

## The Bible Is on Joe's Side

Opinion

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To whom does Joseph Lieberman owe his loyalty? To whom is the sole member of the newly created Connecticut for Lieberman party ultimately responsible?

Lieberman has argued that he is staying in the race for Senate, despite the nearly universal condemnation he has received from the Democratic establishment, because he owes his allegiance to the people of Connecticut and the United States, not to the Democratic Party per se. Irrespective of the senator's controversial positions on Iraq and toward President Bush, and of what some have characterized as his unbridled egoism, serious students of leadership must ask: Is it, in fact, legitimate to claim that service to followers trumps fealty to party?

Whatever else one thinks of his decision to stay in the race, from the perspective of classical Jewish sources — a frame of reference, it should be pointed out, that Lieberman has not cited publicly — the incumbent is on solid ground. Though obviously no direct textual link exists between biblical writings and American partisan politics, it is possible to extrapolate some important insights on this issue from pre-modern Jewish teachings.

A variety of ancient Jewish sources suggest that leaders owe loyalty to the people-at-large, rather than to any intervening entity or party apparatus, precisely because it is the people, along with God, who authorize a leader's powers from the outset. Even in cases when God is said to have handpicked specific leaders — biblical priests, prophets and kings — those individuals also had to be sanctioned directly by the people.

Thus, for example, the inauguration of the high priest required the presence of the “entire community” (Leviticus 8:1-3), and the kings of Israel needed endorsement of “the people” at large to begin their reigns (II Kings 11:17-20). Even the prophets had to prove themselves to the rank-and-file (I Kings 18:17-40), and were unable to rely solely on divine election.

Using the standard suggested by Jewish precepts, only those who choose to serve the people writ large can be considered exemplary leaders. While today some contend that obedience to party insiders is tantamount to meeting the needs of their followers, Lieberman's argument that the two are not always the same has much to commend it.

The ideal leader, according to a variety of Jewish sources, is one who is defined as a servant of all the people. When Rehoboam, son of Solomon, ascended to the throne and sought input from his father's former aides, he was told, “If you will be a servant to those people today and serve them, and if you respond to them with kind words, they will be your servants always” (I Kings 12:7).

The mission of a leader, the new king was counseled, is not to reinforce the reigning policies of an exclusive coterie, but to serve the nation as a whole. The talmudic sages extended this dictum when they insisted that “whoever is appointed over a community becomes the servant of the community” (Yalkut I Kings, 197; Horayot 10a-b).

Another rabbinic commentary opines that in the eyes of God, those who hold elite positions in an enterprise

are no more valuable than the general public they purport to serve. The verses of Deuteronomy 29:9-10, found at the end of the Torah, suggest as much: “You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God — your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to waterdrawer.” The rabbis maintained that the point of this detailed listing was to underscore that “all of you are equal” before God (Tanhuma, Nitzavim 2).

A human leader’s primary loyalty then, belongs not to political apparatchiks, but to the people at large.

That a leader should be bound to the people more than to any subset of special interests is implicit in much of Hasidic literature, as well. Compare the current bipartisan tendency to conflate what’s best for the party with the interests of the polity, and the teaching of the 19th-century work “Derekh Emunah U’maseh Rav”: “If God has granted you the privilege of being a leader, let everyone be important in your eyes and not inconsequential, for you cannot know who is worthy and who unworthy.”

When the famed Hasidic tzadik known as the Rebbe of Ger was asked to also serve as the head of the Kotzker sect, he came to understand that a leader is obligated to serve all the people, not just a select few. “Why have I deserved to become the leader of thousands of good people? I know that I am not more learned or more pious than others. The only reason why I accept the appointment is because so many good people and true have proclaimed me to be their leader” (Meir Einei Hagolah 2:29-30).

To be sure, Joseph Lieberman’s insistence that his primary obligation as a leader is to his state and his nation, rather than to his party, will continue to ruffle more than a few feathers. And as a political stratagem, there is no guarantee it will succeed.

But when evaluated in the context of classical Jewish sources, Lieberman’s contention is both legitimate and authentic. Moreover, in its radical departure from what has become usual and customary practice in American politics, it may be just the kind of creative approach to effective leadership that many seem anxious to embrace.

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