

The Founders and the Torah

By Michael Novak

I don't know who the critics of Joe Lieberman's use of religious references in his vice presidential campaign talk to. Everybody I know, right and left — especially right — is cheering his view that America needs a constitutional space for religion in public, that Americans should talk more about religion in public, that this is the most religious nation on the planet and that secularists who wince at religion in public are to religion what Victorians were to sex.

I am pulling for Bush and Cheney, not Gore and Lieberman, and I am not Jewish but Roman Catholic. Still, I love what Senator Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, is doing to wake this nation up to its deepest identity, rooted in Jewishness.

John Adams wrote, "I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation." He wrote as a Christian, but added that even if he were an atheist and believed in chance, "I should believe that chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all man-

kind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization."

Think of it. Civilization requires civility — men and women who hold that other women and men have something important to say. That, in turn, requires belief in the deeper proposition that, underneath everything, there is truth to be discovered and evidence to be attended to, because at the end of the day everything finally makes sense and is headed somewhere decent and good. That proposition enables civilized people to trust to argument with one another in the confidence that truth will win out; its absence compels barbarians to rely on clubs. And

the Hebrews taught the human race that truth is not an abstract noun but another name for a person, a divine presence capable of infinite insight and creative decision.

I have long thought that historians, political theorists and lawyers pay far too much attention to the least religious founders, like Jefferson, to the neglect of the other 90-plus who signed either the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution or both. They equally neglect the scores of thousands of actual voters who ratified the Constitution, whose views were far more like those expressed

above by Adams than like Jefferson's. By his own admission, Jefferson kept his irreligious views silent, lest they cost him the presidency and his good reputation, even though by today's standards his beliefs in a divine judge and governor of the universe would disqualify him as a secularist.

The best kept secret of American

Lieberman's faith is in the American grain.

history is that the favorite language of that founding generation came from the Torah. The founders referred to their own experiment as the Second Israel. They commissioned a design for the Great Seal with a symbol recalling the first Israel, for they thought of themselves as crossing the deserts of Egypt en route to building a "city on the hill."

Ben Franklin proposed as a motto of the Republic "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God." It fit the American circumstance. The signers of the Declaration, after all, were committing treason. They needed some sort of moral warrant. They also needed hope that they could avoid the hangman's noose; they faced the most powerful army and navy in the world.

It helped that they believed that Providence would assist them and that Providence had created the world so that liberty would in the end prevail. For without liberty, how could the Creator, who desired the friendship of free women and men rather than the worship of slaves, fulfill his eternal purposes?

Most historians lazily say that the founders were Deists, because they did not use Christian names for God, like Trinity and Savior and Redeemer. They miss the crucial point. Three names for God in the Declaration — Creator, Judge and Providence, are unmistakably Jewish names for God. This language did not come from the Greeks or Romans.

If the schoolchildren of America were to say a daily prayer entirely in the language of the Declaration, to the Creator who endowed in us our rights, the Supreme Judge of the rectitude of our intentions, the Providence on whom we rest our firm reliance in our ventures, and the Author of nature's laws, Jews, Christians and Muslims could happily join in.

The minority of Americans who do not believe in the God described in the Declaration is very small indeed; polls suggest perhaps 8 percent. It may be that more than half of those who agree with Joe Lieberman on religion in public will vote for the other party. But the God he points to is far above either party and unites us even in the most disparate parties of this world. □



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