



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday July 17, 2026 ~ Parshat: Devarim

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

What Does It Mean to Be a Friend of the Jewish People?

The death of Senator Lindsey Graham on Saturday night was met with an extraordinary outpouring of grief throughout the Jewish community and the State of Israel. That grief was genuine and deserved.

Senator Graham was a true friend of Israel and the Jewish people. He recognized the danger posed by Iran and by other violent and destabilizing regimes in the Middle East. He spoke clearly about terrorism, without euphemism or apology. He understood that Israel is not merely another small country somewhere on the other side of the world, but a vital democratic ally of the United States.

For the Jewish people, he was something increasingly rare these days. He understood antisemitism. He did not minimize it, rationalize it, or explain it away. When Jews were threatened, Senator Graham was prepared to say so. When Israel was unfairly singled out, he was prepared to defend it. When others equivocated, he spoke with clarity.

For that, the Jewish community owes him gratitude.

And yet, there is an obvious tension here.

Lindsey Graham was a conservative Republican from South Carolina. He supported many policies at odds with the overwhelming majority of American Jews. On abortion, guns, healthcare, the judiciary, church and state, and countless other domestic issues, many (and if we are being honest, most Jews) Jews would never have voted for him. Indeed, American Jews have for decades been among the most reliably Democratic constituencies in the country. Roughly seven in ten American Jews have traditionally identified with or leaned toward the Democratic Party. Only the African American community has demonstrated a greater comparable historic loyalty.

I am part of that history. My political convictions did not disappear with Senator Graham's death, nor would I expect anyone else's to disappear. But neither should our gratitude disappear. And neither should our capacity for honest political judgment. Almost 35 years ago, I read a fascinating book entitled *Jerry Falwell and the Jews*, written by Merrill Simon. The book was based on an extended series of interviews with Reverend Jerry Falwell about Jews, Judaism, Israel, antisemitism, Christianity, and American politics. At the time, Rev. Falwell was among the best known and most influential Christian activists and religious leaders in the nation. At the time, much of what Falwell said made many Jews uncomfortable. Frankly, much about Jerry Falwell made many Jews uncomfortable.

Yet one of his central arguments has stayed with me.

Falwell believed that American Jews were making a terrible political miscalculation. Jews were aligning themselves with liberals who shared many of their social values but might not, in the end, understand their need for security, their vulnerability to antisemitism, or the central place of Israel in modern Jewish identity. Meanwhile, conservative Christians, whose social and religious views many Jews found alien, were becoming some of Israel's most dependable friends.

Was he right?

For many years, I would have answered cautiously. Today, I am no longer sure that caution is sufficient.

One need only look at what happened to British Jewry and the Labour Party. For generations, Labour was the natural political home of many British Jews. It was the party of workers, immigrants, minorities, social justice, and opposition to fascism. Jews helped build it, supported it, and trusted it.

And yet, less than 10 years ago antisemitism became so serious that Britain's Equality and Human Rights Commission found that Labour had committed unlawful acts of harassment and discrimination and had demonstrated serious failures in addressing antisemitism within its own ranks. So British Jewry had to ask some hard questions about their political future. Indeed, just 6 years ago, British Jewry took an unprecedented step when its three leading newspapers all published the same editorial warning British Jewry as to the danger that then party leader Jeremy Corbyn, and the Labour Party under his leadership represented. And two weeks later, Rabbi Emmanuel Mervis, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, published an article in the

Times of London publicly criticizing Corbyn and warning all, Jews and non-Jews alike, of the danger of a Corbyn victory.

Chief Rabbis just don't do that. But That's how high the stakes are.

And there is no reason to be confident that the new leadership of that party will set a better course.

Today, American Jews must now be willing to ask our own version of that question.

