

The American Jewish Soviet Experience

A conversation with Natan Sharansky, author of ‘Never Alone: Prison, Politics, and My People’

Izabella Tabarovsky

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Anatoly Sharansky, now Natan, was born in 1948 in the Ukrainian Soviet city of Stalino (now Donetsk), a time and a place where being a Jew was, in his words, “a disease without cure, a sentence to a life without hope,” and “an invitation to be pitied.” His parents—witnesses to the prewar terror of Stalin’s regime, Hitler’s Holocaust, and Stalin’s postwar anti-cosmopolitan campaigns—guided their son on the path of Soviet Jewish “survivalism,” a term that does not have resonance for postwar American Jews, though it would be easily recognized by their parents, and unfortunately, perhaps, by their grandchildren.

Soviet Jewish survivalism consisted of keeping your head down and your views to yourself, being the best at everything, and choosing a technical or scientific field, where the impact of ideology might be less corrosive than in history, law, or journalism. If all the stars aligned and you followed the program, you just might succeed at overcoming your handicap—your Jewish name and face, and the “nationality” line in your papers. Science might also provide a reprieve from the soul-destroying Soviet life of “doublethink”—the need to hide one’s true thoughts and feelings behind a mask of a loyal Soviet citizen—as well as an illusion of serving a higher purpose rather than serving the regime.

For a while, Sharansky went with the program, as he explained to me when we met recently in Jerusalem to discuss his new book, *Never Alone: Prison, Politics, and My People*, which he coauthored with Gil Troy. He was accepted into the country’s most prestigious physics and engineering school, moved to Moscow, and prepared to embark on a brilliant scientific career.

Very quickly, however, he realized that no Soviet citizen could remain within the system and remain free from doublethink. His success depended on his ability to spout the right slogans and pass ideological loyalty tests as much as it did on his scientific talent and hard work. He and his Jewish friends hated the regime privately “while loving it publicly.” He describes the pain of that inner split: the anxiety of checking yourself before speaking, the fear of saying a wrong thing to a wrong person, the dread of being found out. But his ambition, and the early promise of success as a scientist, kept him chained to the path his parents set out for him.

What planted the first seeds of doubt in his mind was the Six-Day War. Israel’s unexpected victory against Soviet-trained and Soviet-supplied Arab armies was a powerful moment for all Jews around the globe, but for Soviet Jews it held particular significance. In the run-up to the war, Soviet newspapers were gleefully predicting a historic victory of “progressive Arab nations” over the “lackeys of American imperialism” and the “bourgeois nationalist Zionist colonialists.” The propaganda energized local anti-Semites, who had no trouble discerning anti-Semitic dog whistles in the demonization of Israel, and many Soviet Jews feared that Israel’s

imminent destruction would lead to physical violence against them. When Israel won, they celebrated not only the miraculous survival of the Jewish state but their own deliverance.

But the consequences of Israel's victory for Soviet Jews ran deeper than that. Sharansky noticed that "strangers, colleagues, and friends" were suddenly looking at him differently. They talked to him as if he himself were responsible for the defeat of the Soviet-led Arab armies. At first, it took him aback: He was, after all, a loyal Soviet citizen, just like them. Yet he could not dismiss this strange new feeling. "Seeing how the word 'Israel' became something that could boost us—not just diminish us—filled me with a pride and dignity I had never experienced," he writes. He began to seek out information about Israel and Jewish history.

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That was the beginning of the end of Sharansky's life as "an exemplary Soviet doublethinker." For him and countless other Soviet Jews, whose only authentic Jewish experience was one of anti-Semitism, the new personal connection to Israel opened a path to Jewish identity that nothing else ever could. The idea that somewhere on this planet there was a country that loved them and wanted them—a country that they could call home—spoke powerfully to them. In contrast to their privileged American cousins, for Soviet Jews, Israel's promise of being a refuge for any Jew in need was more than a mere abstraction. When Sharansky read about the Israeli commandos' 1976 raid on Entebbe to rescue Israeli hostages, he viewed it as a "personal guarantee"—a promise that Israel would stand by him too, that he, too, would be rescued.

