the trail. William Bennett, the onetime secretary of education and "Book of Virtues" man who is a close Lieberman friend, expresses deep disappointment over the senator's capitulation to the entertainment industry.

"I am a virtual absolutist on the First Amendment, but Senator Lieberman and I were doing more than 'nudging' the entertainment industry" he says. "We were trying to shame them." Mr. Bennett, a Roman Catholic, was outraged when he heard that both the senator and the vice president, an evangelical Bap-

tist, sat without protest when a speaker at their fund-raiser told a tasteless joke mocking the Christian faith.

"Seinfeld" producer Lenny David, no doubt thinking he was being ever so clever, said: "Like [Governor] Bush, I, too, found Christ in my 40s. He came into my room one night, and I said, 'What no call? You just pop in?'"

Says Mr. Bennett: "This is just further confirmation that the only kind of bigotry still permissible is anti-Christian bigotry." Indeed, this is particularly offensive to devout Christians, including the Rev. Jerry Falwell, who have been most fervent in defending Mr. Lieberman against the criticism that he was improperly speaking of his Jewish faith on the stump.

Daniel Lapin, an Orthodox rabbi who heads a group called "Toward Tradition," which brings together Orthodox Jews and conservative Christians, draws an analogy between the sound of the shofar and the sound of a child when you can't tell whether he's laughing or crying. That's how many Jews feel about Joe Lieberman: We don't know whether to laugh or cry.



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