

Of Prophet and Loss: Whither Sharansky's Heroic Stature?

By Walter Ruby

If I had been asked ten years ago for the name of my greatest living hero, I would have replied without reservation, "Natan Sharansky." If someone had posed the same question to me two years ago, I would still have said, "Sharansky," albeit with serious reservations.

Today, I no longer consider Natan to be a hero. Yes, he is the once great man who fought for the rights of all Soviet citizens, Jews and non-Jews alike, and through sheer force of will and force of truth somehow managed to vanquish the seemingly invincible Soviet tyranny. More recently, though, as a minister in successive Israeli governments who has shown a penchant for harsh treatment of the Palestinians, Sharansky has tarnished his former promise as a moral leader committed to freedom for all peoples. Not so long ago, the Natan Sharansky who had built bridges in the 1970s between the Jewish emigration movement and the Soviet dissident movement headed by Andrei Sakharov appeared to be the only living Jew with the potential to unite our own badly divided people around a vision blending ahavath Yisrael (love of the Jewish people) with tikkun olam (the mending of the world). These days, however, tikkun olam is nowhere in sight as this one-time champion of universal human rights has become an increasingly strident leader of Israel's 'national camp,' now pressing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to step up Jewish settlement of the West Bank.

Reading Natan's recent pronouncements is all the sadder when one recalls the younger Sharansky of the 1970s and 1980s, who was so self-evidently the greatest moral leader in the Jewish world. Who can forget his defiant and soul stirring "Next Year In Jerusalem" speech in a Soviet courtroom before he was led off to the gulag in chains, or the sheer indestructibility of his spirit as he managed to keep mind and body intact during eight long years of near total isolation inside a Soviet "punishment cell"?

Sharansky's greatness was never more evident than on the unforgettable night in February 1996 when I first glimpsed him in the flesh at Ben Gurion Airport. He had been flown there after being liberated from the gulag to be accorded a hero's welcome by the entire nation of Israel. Amidst all the hoopla of that airport mob scene, the speeches by Israel's leading politicians, and the clamor for his attention by hundreds of journalists and Soviet Jewry activists from around the world, Sharansky sat imperturbably on the podium holding hands with his beloved wife Avital, from whom he had been torn 12 years before. Here was a balding, shabbily dressed, and utterly ordinary-looking man who, at that moment, was the symbol of all that was good and noble in the Jewish spirit.

When Natan rose to speak in the halting, yet highly literate Hebrew he had learned in underground ulpanim during the 1970s and somehow had maintained through his long years of isolation, he metamorphosed before our eyes from a symbol, a face on a poster, into a real human being, a simple Jew, a mensch, who spoke the plain truth without artifice or pretense and whose thoughts, even at that moment of personal triumph, were with the thousands of prisoners still marooned in the gulag. "On this happiest day of our lives," Sharansky said, "I am not going to forget those whom I left in the camps, in the prisons, who are still in exile or who still continue their struggle for their right to emigrate, for their human rights."

Then Avital, a deeply religious Jew and devotee of the settler movement, led Natan to an outdoor rally at which she was wildly cheered by a mainly right-wing crowd. She turned to then Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who sat behind her on the podium, and demanded that he "protect our country and not give up one bit of it." Peres, Ariel Sharon and other politicians gave their own windy self-serving orations, only reinforcing the impression that they were morally dwarfed by the small, pale man sitting among them, shaking his head from time to time as though to assure himself that he was not still back in his prison cell having a particularly vivid dream.

When it was finally his turn to speak, Natan effortlessly elevated the discourse above any political agenda, including that of his wife. He told the audience, "During those difficult years when I heard not a word from anybody, there was not a single day that went by, not a single moment that passed, in which I did not feel a connection with all of you. Even when I was in solitary confinement, I sang the song, 'How good it is to be together, as brothers.'" Spontaneously, voices in the front row began singing the words from the Book of Psalms: "Heenay Mah Tov U Mah Na'im Shevat Achim Gam Yachad." Natan, Avital and the rest of the audience joined in and suddenly the song, considered by many Israelis to be Socnut (Jewish Agency) shmaltz, magically reassumed its timeless power, bringing together everyone at the rally -- leftists and rightists alike -- for a transcendent moment of mutual recognition and acceptance.

So what went wrong? Why has Sharansky not lived up to his great promise? Certainly, he was in an unenviable position, given that Jews from clashing moral and political positions all looked to him with such hope. Sharansky drifted haltingly toward the right over the years, evidently torn between a political constituency (Israel's Russian immigrant population) that deeply mistrusted the Palestinians, and a smaller group of liberals who looked to him to lead the struggle for universal human rights, including Palestinian human rights. There was clearly no formula for squaring that circle, although he sometimes seemed to try; insisting, on the one hand, that a failure to settle Har Homa would amount to "an end to Zionism" while advocating, on the other, more humane treatment of Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem by Israeli officialdom.

Natan took the lead in pointing out Palestinian violations of the Oslo Accords, including the printing of anti-Semitic material in school textbooks, yet had nothing to say about Israeli violations, including the refusal to free many security prisoners who had been slated for release under the terms of the agreement. The authoritarian style of the Arafat regime vividly reminded him of the Soviet Union, and he frequently expressed doubt as to whether Israel could make peace with a dictatorship. Somehow, he appeared to miss the irony that during its long occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Israel habitually resorted to the kind of abuses of Palestinian human and civil rights for which he so vociferously denounced Arafat.

My most recent personal encounter with Sharansky came in 1998 when, as Interior Minister under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he came to New York to promote the re-publication of *See No Evil*, his powerful 1987 account of his years in the gulag. When Natan called on me at a press conference, I asked how, given his own experiences as a political prisoner, he could accept the longstanding Israeli practice of "administrative detention," arresting and holding Palestinian prisoners for extended periods, often without access to a lawyer or without a specified trial date. Sharansky smiled wryly and said, "Walter, you always ask the tough questions." He then explained that while he is personally uncomfortable with administrative detention, he believes that practice to be justified under the unique circumstances in which Israel lives. After all, he reminded me, he and other Soviet refuseniks were totally non-violent and sought only to leave the Soviet state, not to destroy it. Many Palestinians, on the other hand, are indeed violent and committed to Israel's destruction. He had a point, of course, but however one cut it, the irony of the one-time political prisoner and champion of human rights advocating jailing other prisoners without charges was simply too much to swallow.

Today, as Housing Minister in Sharon's new government, Sharansky is pressing for the stepped-up building of apartments in West Bank Jewish settlements even though thousands of housing units built for settlers in recent years stand empty. Two weeks ago, he came to New York to urge American Jewry to step up pressure on the Bush administration to mute its criticism of Sharon's increasingly hard-line response to the Palestinian intifada.

Sharansky has made his choice. He clearly has given up efforts to find common ground among Jews with differing visions, and instead has taken his place as a lion of the Israeli right. Even in this sadly circumscribed role, Natan evinces a personal integrity and soaring intellect that only make his choice all the more tragic, not only for those Israelis and Jews who still dream of an accommodation with the Palestinians, but for all of Am Yisrael -- left, right and center. Sharansky was the only leader with the moral stature to get Jews of all political and religious stripes to end mutual demonization and recognize each other's Jewishness and humanity. Natan summoned forth exactly that sense of Jewish wholeness and connection on that magical evening at Ben Gurion Airport so many years ago,

and he had the potential to be our people's unifier on a more sustained and lasting basis. But it seems, at least for the present, that he is unavailable for the job.