

Back in 2000, it was on this Shabbat, Shabbat Nachamu, the Sabbath of Comfort, the first Shabbat after Tisha B'av, our Jewish day of mourning for the destruction of the Temple and the end of Jewish national independence, that Joe Lieberman was nominated as the vice presidential candidate of the Democratic party.

A lot of water has gone under the bridge, but I happened upon a pile of sermons from that year, from rabbis from various denominations. It's hard to remember the excitement in the Jewish community at the time. The theme of all the sermons was essentially Zeh Hayom Asah Adonia- Nagilah ve nismecha Bo- This is the day that God has made--what a day to celebrate. Several of the rabbis commented on how far the Jewish community had come in one generation from quotas at major universities, and neighborhoods that didn't sell homes to Jews, to the Vice Presidency. We were caught up in the story of Hadassah Liebermann, Joe's wife, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, potentially bringing an observant Jewish flavor to Blair House the vice president's residence.

It seemed an affirmation of Louis Brandeis' words: "To be a Better Jew is to be a better American" or the words of Jesse Jackson, at the time, "This nomination opens the doors for all American regardless of race, religion or Ethnic Background." Perhaps he should have said gender as well.

Of course Joe Lieberman did not become vice president, and over time found himself less in synch with a significant majority of American Jews, yet the story of American Jewish participation in American politics is a significant one.

It begins with George Washington and the desire of the Jewish community to offer congratulations. Of course, even with the small Jewish community at that time, variously estimated between 1-2,000 individuals, the Jewish community was not able to speak with one voice. Several different congregations offered their separate letters but the most famous is that of the Newport Rhode Island Synagogue. The community of about 300 wrote to the President on the occasion of his visit to the city and then George Washington responded in a famous letter:

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for giving to Mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.

For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens.

It wasn't until 1877 that the last state, New Hampshire removed obstacles to Jewish service in elected office, North Carolina having removed its Christian oath in 1868, though these oaths were often ignored and Jews were active in American political life almost from the beginning of our history in the United States.

Jewish firsts regarding political office go back to colonial times when Francis Salvador served as a member of the colonial legislature in South Carolina. It was another half century until a Jew served in Congress, Lewis Charles Levin, who was elected in 1845 from the 1st Congressional District in Pennsylvania. Other firsts followed, the first mayor of a major American City, 1873 Moses Bloom in Iowa City, first governor Washington Barlett of California in 1887, and of course the first Jewish Justice of the Supreme Court, Louis Brandeis in 1916. There were many other firsts in between these and after, continuing through to our own current Senators Feinstein and Boxer, the first two Jewish American female Senators.

All of these firsts are a great reminder of the love affair American Jews have had with our country and its manifestation in our participation in the political process.

One expression of political participation is voting, where it is estimated that 90 percent of Jews who are registered to vote make it to the polls in presidential

years, compared to 74 percent of all Americans. In 2008 for example, a big presidential elections, it is estimated that 96% of American Jews voted.

Another element of citizenship is participation in elected office. Jewish representation accounts for **7 percent** of Congress as a whole and **12 percent** of the Senate which is a high percentage considering that Jews are estimated to be only 2% of the general population. It is also interesting that some of these Jewish officials are elected from parts of the county with low Jewish density, like Hawaii, Oregon and Kentucky.

The belief that being registered and voting is a religious duty is widespread among Jews and expressed by rabbis of all denominations. Perhaps the pivotal moment on this score was when the east coast Orthodox Rabbi ,Moshe Feinstein's wrote a letter in 1984, calling voting a Mitzvah, a religious obligation. America has given us many gifts he wrote, and the Mitzvah of Hakarat Hatov, of repaying goodness with appreciation, demands that we fulfill all the responsibilities of citizenship.

Our congregation's SHOC group, Shir Hadash Organizing Committee, is working to encourage all of our members to register, especially those who have moved recently or younger adults who are the most likely not to be registered. We are

also working with our partners from the Churches where we hold our Health Fairs, to encourage voter registration in those communities as well.

This past Thursday night, Julie Harris, a young woman who grew up in our congregation but now lives in North Carolina represented Congregation Shir Hadash in Raleigh/Durham at the launch of Project Nitzvim Standing up for Voter Protection, a project of the Union for Reform Judaism, with our partners the NAACP and PICO. As Rabbi Jonah Pesner stated: “During the first presidential election in 50 years without the full protection of the Voting Rights Act, it is our responsibility to protect this fundamental right of citizenship. “ This will be an ongoing effort in North Carolina and other parts of the country where voting rights have been compromised.

Jake, given our history as a Jewish community, voting is a privilege that we should never take for granted. We pray that this heritage of commitment and community concern will continue in you and your generation.