

The Other Bridge

Category: Tzav, Vayikra

Everyone has been talking about the tragic bridge collapse in Baltimore. But there is also another bridge which came down—the remarkable story of Joe Lieberman, the Shabbat-observant Senator who blazed a Jewish trail in the US Government.

The Shomer Shabbos Senator

This week, all the news coverage focused on the bridge that collapsed—the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore which was struck by a ship which had lost power.

But on Wednesday, another bridge collapsed with the passing of famed Senator Joseph Lieberman. Joe was a bridge between liberals and conservatives, between Jews and non-Jews, and between observant Jews and those who are not yet so.

Later in life, Senator Lieberman was famous for his Judaism, and more specifically, for his observance of Shabbat. But he wasn't always so religious. He was born and raised in an observant family in New Haven, Connecticut, but when he went off to college, he slacked off on his observance and lost touch with Shabbat.

What brought him back was the death of his grandmother, an observant Jewish woman who had immigrated from the old world. He would often say that she was the most important influence in his life, and when she died, he realized he would need to take personal responsibility for his Judaism. From that moment onward, he returned to the Shabbat observance for which he later became so famous.

He also merited to have a warm relationship with the Rebbe. Rabbi Yisroel Deren, the Shliach in Connecticut, introduced him to the world of Chabad and brought him to several of the Rebbe's farbrengens. He later came to the dollars distributions to ask for the Rebbe's blessing in his public role, and the Rebbe's warmth towards him is plainly evident on the videos.

Joe's Real Legacy

Every politician thinks about his legacy. Whenever a politician retires—and often before that—the first thing they do is write a book of memoirs to ‘set the record straight’ about their achievements.

Joe Lieberman had a long and storied career. He was a senator for many years, and he ran in national elections to be Al Gore's vice president in a razor tight race which he lost by only a few hundred votes in Florida. He was the first, and—as of today the only—Jewish person to run on a major ticket in the United States.

But when he retired, he didn't write about his accomplishments; instead, he wrote a book about Shabbat. For his legacy, he wanted to be remembered as the first Shabbat-observant senator in the United States—even more than the first Jew to run on a major ticket.

Observing Shabbat as a senator came at no small price. There were occasions where he walked for hours from his apartment to Capitol Hill to be present during an important vote on Shabbat, and—perhaps more often—he would be held up in the Senate late on a Friday evening for some important vote or another, and he would be forced to walk many miles home.

Nonetheless, he wrote that his career was not at all negatively affected by his Shabbat observance. On the contrary, people appreciated his religious commitment, and when they saw that he was consistent about it, they respected him even more.

The Gift of Rest

His book, “The Gift of Rest,” reads like a love song to Shabbat. The entire goal of the book is to remind young Jewish Americans that one could cherish Shabbat and still be successful, and in fact, the Shabbat observance will actually enhance the success as well. He makes an interesting point; while the three holidays of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot were celebrated by traveling all the way to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, Shabbat is a day which brings the holiness right into your living room.

He tries to bring the reader into the Shabbat experience. He describes how he

attends synagogue, a space where he is no longer “the distinguished senator,” and not even Joe, but is instead “Yosef Yisrael,” his Jewish name with which he is called to the Torah. All week long, he listens to politicians pontificating, but during the Torah reading, he finally has the pleasure of listening to the word of G-d.

The key to Shabbat, he notes, is that it doesn't only remain in the synagogue. When it comes to synagogue observance, Jews are divided. Some people pray in the ashkenazi prayer book, while others pray in the Sephardic tradition. The real place for bonding is over a Shabbat meal; when it comes to Kiddush and challah and a delicious meal, being Ashkenazi or Sephardic isn't a source of conflict.

He was once asked what to do about the lack of Jewish unity in Israel. His response was that we need more “shul candymen.”

In many synagogues, there is a person responsible for handing out candies to children during the service to make the experience more enjoyable for them. “Maybe it's time,” he said, “to have candymen for adults,” i.e., we need to look for ways to make Judaism enjoyable and meaningful for adults as well. He said that we needed to take an example from the Rebbe on how to look for the good and for the positive in every Jew.

