

of history. Washington wrote of his awareness that every step he took set a precedent.

Of course the greatest of the all, in my opinion, was Abraham Lincoln. One of the primary reasons for my fascination with Lincoln is that within him he wedded practical political genius, a tremendous empathy for people, expressed with tremendous eloquence. He represents American civilization at its greatest. The values he expressed were Jewish values – human dignity and the freedom of man – and that, perhaps, is why he had such a comfortable relationship with the Jews. When General Grant issued General Order No. 11 in 1862, expelling all Jews from the western territories, Lincoln consoled the Jews and told them to come to him as Father Abraham, and he overrode the order. He understood the Jewish experience, and that is why he also understood the experience of the black slaves. Indeed, there is a lot to be learned from studying Lincoln – his life, his thought, his prose, his exemplary moral character, and so on. I once spoke to President Joel and suggested that studying and learning about Lincoln should be a requirement, in understand the best of American civilization.

*Are there any contemporary political figures that Rav Genack believes are important from the Orthodox Jewish perspective?*

I am a great admirer of former President Clinton. Perhaps not in the sense of Jewish values, but Clinton certainly has an incredible mind. When you listen to Clinton speak, he makes observations that make you understand the situation. And I don't know any political figure who could do what he did. When most political figures speak, it sounds rather hackneyed. But not Clinton – he is just so fascinating.

I had a correspondence with the former President of about 100 letters about different Jewish themes in the Bible and so forth. I would write to him about subjects like R. Akiva, and he would write back interesting he'arot. In fact, the Jewish experience really interested him, and people would be surprised how well versed he is in the Bible. In one letter, I discussed how leaders aren't perfect and how even the best of them are flawed – that is why Yehudah was chosen for *malikut* rather than, say, Yosef. Yehudah was chosen because Yosef was unable to admit a mistake. My daughter was the one who actually typed up the letter, and she referred to Genesis 28. In his response, he had corrected it to Genesis 38.

As far as Israel is concerned: I traveled with him to Israel three times. I saw the enormous connection between him and the people of Israel and I think that he really cares about the people of Israel. Once, at a dinner, someone mentioned Yitshak Rabin. I overheard him remark that Rabin was a great man; that he was, in a sense, like a father figure to him.

*How should an Orthodox Jew relate to*

*Clinton's conspicuous flaws? Does one have to compartmentalize his positive qualities and negative qualities in such a stark fashion?*

I was actually at the White House when he confessed to his misdeed. It was around the time of Rosh ha-Shanah. I told Mrs. Clinton that we are told that when God judges us on Rosh ha-Shanah, he judges us in context, our mitsvot are compared to our *aveirot* and a broad spectrum of issues is taken into account. My own opinion is that in Clinton's case, I am not embarrassed to say that he is very caring and empathetic. With his foundation's work in Africa he has literally saved tens of millions of lives. It's amazing how one person can galvanize such support. That is the Bill Clinton that I admire very much.

*How should a Jew who wants to get involved in the world of politics and public policy deal with halakhic issues like shemirat Shabbat, kashrut, and hillul Hashem versus kiddush Hashem, etc.?*



Someone whom I admire very much in this regard is Senator Joe Lieberman. Take *shemirat Shabbat*, for example. He always walks to the Senate to vote on Shabbat, and he hasn't compromised on his standards. I don't mean to make him into a Rosh Yeshivah – he is not – but he is certainly a role model for our community, and somebody of whom we can be proud. Indeed, it is amazing to see how far an Orthodox Jew can reach, and to see how that was not an impediment for him to be the Vice Presidential nominee in 2000. And if you read the New York Times, you know that if it were up to Senator McCain, he'd be a nominee in 2008 as well. And this is someone who keeps Shabbat and *kashrut*! I used to learn a little with Senator Lieberman on the phone, and I know that these issues are important to him. He is very proud of his daughter Chani who is studying in Stern College now and ultimately

wants to live in Israel. Senator Lieberman demonstrates that an Orthodox Jew can accomplish anything in this country.

*Would Rav Genack like to share with Kol Hamevaser his perspective on the upcoming election?*

I was a very strong supporter of Senator Hillary Clinton and I was disappointed when she did not get the nomination. I thought she would have made a very good president. I think that we can be proud that the American political system produced two good candidates for president, Senators McCain and Obama. As far as the two nominees are concerned: this campaign has pivoted around two lies. One is that Senator McCain is George W. Bush. Clearly he is not. His career in public life has been marked by his independence and willingness to even take on his own party. The other is that Senator Obama is a Muslim who once studied in a *madrassa* as a child and that his friends are terrorists. That is not true either. It is amazing that these sorts of things have currency in our political system.

good president as far as Jews are concerned as well.

Either way, next president is going to have to face enormous challenges – both domestic and international. Perhaps most importantly, he will have to confront Iran. We will need to improve the American image in order for us to work with other nations to withstand the ominous threat of a nuclear Iran. Remember, it wasn't so long ago that Clinton was president, and America was admired around the world. I hope that either of the current candidates if elected president will do everything that is necessary to thwart Iran's dangerous nuclear ambition.

After the damage done to America's standing in the world in the past eight years, we need a president who is more cerebral and less intuitive; who responds with his head and not his gut, who is more empirical and less ideological. Obama has demonstrated these qualities. But of course, he remains untested and doesn't have the years of experience he can rely on as a template for action, but I think we have good reason to be hopeful.

*In some Orthodox Jewish communities da'at Torah plays a role in determining how to vote. Does da'at Torah have a role to play in this regard?*

I am not even sure what *da'at Torah* really is. I remember the Rav telling me that he hadn't even heard the phrase until he came to America, so I don't know exactly what *da'at Torah* means. Though the Rav in his hesped for Rav Hayim Ozer develops the notion, I assume it applies only to someone of his dimensions. But whatever it means, it certainly shouldn't play a role in compelling someone to vote for a specific candidate. Obviously, the Torah has specific values and mitsvot and those should motivate everything that we do, but I don't think that you can create a specific political agenda – whether to be a Democrat or a Republican – out of this system.

This question relates to the issue of candidates who espouse values that are explicitly against the Torah. As I mentioned before, this is an important and complex issue, but I don't think it is the only issue. I think that Rav Moshe Feinstein was once asked whether one may vote for such a candidate. He responded that these are not the only issues that should be considered.

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