For Sharansky, there is a profound and natural link between his self-discovery as a Jew and the awakening of his thirst for freedom. He describes identity and freedom as deeply intertwined. "It was only when I discovered my identity that I found the strength to fight for my own freedom and the freedom of others," he told me. Being enslaved to his professional ambitions meant being forever split between his inner and outer self. Even science could not save him from his "portable, permanent chamber of fear." As his sense of belonging to the Jewish people deepened, he was no longer prepared to check his true self at the door of a prestigious scientific institute. He wanted the freedom to be himself fully, at all times.

Sharansky dwells in considerable detail on his struggle to live in truth. There is a reason for that. He is deeply concerned with what he views as the dawning of an age of doublethink in America—a phenomenon best captured in the Cato Institute's recent finding that 62% of Americans have political views they are afraid to share. Doublethink is dangerous for democracy, he warns. That the new brand of cultural totalitarianism that induces people to self-censor doesn't come from the government, nor is enforced by a KGB-like agency, is cold comfort to him: Manufactured public opinion of the kind that today's social and legacy media produce is just as capable of silencing people and pushing them into split lives as are state propaganda and brute force. Against this, there is only one remedy, he told me: "first and foremost, each person must decide for himself that he will not be a doublethinker; that she will say what she really thinks."

If anyone is in a position to issue such an appeal, it is, of course, Sharansky. In a bid to align every part of his life with his conscience, he gave up not only a prestigious career but his physical freedom. Strikingly, he asserts that he was a freer man in prison than outside: In prison

he did not need to wear a mask. He taunted his interrogators by telling them Brezhnev *anekdoty*—subversive jokes that painted the general secretary as the bumbling senile nitwit that he was—and watching with satisfaction as they struggled to suppress their laughter. You can't even laugh when you want to, he would point out; so which one of us is really free? From his sensory-deprivation punishment cell in Mordovia he visualized friends in America, Israel, and the rest of the world fighting for him. He used this mental image to shield himself against his tormentors' claims that the world had abandoned him.

Soviet propaganda tried to undermine the idea of Jewish peoplehood by calling it a fiction and claiming that Soviet Jews had nothing to do with the Jews in Israel and America. Soviet intelligence agencies also deployed “active measures”—tools of disinformation and manipulation—to sow discord among American Jewish groups. These efforts underscore one of Sharansky and Troy's fundamental messages: We must strive to see beyond that which divides us and work to strengthen the essential bonds that hold us together.

Today, Sharansky sees some of the same forces that acted on him in the Soviet Union—anti-Semitic anti-Zionism that demonized the Jewish state, and an expectation that he truncate his Jewish identity to fit the dominant ideology—at work on American Jews. To be sure, the United States is not the Soviet Union; but that does not make these forces any less frightening. I asked Sharansky whether American Jews, who are facing these pressures for the first time in their lives, might not benefit from examining the experience of Soviet Jews in greater depth.

Sharansky agreed. For one thing, there is something to be learned from the Soviet Jews' “Jewish pride” that developed “as a response to anti-Semitism.” Another valuable aspect is their holistic understanding of anti-Semitism.

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Ideological loyalty tests are fast becoming normal parts of American institutional and social life. If the recent trend to “cancel” those who fail to comply is any indication, many may soon be facing Sharansky's choice: to live in truth or retreat into the splintered life of doublethink. For the Jews, there are additional factors to consider. They include an ability to live in the fullness of their Jewish identity or excising the “undesirable” parts such as their connection to Israel. Sharansky shows that the path of least resistance—self-censorship and doublethink—is not nearly as cost-free as one might think.

When Sharansky stepped down from his position as the head of the Jewish Agency, he gave his successor a piece of advice: “To enjoy your job, not only for nine years but even for one minute, you have to answer one question: Do you love the Jewish people?” For Sharansky, the answer is an unequivocal yes. It is a question, and a challenge, that he directs at all of us. Pluralism and diversity of opinions is one of the Jewish people's greatest strengths, Sharansky and Troy write. But we also must remember that even as we debate each other vigorously, our goal is not to win. It is, instead, “to continue our journey together,” as one people.