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The Setting of the Sundown Kid

Joe Lieberman kept the Sabbath holy and won admirers across sectarian lines.

By Meir Soloveichik

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Joe Lieberman leaves the White House, May 17, 2017. PHOTO: OLIVIER DOULIERY/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The Connecticut Senate found a solution to its budget stalemate on a Friday evening in 1971. But a crucial vote, 27-year-old Joseph Lieberman, had gone home to celebrate the Sabbath. At Majority Leader Ed Caldwell’s direction, the chamber delayed the vote, observed the day of rest, and passed the budget Saturday night. The next day’s Bridgeport Post carried a pithy headline: “Butch Caldwell and the Sundown Kid.”

Lieberman, who died last week at 82, recounted this story in his 2011 book, “The Gift of Rest: Rediscovering the Beauty of the Sabbath.” “For me,” he wrote, “Sabbath observance is one of the greatest gifts of my life.” Jewish law prohibits the use of electronic devices, as well as traveling by car, on the Sabbath. Every Friday before sunset, his wife, Hadassah, would kindle candles so that the “older, gentler, and timeless light” replaced “the modern, sharp, and artificial light of the computer, the television, and the BlackBerry screen.”

He insisted that the rules of the Sabbath ensured spiritual liberty. “Every generation has its own pharaoh and its own slave masters uniquely based on the culture of the time,” he wrote. “Our pharaoh may be the electronic devices—

computers, televisions, iPhones—that mesmerize us, dominating hour after hour of our lives. . . . Too often they show us an electronic alternative reality full of negativity, trivia, or degradation. From all this, the Sabbath offers to free us for a twenty-four-hour period.”

The Sabbath brought freedom, which, counterintuitively, rigorous Jewish law helped secure. The obligations outlined in the Talmud, Lieberman reflected, make the Sabbath what it is and “protect it as a day of faith and rest.” They also had implications for his professional life. When a vital vote kept Lieberman late in the U.S. Capitol on a Friday, he would have to walk 4.5 miles to his Georgetown home, sometimes escorted by Capitol police in soaking rain or terrible cold.

Lieberman’s devotion to his faith earned the admiration of members of other religious communities. The police escorts, often religious Christians, admired him and sometimes engaged the senator in discussions about the Bible. Another state senator, Con O’Leary, reported that his mother planned to vote Republican in the 1988 presidential race but would back the Democrat for U.S. Senate because “I like the fact that Joe Lieberman is a religious man and keeps his Sabbath.”

This bond with diverse religious Americans reflected what set Lieberman apart from certain Jewish organizations in America, which lobbied for a wholly secular public square. In 2000, when Lieberman was the Democratic nominee for vice president, his public persona attracted the ire of the Anti-Defamation League, whose then-leader, Abraham Foxman, insisted that Lieberman’s focus on faith “risks alienating the American people.” Lieberman argued the opposite: “There must be a place for faith in America’s public life.” He insisted that the Constitution guaranteed “freedom of religion,” not “freedom from religion.”

His reflections allow us to understand why a man who came within 537 votes of the vice presidency retained his joy even after a tumultuous loss. Turning off his cellphone on Fridays, he reflected to me, was a reminder that the world could endure for 24 hours without him. It is, in other words, through political humility and faith in providence that we achieve spiritual well-being. That comment captured who Lieberman was, allowing us to understand why, even as he was later effectively exiled from the Democratic Party for his unwavering support of the Iraq war, his good cheer remained constant.

One of the most amusing anecdotes Lieberman told concerned a trip to Bosnia with his friend Sen. John McCain. As McCain slept, Lieberman rose to recite morning prayers, donning traditional Jewish attire, the phylacteries known as tefillin and a prayer shawl. When McCain awoke, his eyes widened at the oddly attired man beside him.

“Where am I? What is going on?”

“Johnny,” Lieberman said, “I’m just saying my morning prayers.”

“Oh good. For a moment there, Joey, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven.”

Lieberman impishly replied: “That says a lot about what kind of person you are, my friend. You think when you get to heaven you’re going to see a lot of Jews praying.”

Jews see the weekly day of rest as a foretaste of the eternal life to come, devoid of daily acrimony, partisanship, ambitions. Lieberman experienced that gift every week and sought, in good faith and generosity, to share its meaning with others. As people of faith, Jews and Gentiles, bid farewell to the Sundown Kid, we can draw consolation from the image of his experiencing the ultimate Sabbath that awaits.

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