

# [***Senator Lieberman Showed How Tradition Brings Meaning to Modern Life | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BPG-FVB1-DY68-100D-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** As the first Orthodox Jewish U.S. senator, Senator Lieberman was an inspiration to a new generation of Jews and gentiles.

**Body**

The death of Senator Joseph Lieberman was a loss for the country, but it gives us time to reflect on the remarkable life he lived as America's highest-ranking Orthodox Jew. At a time when being Jewish in America is often boiled down to one's political position on Zionism, the life of the late senator is a reminder that there is something above even ***politics***. As the first Orthodox Jewish U.S. senator, Senator Lieberman was an inspiration to a new generation of Jews and gentiles who realize that religious observance—especially strict Sabbath observance—offers an antidote to many of the ills of modern life.

Senator Lieberman loved Shabbat so much that he wrote a book about it—*The Gift of Rest*. The book is remarkable because it does not shy away from the strictness of the day, which superficially may turn some people off. Traditional Judaism prohibits a number of daily activities on the Sabbath, like driving and cooking, in order to fulfill the commandment to remember the day and keep it holy. That's why Senator Lieberman would often make an hour-and-a-half walk between his home in Georgetown and the Capitol—sometimes in the pouring rain with Secret Service in tow—to avoid violating the Sabbath.

This strict observance of a day of rest may at first seem paradoxical—how can a whole list of dos and don'ts help us rest? The case of smartphones is a good answer to this question.

One of the ways Orthodox Jews keep the Sabbath is by refraining from using cell phones and other electronic devices. "Our eyes and faces are glued to one screen or another for much of every day," writes Senator Lieberman in *The Gift of Rest*. "Even when we think we are at leisure, they invade our attention, holding us in their grip and separating us from our family and friends.... From all this, the Shabbat offers to free us." The prohibition on smartphone use is one of the bricks in the edifice of what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called our "cathedral in time."

The average American spends about four hours a day on their phone. That equates to two months of a year staring at a small screen. Research is beginning to show that the impact of these hours spent on the phone is not uniformly positive—there is a correlation between increased phone usage and a whole set of mental health problems, including self-harm and depression.

"Kids in religious families were not nearly as harmed by the move to the phone based childhood as those in secular families," says Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist and author of *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. "When I have spoken with Orthodox Jews, I see one reason why: Orthodox Jews have Shabbat, a full day when everyone does a collective digital detox and everyone attends intensely to each other."

These traditions are not limited to improving personal mental health. In an interview I did with Senator Lieberman he spoke about singing a traditional song called "Eishet Chayil"—a Woman of Valor—to his wife Hadassah every Friday night. At a time when not enough men respect the women in their lives, this old-time ritual is yet another religious "stricture" that brings peace to a home.

And at a time when Americans are increasingly lonely and atomized, having dinner and singing songs with the same group of people week after week is maybe not such a hokey thing. Just a month after meeting the woman who is now my wife, I interviewed Senator Lieberman. I told him that I knew I was going to marry her. He knew and loved my in-laws and he gave me his blessing. One of the first things we talked about were the Shabbat traditions I would be marrying into. He knew of those traditions because he was a dedicated member of their synagogue in Georgetown and it was a central part of his life. Every Friday night we know what we're doing, and we generally know who we're doing it with.

More than any of his political activities, we will remember Senator Lieberman as a great man who showed Americans—both Jews and gentiles—that the traditions of the past may be the best way to live in this future.

*Max Raskin is an adjunct professor of law at New York University and a fellow at the school's Institute for Judicial Administration.*

*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2371648/joe-lieberman.jpg)

**Graphic**

Joe Lieberman

Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

WASHINGTON - NOVEMBER 10: Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT) testifies before the Senate Budget Committee Capitol Hill November 10, 2009 in Washington, DC. Lieberman and bipartisan members of Congress were set to testifying about proposals for long-term fiscal stability in the wake of last year's financial meltdown

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