Parts of the Democratic Party have become increasingly hostile toward Israel. Too many elected officials and candidates have treated the Jewish state not as an imperfect democracy facing difficult choices and neighbors committed to its eradication, but as uniquely illegitimate. Language that would immediately be recognized as bigotry if directed against any other minority is too often tolerated when directed against Jews, provided that the word "Zionist" is substituted for the word "Jew."

I do not believe that antisemitism and anti-Zionism can be meaningfully separated in the world in which we now live. Zionism is the belief that the Jewish people, like other peoples, are entitled to sovereignty and security in their historic homeland. One may criticize an Israeli government. Israelis do so every day. One may oppose particular Israeli policies. That is politics. Yet when the one Jewish state is declared illegitimate; when Jews alone are denied the right of national self-determination; when Israel's enemies are excused while Israel is condemned for defending itself; when Zionists are excluded from public life, campus organizations, political movements, or cultural institutions, then anti-Zionism is not merely criticism of Israel. It is antisemitism adapted to the language of our time.

Yet that does not mean that American Jews must become Republicans. The Republican Party has its own moral failures, its own extremists, and its own forms of antisemitism. Jews must never overlook white nationalism, conspiracy theories, or the exploitation of Jewish fears for partisan purposes. Friendship with Israel does not absolve any politician of every other failing.

Nor should Jews become single-issue voters. We care about the welfare of the poor, civil rights, reproductive freedom, healthcare, fair and reasonable immigration policies, the environment, democracy, political interference in the judiciary, and the separation of religion and government. These are not incidental concerns. They emerge from our understanding of justice and human dignity, and the lessons of 2000

years of powerlessness and oppression. And each of them has been threatened, challenged and endangered by the current administration.

But Israel and antisemitism can no longer be treated as incidental concerns either. There comes a point at which a community must ask whether its loyalty is being reciprocated. American Jews have given the Democratic Party our votes, our money, and our moral energy for generations. It is not unreasonable to expect that party to draw clear boundaries against those who demonize Israel, excuse terrorism, or traffic in antisemitism.

It is not unreasonable to expect our political friends to act like friends.

And it is not unreasonable to acknowledge friendship when it comes from someone for whom we would never otherwise vote.

That may be the most important lesson of Senator Graham's passing. We mourn him not because we suddenly agree with everything he believed. We mourn him because he stood with us when standing with us mattered.

It is time for all of us to remember a hard truth. Political parties are not families. They are not synagogues. They are not clubs. They are coalitions of people and interests, and they must continually earn our confidence. Thus, no party is entitled to the Jewish vote. No candidate is entitled to our loyalty merely because his or her name is followed by the letter we have traditionally supported. In these times, we must examine the full character of a candidate. At the same time, in this age of rising antisemitism and anti-Zionism, and tolerance of it among elected officials in both parties, we must also ask direct and unavoidable questions:

Does this person recognize unequivocally and unambiguously Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state?

Will this person defend Israel's right to protect its citizens?

Will this person confront antisemitism even when it comes from political allies?

Will this person stand with the Jewish community when doing so is difficult rather than fashionable?

Those questions must matter when we cast our votes.

So what does it mean to be a friend of the Jewish people? It does not require agreement with us on every issue. It does not require voting the way we vote. It does not require sharing our theology. But it does require recognizing our humanity, respecting our history, defending our right to live in safety, and acknowledging the

legitimacy of the Jewish people's connection to our homeland. A friend may disagree with us. Yet at the same time, a friend does not deny our right to exist, or curry favor with others by denigrating our history, our values, or sensibilities.

Jerry Falwell may have been wrong about many things. But he saw something that American Jews did not wish to see: that the people who share most of our political preferences will not always be the people who best understand our deepest fears or stand most faithfully beside us. Lindsey Graham did stand beside us. Many of us would never have voted for him. But we knew that he was our friend.

Yehi Zichro Baruch May his memory be a blessing. And may his friendship remind us that, in politics as in life, loyalty must never be automatic, and genuine friendship must never be taken for granted.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner