Religion and Politics in America, by Joseph Lieberman

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Joseph I. Lieberman was Senior United States Senator from Connecticut and was the first Jewish Vice Presidential candidate of a major party, running on the Democratic ticket in the 2000 election. An Orthodox Jew, his most recent book is The Gift of Rest: Rediscovering the Beauty of the Sabbath. This is the text of address delivered by Senator Joseph I. Lieberman to students at Brigham Young University, October 26, 2011. This article appears in issue 14 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and was also reprinted in issue 28. Senator Lieberman was the Honored Guest Speaker at the 10th Anniversary Dinner of our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, held on May 8, 2017.

I confess I also like a good introduction, so I thank you, President Samuelson, for such a generous one, and for inviting me to be with you this morning. I have the greatest admiration for this university's work in educating minds, ennobling spirits, and inspiring in your students a commitment to the words etched in stone at the entrance to this great campus: "Enter to learn, go forth to serve." There is a warm ecumenical spirit that flows through this campus, and I feel a strong connection to BYU because of the core principles it stands for, which are at once rooted in the tradition of the Mormon faith, but also in the fundamental values that are shared by all Americans and all people of faith.

In this vein, I am reminded of something that happened to me almost exactly three years ago, during the last presidential election. As many of you know, I made the decision back in 2008 to support my friend John McCain for president, even though he was a Republican and I am a Democrat. The most intense and stressful period in any presidential campaign is the final stretch—and I was traveling around the country, trying to rally support for John and his running

mate, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska. It was the eve of the vice presidential debate that would pit Governor Palin against Barack Obama's running mate, Joe Biden, and the McCain team was increasingly nervous. I had been the Democratic vice presidential nominee in 2000, when Al Gore was running for President against George W. Bush, and so the McCain team asked me to go to Philadelphia, where Governor Palin was practicing for the debate, to see if I could help her prepare. When I arrived at the Westin Hotel in downtown Philadelphia for the debate prep session, Governor Palin seemed tired and frustrated, and the McCain team was fast approaching a full-blown panic.

One advisor turned to me and said: "Senator, we need your help. Please go in there and talk to her. You have something in common with Governor Palin that none of the rest of us has. You are both religious people."

Now, this was a wonderful moment, I thought, because although Sarah Palin is Christian and I am Jewish, this advisor sensed there might be a special bond between us based on our religious beliefs and observance. And I discovered that there was. I began our conversation by asking her if she was familiar with the biblical story of Queen Esther, in which the young queen is called upon to consider her destiny and, with tremendous courage and faith, stand up to the genocidal Haman and save the Jewish people. Governor Palin was indeed very familiar with the story—and I suspect many of you may be as well—so, I reminded her that, as people of faith, we share a belief that we are not here by accident—that we are here on earth for a reason and a purpose. Like Queen Esther, Governor Palin was at a moment of personal destiny. "You have been given a big opportunity," I said, "and you have a choice to make about whether or not you will seize it and your destiny. So be yourself and have faith, and God will see you through this."

Governor Palin told me that my words meant a lot to her. The conversation meant a lot to me too because it reminded me that irrespective of theological or political differences, there is a common bond between people of faith. Indeed, people of faith have a shared gratitude for what we have been given—beginning first and foremost with our lives. We also believe what both the Bible and the Declaration of Independence tell us: that each and every one of us is a child of God, and that as such, every person enjoys certain basic rights, liberties, capabilities, and responsibilities. We believe that each of us has his or her own destiny, and that this great nation that we are all part of has a destiny too.

In this spirit, the subject I would like to discuss with you this morning is the relationship between religion and politics in America, a subject that is very

personal to me. You see, my Jewish faith is central to my life, including my career in politics. My faith has provided me with a foundation, an order, and indeed a purpose, and has so much to do with the way I navigate through each day, both personally and professionally, in ways both large and small. It also means that, like you, I observe the Sabbath, or Shabbat, as it is called in Hebrew. This means that, for me and other observant Jews, from before sunset on Friday until after sunset on Saturday, I turn off my Blackberry. I do not drive or ride in a car. If there is a vote in the Senate, I will walk there from my home a few miles away.

My observance of the Sabbath is also the subject of the book I recently wrote. Now, I know some people may wonder why a United States Senator would write a book about a religious subject like the Sabbath. The reason is simple: I love the Sabbath and believe that it is at once and commandment we must keep, but also a gift from God that “keeps” and nurtures those of us who observe it. That has certainly been true for me, and I wrote this book because I want to share the Sabbath with everyone, in the hope that they will grow to love it as much as I do.

Before I talk about my own spiritual path and career in politics, however, I think it is important to put all of this in a broader context. Of course, we are at the start of another presidential campaign, one in which discussions and debates about the relationship between politics and religion have already played a prominent role. But in fact, these are questions that are very old—going all the way back to the Founders of our country, who wrote the Declaration of Independence and later the Constitution. The vision of our Founders is relevant because it reminds us that, from the beginning, America has been a nation that has been defined not by our borders, but by our values. One of those founding values was a belief in a higher power—a belief in God. The United States was formed, as the Declaration of Independence says, to secure for the people of this country the “inalienable rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” that were endowed by our Creator. In that way, the United States of America was and is a faith-based initiative. What is equally striking and remarkable is that although our Founders were overwhelmingly men of the same Christian faith, the founding documents they bequeathed us guarantee religious freedom, including the right of every American to hold elective office regardless of his or her religion.

It is Article VI of our great Constitution that explicitly bans religious tests for elective officials, allowing Americans to hold office irrespective of their faith. And it is the First Amendment of our Constitution that prohibits the “establishment” of an official religion, ensuring for every American the right to worship—or not to worship—as he or she so chooses. Succeeding generations have been inspired by

this founding vision and endeavored to make real its full promise, which I have always believed is a promise of freedom of religion, not freedom from religion. America's religious freedom has created a unique public square in which there is no establishment of one religion but freedom for all religions. And that means there is tolerance for different religions throughout our country and in our public life. Perhaps that is why from 1776 to today, America has been a uniquely religious country.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous French student of America, noted the remarkable religiosity of Americans in his definitive account of the United States in the nineteenth century. He wrote that there is no country in which religion "retains greater influence over the souls of men than in America," and added that "there can be no greater proof of its utility and its conformity to human nature than that its influence is powerfully felt over the most enlightened and free nation on earth." This observation is still true today: Over 90 percent of Americans say they believe in God, and the majority of Americans regularly attend a house of worship. Tocqueville also observed that although Americans were divided by religious sects, "they all look upon their religion in the same light," as he put it. He recognized that though characterized by different and diverse belief systems, there are universal values that unite all Americans, which is a second consequence of our country's commitment to religious freedom. Indeed, religious freedom in America has given birth to the development of a set of shared religious values that constitute what President Abraham Lincoln called America's "political religion" and Walt Whitman praised as "a sublime and serious Religious Democracy" in this nation.

In American history, the sublime and serious combination of religion and democracy has been a force for good in our public life. Some of the great movements of conscience in America emerged from the convictions of religious people and used the language and liturgy of faith to build support. It was this spirit that animated the abolitionist movement, which fought to end the evil of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century. It was this spirit that also animated the suffragist activists of the twentieth century who fought for the right of women to vote and participate in our civic life as equals. And it was this spirit that I was personally privileged to witness when I was in college at Yale in the early 1960s during the civil rights movement in America, which aimed to end racial discrimination and empower African Americans to reclaim their voting rights in southern states. I was inspired to join the civil rights movement because of the values it represented, which were deeply rooted in my faith: the values of equality, inclusiveness, tolerance, and service to others. The purpose of the

movement was best expressed by the words of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his soaring “I Have Dream” speech. This speech—which was a call for freedom, for justice, and for a return to America’s founding values—represented the culmination of the historic March on Washington, a movement I took part in, in which thousands of us, of all religions, races, and nationalities, joined together peacefully and powerfully to petition our government to right the wrong of racial bigotry.

For me, the March on Washington was America at its best. It was America as my family and faith had encouraged me to believe it could be.

During the early 1960s, I felt a boundless sense of hope and possibility about the future that lay ahead for our nation. It was also while I was at college that another important barrier was broken. It was in the fall of my freshman year that a Roman Catholic, John F. Kennedy, was elected to the presidency for the first time in American history. At the time, I felt a sense of possibility that because of President Kennedy's election, doors were going to open for me too and for others who were part of minority faiths, races, and ethnicities. President Kennedy’s historic election embodies the tolerance and respect Americans generally have for religions different from their own—religions whose adherents are a minority in our country.

In 2000, when Al Gore gave me the privilege of being the first Jewish American to be nominated for national office, I personally experienced the American people’s generosity of spirit, fairness, and acceptance of religious diversity. One African American minister said to me on the day I was nominated, “In America, when a barrier is broken for one group, the doors of opportunity open wider for every American.” I felt that warm sense of shared progress throughout the campaign. I also felt free—indeed I was encouraged—to talk about my religion and the central role observance plays in my life. I have some wonderful memories that make this clear in living anecdotes, several of which I write about in my book on the Sabbath. A veteran Secret Service agent who had worked several national campaigns told me he had never heard so many people say “God bless you” to a candidate. It was a reflection, I think, of how Americans embrace the faith that we share, even though we may be of different religions.

