

In Memoriam: Jack Kemp  
*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt*

The Jewish people have lost a true friend.

Jack Kemp will be remembered for many things. He was a man of ideas, intellect and compassion who cared deeply about justice, fairness and compassion.

He was also a principled man with the strength to practically single-handedly change the direction of an entire political party. It is easy to forget, but Israel did not always enjoy the bipartisan support it has today. Jack overcame his party's tendency towards isolationism and the inclination among Republicans to write off the Jewish vote.

At a young age, as a result of a friendship going back to his high school days in Los Angeles with the daughter of Rabbi Max Nussbaum of Los Angeles, he developed an appreciation for Judaism and the Jewish people.

As a member of Congress in the 1970's, Jack became an outspoken leader of the movement for Soviet Jewry. His wife, Joanne, was a partner in the struggle and she herself was at the vanguard of organizing congressional spouses on behalf of Soviet Jewry. Against the wishes of the leaders of his party, he pushed on this issue and pointed out to Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon and others how important it was to embrace the cause of freedom for Soviet Jewry.

If all he did was to help liberate the Jews behind the Iron Curtain, we could say *dayenu*, it would have been enough.

But in addition to his insistence that freedom for Soviet Jews be at the centerpiece of American foreign policy and its relations with the Soviet Union, he also was a passionate lover of Israel who believed in the Zionist principles and in working to ensure its security.

It is no exaggeration to say that as a result of his work, the Republican Party was receptive to issues important to the Jewish community. He allowed Jews to feel comfortable and welcomed in the GOP. He thereby strengthened the Jewish community's influence because it meant that Jewish support could no longer be taken for granted by the Democratic Party.

I first met Jack when attending a forum sponsored by a group interested in working to achieve peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The approach struck me as being somewhat naïve, and so I told a classic Jewish story to illustrate my concern. The story was of a man who approached his rabbi and said that he had a solution to the problem of poverty in their village. He said to the rabbi, "All we need is to get all of the wealthy people in town to give their money to the poor, and we will be able to take care of the problem." A year later the rabbi asked how his project was coming along. "I'm halfway there," he responded. "I have gotten all of the poor people to agree to accept the

money. Now all I need to do is get the wealthy people to agree to give away their portion.”

Jack laughed and loved the story. He approached me after the meeting and said he wanted to get together. He took the initiative and surprised me a few days later by calling and asking when we could get together. It was the beginning of a wonderful friendship and meaningful relationship that ended all too soon.

One Saturday morning this past fall he attended services since his grandson had been invited to attend a bar mitzvah at my synagogue. I invited him to come to the bema and read in English the traditional prayer for our country. Before he began to read the prayer he stood at the podium and said, “Some of you in the congregation might be wondering what I am doing up here.” He paused and said, “I am Rabbi Weinblatt’s shabbes goy.”

I would only say he was much more than that. He was a friend who was not just a “shabbes gentile.” He was a righteous gentile.

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