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The Year of the Jew: Why 2000 Was the Most Important Year for Jews Since 1948

By Daniel S. Brenner

Now that the presidential transition is underway, and the photos of Bush and Gore shaking hands have been beamed worldwide, we may take a moment to reflect on what one senator from Connecticut has taught us about Jews in America.

If we've learned anything, it is that Americans value Jews. They think that we're smart, good with money, ethical, sensitive, conscientious, spiritually connected, family centered, and tactfully outspoken. Take those character traits and combine them with some classic positive views-namely, that we are funny and value education -- and you've got a people with a fine reputation. It is no joke that Lieberman captured the popular vote for Al Gore.

So it is no surprise that the American people are fascinated with Jews, want to

marry Jews, and that now, as a result, I sense that we are experiencing the boomerang effect -- Jews want to be more like Jews.

That is a strange thing to say. But I think that it is a reality-after years of self-inflicted blame, guilt, and theological wrangling, now that the Gentiles of the world see us as a gift (Thomas Cahill's Gifts of the Jews proved that one), we Jews are articulating our Jewishness in new ways.

It used to be that the most widespread way to define one's Jewishness in America was to go negative-to say, "We don't believe in Jesus," "Don't celebrate Christmas" or "We don't want Judaism to die." Emil Fackenheim's famous 614th commandment, "Not to give Hitler a posthumous victory," was immensely popular. Many articulated a sense that we were Jews to preserve a minority that faced extinction, not to further a spiritual, social or political mission.

Now people are articulating a connection to Judaism based on some amazing positives. Post-Lieberman, Judaism has been articulated as a force that grounds people ethically in a changing political and social context. This view of Judaism is not nostalgic, but rather it is seen as a way to counter the maddening pace of consumer culture. It is one that sees Jewish life as a bridge between past and present, and as having an ethical mission to create a just world.

Photographs of the Lieberman family walking to shul on Shabbes evoked immense pride. This pride was felt not simply by the tiny minority of Jews who walk, or even who go to shul on Shabbes, but by countless people who haven't stepped foot in a synagogue for years. Shabbes, the idea of taking a break from the stress of the commercial and workday world, is indeed one of the Jew's gifts to the world.

While "integrity" was the theme that George W. Bush used to capture votes in the South and West, when asked which man on the ticket had it, Americans responded with Lieberman. This, too, is a value of which American Jews are speaking. Historically, we have taught that "a good name" is valued above fame, material wealth, and influence.

So the year 2000 has turned Jews onto Judaism in some rather unexpected ways. I sense that as more Jews articulate their Jewish connections in positive ways, we'll see more "Liebermans," and not just in politics. The impact that such people can have on the so-called unaffiliated Jews of the world and, perhaps more importantly, on the Jews who are connected is immeasurable. Al Gore might have lost the election, but he has changed Jewish history.

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