

Observing Lieberman: Religious practice in public

From the Editors in the [August 30, 2000](#) issue

A few days before the 1988 election that sent him to the U.S. Senate from Connecticut, Joseph Lieberman heard an encouraging story from one of his friends. According to the account in his book *In Praise of Public Life*, a supporter overheard his mother and her friends (all Christians) saying they were going to vote for Lieberman (a religiously observant Jew) because he was “a religious man.” The friend realized then that Lieberman’s decision not to campaign on the Jewish sabbath could be a political strength. “It tells people that something matters to you more than political success.”

In selecting Lieberman as their vice-presidential candidate—and the first Jew on a major national ticket—Al Gore and the Democrats are hoping for a similar response from the rest of the nation. By the delicate calibrations of American politics, Lieberman appears religious in the right way: he projects a sense of integrity and rootedness without seeming dangerously alien to those who don’t share his faith.

As a Jew, Lieberman may actually be more free to talk about how he keeps his faith than a devout Catholic or evangelical Christian would be. As an adherent of a minority religion that historically has been deeply committed to religious and social tolerance, Lieberman’s God-talk is not likely to conjure up fears of coercion or domination. And since rabbis have generally not offered systematic or authoritative pronouncements on public policy the way that Catholic or Protestant leaders have, he is not shadowed by any controversial religious authority figures.

So far, most of the discussion of Lieberman’s Jewishness has focused on a particular religious practice: sabbath observance. As countless reporters have noted, from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday Lieberman does not work (or campaign), and he tries to avoid driving or traveling (or wearing a watch). “This is the time when the worldly concerns of the rest of the week are put on hold,” he writes, “so that we can focus on all that God has given us.” Lieberman is quick to

assure people, however, that these rules may be broken in an emergency.

It's refreshing to find the discussion about "religion in politics" attending to a concrete religious practice. Lieberman's sabbath-keeping shows that it's possible to make a significant religious witness in politics simply through one's everyday practices, quite apart from political position-taking. It also shows that religious practices can be appreciated by those outside the faith. Sabbath-keeping is both private expression and public witness. Lieberman's staff, colleagues and constituents have apparently not had much trouble grasping what it means and respecting it, even if they don't hold to the theological rationale for it.

We welcome Lieberman's presence in this election as a sign of our society's openness to religious difference, and we hope it will serve to heighten people's sense of the various ways of being religious in public.