

## Seven Decades of Torah Life in the State of Israel 1978–1987

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# “PRISONERS OF ZION” AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FREEDOM

Just as the origins of modern Zionism can be traced back to the trial of Colonel Alfred Dreyfus, a trial also marks the turn of the fourth decade for the modern state of Israel. In 1978, Anatoly Borisovich Shcharansky’s sentencing to thirteen years of forced labor by the Soviet Government inspired protests around the globe, culminating in the march on Washington D.C. on December 6, 1987, when a quarter of a million people protested in solidarity with Soviet Jewry. With these two events as bookends, I wish to unpack a lesson from this period, fundamental to our celebration of Yom Ha’Atzmaut.

When I asked my mother for her recollections of that time, she was excited to share that she had Anatoly’s name on her bracelet before he changed

it to Natan Sharansky. From your local Bnei Akiva chapter, you could buy a plain silver C-shaped band that bore a name of a “Prisoner of Zion,” which she wore for years. It was that personal connection to the issue that inspired her to join the protests of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), along with her family and friends. “It was what everyone was doing, it was a bit of a social scene,” she conceded.

The bracelet was the brainchild of the SSSJ’s founder, Jacob Birnbaum. He planned to personalize the campaign, and he transformed the movement from “an abstract struggle for ‘Soviet Jewry’ into a concrete struggle for Soviet *Jews*, with names and stories,” author and journalist Yossi Klein Halevi reported.<sup>1</sup> “Over the years, the personal campaign became

an essential feature of the entire movement, drawing new recruits and energizing veteran activists.”

Natan Sharansky, however, is certainly the most famous refusenik. Perhaps it is due to his high-profile career in the public sector, or for his mesmerizing claim that he kept sane in extended solitary confinement in Soviet prison by playing mental chess games against himself. Yet I think he is famous because of Avital.

Avital married Natan Sharansky the day before she used her expiring visa to flee the USSR in 1974. Avital began her activism as a newlywed, and made her first trip to America to plead on her husband’s behalf in 1975; but it was only after his trial in 1978 that Natan’s plight received widespread attention. Avital began meeting with

dignitaries and diplomats, and found her way into the homes and hearts of Jews the world round.

Thirty years after Sharansky's walk to freedom across the Glienicke Bridge,<sup>2</sup> their daughter, Rachel Sharansky Denziger, explained how indebted she feels for the strength the protest gave to her parents, while in turn it was her parents who gave strength to the protests. Klein Halevi explained that it was "Birnbbaum's vision of a symbiotic relationship ... American Jews were inspired by the courage of Soviet refuseniks, who in turn were fortified by American Jewish support."

Why is this story about Diaspora Jews relevant to Israeli history?

When God signed a pact with Avraham at the *Brit Bein HaBetarim*, when the Land of Israel was promised to a not-yet existing nation, God explained that a prerequisite to national autonomy was to first be strangers in a land that is not theirs (Gen. 15:13). To a person who does not yet have children, it is an odd selling point to promise that the progeny must first be slaves before they can become masters of their own land.

R' Elazar HaGadol is puzzled as to why the Torah warns us about proper treatment of the "strangers' among us," and the Gemara (*Baba Metzia* 59b) is unsure if the message is repeated 36 times or 46 times. Tosafot add that the inclusion of the ten additional iterations under dispute are the verses that tell us the reason behind the sensitivity, and are not a warning in-and-of themselves. Meaning, on top of the uniquely repetitive statements warning us to treat strangers with love and kindness, there is another set of repetitive verses that reiterate the spirit behind the law. These are verses where Hashem tells us to treat the Other kindly, "for you were strangers in the

*land of Egypt*" (Shemos 22:20). The connection between our time in Egypt and our treatment of others is repeated in Shemot (23:9), Vayikra (19:10), and in Devarim (10:19; 23:8; 24:18).

We are told that "When strangers become your neighbors, do not wrong them. They are your community ... and love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." This verse is juxtaposed with themes in the next verse that we should do righteousness because, again, God took us out of Egypt (Vayikra 19:33-36).

Within the basic vision of God's giving the Land of Israel is a prerequisite national training in empathy. To feel for those who have wandered as we have wandered, who have been enslaved as we have been enslaved, who have been persecuted as we have been persecuted. We will recognize their pain as it resonates with our national consciousness. We will hate injustice, because we have been victims of injustice and so we will be a beacon of righteousness from our own soil. It is a fundamental component of our *brit* with God from the *Brit Bein HaBetarim*.

It is injustice that inspires us, and our pursuit of justice that helps us earn our return, as Yeshayahu exclaimed, "Zion is redeemed with justice, and we will return to it through righteousness" (1:27).

That is why it is no coincidence that these movements have been inspired by trials, corrupted manifestations of justice. And it was from the beginning, at the first SSSJ rally on May Day 1964, that Birnbbaum insisted on having posters declaring "Let My People Go!" Egypt, the very first diaspora destination, still informing how we advocate for "strangers" who are our community, who are the names on our bracelets, the visitor in our living room,

and the prisoner on our mind even if they are in a cell across the world. They are strangers, but we know them, for their story is our story.

This message is integrally woven into the fabric of Israeli society. It is no surprise that Israeli support was first on the ground after an earthquake in Haiti in 2010, that we sent relief to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and 140 tons of supplies to Indonesia and Sri Lanka after the tsunami in 2004. Going the extra mile, as part of their relief teams, Israel dispatches a troupe of medical clowns to fill the makeshift medical tents with warmth when it is most needed.

As we celebrate the founding of the State of Israel and commemorate Yom Hazikaron, it behooves us to dwell on what made it possible: the sacrifice and hardship, as well as wounds that are fresh and still healing. Central to our national narrative is our capacity to learn compassion and empathy from these experiences, forming a deeper understanding of the human condition.

The Mishna in *Avot* says that "*Ben Arba'im L'Binah*," forty is the age of wisdom. R' Ovadiah ben Abraham of Bartenura, as a prooftext, quotes Devarim (29:4), that it was not until after forty years in the desert that God gave the Jewish people a "*heart for understanding, eyes to see, and ears to hear*." Israel's fourth decade teaches us to open our ears to listen, our eyes to see, and our hearts to feel the plight of others.

## Endnotes

1 Klein Halevi, Yossi. "Jacob Birnbbaum and the Struggle for Soviet Jewry" *Azure* (17) Spring 5764/2004.

2 Sharansky Danziger, Rachel "30 Years After Glienicke Bridge" *Times of Israel* Feb. 11, 2016 <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/30-years-after-glienicke-bridge/>.