On another occasion, I remember once speaking to a rally of Latino Americans and seeing in the front row a woman who had created a poster which perhaps best expressed the sense of shared values and shared aspirations that I am speaking about now in two powerful words that I don't think ever appeared together before: "Viva Chutzpah!" These Americans, like so many others across

the country, were moved by the fundamental American principle of equal opportunity and respect for diversity of religious belief that has been at the heart of our American story from the beginning. In the end, the Gore-Lieberman ticket received over a half-million more votes than the Bush-Cheney ticket. I do not cite these matters to relitigate the nettlesome matter of Florida's electoral votes, but rather as unambiguous proof that our ticket was judged on our qualifications and policies, not on the basis of my religion. That's the way our Founders wanted it to be and the way it should be.

As we begin the 2012 presidential election cycle, faith and politics have once again become a source of some interest, controversy and perhaps apprehension. For instance, some have expressed anxiety about open professions of faith by a few of the candidates in the Republican primary. I do not share these anxieties. First, a candidate does not give up his or her freedom to exercise freedom of speech during a presidential campaign. If a candidate wants to discuss his or her faith that is their right, just as it is everyone else's right to decide how they feel about those expressions of faith. I welcome the opportunity to hear about a candidate's faith; I find it helpful, in fact, because it tells me more about the kind of leader he or she would be. Now we also have two Mormon candidates running for president in 2012, and one of them, Governor Mitt Romney, a distinguished graduate of this university, may well end up as the Republican nominee. If that happens, a new barrier will be broken—and the door of opportunity in our country will once again be wider for all of us. I also hope that no candidate will be judged solely on the basis of his or her faith. Our national candidates should be judged in the best American way—that is, on the basis of their capabilities and policies, their experience, and their vision.

In 1960, when John F. Kennedy was running for president, it was at a time when there was still significant anti-Catholic prejudice in the country. On the eve of the vote, he spoke about this challenge, and his words remain as true today as they did then. He said, "If this election is decided on the basis that 40 million Americans lost their chance of being president on the day they were baptized then it is the whole nation that will be the loser—in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics around the world, in the eyes of history, and in the eyes of our own people."

The same will be true if Americans judge Governor Romney and Governor Huntsman based on their Mormon faith alone. In America, there cannot be a religious test for serving in elective office and I hope and believe that Americans of all faiths—and of no faith—will not base their votes on the fact that Governor

Romney’s Mormon faith is different from their own. Just as Americans rose above differences when John F. Kennedy’s Roman Catholic faith was “different” in 1960, and 16 years later when Jimmy Carter’s Christian evangelical faith was “different,” and again in 2000 when my Jewish faith was “different,” Governor Romney must be judged on his personal qualities, his leadership, his experience, and his ideas for America’s future. My experience in 2000 gives me great confidence that the American people will again reject any sectarian religious tests for office and show their strong character, instinctive fairness and steadfast belief in our Declaration of Independence and in our Constitution. That truly is the American way.

Let me conclude by saying that there is one more way in which I believe that the religion of the American people is profoundly important to the current time of American life: a time when millions of Americans can't find work; when millions of Americans are worried about whether they will have their jobs next year; when millions of Americans are pessimistic about America's future; and when people all over the world worry or, in the case of our opponents and enemies, hope that America has begun an irreversible decline. I don’t buy into this pessimism about America's future at all. I believe that this twenty-first century will be another great century for America. One of the big reasons for my optimism is those numbers I cited earlier—that more than 90 percent of the American people believe in God and more than half of Americans regularly attend a house of worship. Now why is that important? It is important because faith in God, love of Country, a sense of unity, and confidence in the power of every individual have carried America through crises greater than the one we face today and will, I am sure, propel us forward again.

People of faith are also strengthened by their faith in God to make clear and proper distinctions and choices. This view is antithetical to moral relativism—it is a positive, affirmative worldview that is not only deeply American, but that is a crucial ingredient to any culture that aspires to be free and prosperous. After all, the greatest source of America’s strength and hope is not in the divisive politics of Washington. It is in the broadly shared values of the American people and the unity of action so many of us derive from the strength we find in the varied houses of worship we attend. My time here with you at BYU has also made me optimistic about the future and the great American century that lies ahead. You inspire optimism in me because I am confident that when you go forth from these gates, guided by your faith, your service will help to make America the more perfect union it has always aspired to be.