The Eternal Flame

Right at the beginning of this week's Torah portion, the verse commands us to ensure that a fire burns constantly on the altar; “it should never be extinguished” (Vayikra 6:6). The Jerusalem Talmud notes that this obligation is all-encompassing; “even on Shabbat, and even if it is impure”; the fire is never to be extinguished (Yoma 4:6).

The Rebbe taught an important lesson from this concept.

There is a spiritual equivalent to the physical Tabernacle, the Rebbe explained; the Jewish person himself is a sanctuary for G-dliness. The analogy holds true in the details as well. Just as the Temple had an altar, the Jewish person has an altar within him—his heart. The Temple, in fact, had two altars, and the commandment regarding the eternal fire was said with regard to the outer altar. So too, the spiritual fire in a Jew's heart must burn on his outer altar. This flame, this

enthusiasm, needs to be open and visible to all; everybody should know that within him burns a fire of love for G-d.

And, as the Jerusalem Talmud said, this flame needs to burn even on Shabbat, and even in a state of impurity.

These are two opposite extremes. Shabbat is a time of holiness, when a Jew feels naturally closer to G-d. He is relieved of all his material concerns, his smartphone is turned off, he has the peace of mind to dedicate more time to prayer and Torah study. He feels a more natural connection.

In this state, a person could mistakenly assume that his intellectual connection that he derives from Shabbat will suffice; he doesn't also need an "eternal flame," a sense of enthusiasm and emotional connection coming from his heart. The Torah reminds this person: The eternal flame must burn even on Shabbat; you too, must remain focused on keeping that flame alive.

On the opposite extreme, there is a person who feels distant from Judaism. He lacks a connection to G-d—and therefore gives up hope. Why bother, if the connection has been anyways lost? The Torah calls to this person and says, "the eternal flame must burn even in a state of impurity." Every single Jew has a spark of love for G-d, and he just needs to fan those sparks until they burst into a flame which lights up the world.

Keep the Flame Burning

Who lights the fire on the altar?

The Talmud says that in the first Holy Temple, the fire miraculously never extinguished. There may have been winds and snowfall in Jerusalem, but the fire on the altar never went out. Nonetheless, the Talmud says that it is a mitzvah to sustain the fire in a natural way as well. Despite the miracle, the priests were to stoke the flames with wood. "Although fire descends from heaven, it is a mitzvah to sustain the fire via ordinary people" (Yoma 21b).

This is true in a spiritual sense as well. Occasionally, we will experience a miraculous fire from heaven; we will momentarily feel a sense of inspiration which cannot be defined or explained. But that's not enough. G-d wants the fire to

come from within our ordinary selves. He wants that every mitzvah that we observe be carried out with enthusiasm and with excitement.

Judaism should not be observed as something that one needs to get over with; we need to do it with warmth and with vitality, and when we do so, we can rest assured that “it will never be extinguished”—our excitement will be contagious, and it will be contracted by our children and grandchildren as well.

This week, a non-Jew who is married to Jewish woman told me that his daughter gave birth to a baby boy. Knowing that the baby is a full-fledged Jew, he encouraged his daughter—who is also married to a non-Jew—to have a real bris carried out by an authentic mohel. The daughter, herself a doctor, insisted that the circumcision be carried out in a hospital.

They got into a bit of an argument, and the Jewish grandmother got annoyed at her husband. “Give it up,,” she told him. “Whatever will be, it’s not worth the fight!” But he pushed, and begged, and pleaded, and when his daughter finally realized how important it was to him, she agreed—and a Chabad Mohel did the bris according to Halachah.

That’s called “keeping the fire burning.”

Joe Liberman was an example of a Jew who was never ashamed of his mitzvah observance, and never lost his enthusiasm for Judaism. A flame was always burning.

(See Likkutei Sichos 1:217)