



---

## JEWISH COMMENTARY

---

# Sharansky's Faith

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

**N**ATAN SHARANSKY is a towering figure in the Jewish world, but the true essence of his greatness is often misunderstood. Upon achieving victory over the Soviet regime after years in prison and at last arriving in Israel, in 1986, Sharansky might have been expected to adopt an easy life, to collect honoraria delivering speeches around the Jewish world. Instead, he dedicated himself to public service, first as a minister in the Israeli government and then as leader of the Jewish Agency. This took him from experiencing universal adulation into the realm of politics, where criticism would be constant. As Sharansky quips, the refuseniks reversed the trend: First they went to prison, then they worked in government.

How his experiences in captivity motivated his later career is the subject of a new book he has written with Gil Troy, *Never Alone: Prison, Politics, and My People*. If there is a central theme to Sharansky's life, it is his balance of particularity and universalism, the defense of the Jewish people on the one hand and human-rights advocacy on the other. In an attempt to bridge this gap, Sharansky offers an interpretation drawing on two biblical figures: King David and the prophet Isaiah.

This argument, alas, fails in its intended application, but it gives us the perfect prism through which we can see Sharansky's own greatness.

David and Isaiah, Sharansky suggests, symbolize

---

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

“different routes to Jewish identity.” David, the great warrior, “represents the impulse to build and defend a sovereign nation in our own homeland.” Isaiah, in contrast, represents “our ethical imperative and our message of peace, universalism, and social justice.” Israelis “represent the Davidian party, ready to use brute force to protect Jewish sovereignty when necessary,” while American Jewish critics of Israel “are Isaiahans, most moved by the prophetic teachings, including harsh critiques of power, particularism, and the status quo.” That is why over the decades, “human rights—and *tikkun olam*, repairing the world—came to be the defining Jewish value for many liberal American Jews.” Sharansky suggests that “a constructive debate between Davidian Israelis and American Jewish Isaiahans could strengthen our people.”

The hard truth, however, is that often Israelis have missed the essence of David's greatness, while American Jewish critics of Israel are actually *ignoring* Isaiah. David is more than a warrior; as Sharansky explains in his 1988 memoir, he learned from David that a constant awareness of God allowed one to “fear no evil” (the title of that great book) in the valley of the shadow of death. David defended his people but sought to remind Israel of the God Who was the source of his victory. That is why David's truest legacy is not his defeat of Goliath but his vision of Jerusalem, a city crowned by a Temple that is an eternal locus of Jewish identity.

Interestingly, Sharansky's own recognition of this fact inspired his greatest moment in government. As he recounts in *Never Alone*, he was the first to pull out of Ehud Barak's coalition when Israel's then-prime

minister offered Yasser Arafat control of the Temple Mount. Sharansky's resignation helped lead to the fall of Barak's government. If Sharansky and his fellow Russian Jews, rather than Israel's religious parties, were the first to abandon Barak, it was because, he reflects, "the connection linking our identity with the liberation of Jerusalem and the Western Wall was fresh. We hadn't been around long enough to take it for granted. Maybe we were also the most protective of Jerusalem's centrality to the Jewish story." In the end, it was not Barak, the sabra warrior, but the refusenik immigrant who was the truest Davidian.

In a similar sense, many American Jews who think they are following Isaiah's path fundamentally misconstrue him. Isaiah's universal vision is predicated on the defeat of evil and the recognition of the Jewish right to Jerusalem:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths.

Isaiah foresees a world at peace once it has come to know the God of Jerusalem and the moral truths Judaism has always preached.

Yet as Sharansky himself writes, it is just this moral vision that is now being lost. He blames postmodernism, the assault on truth, for the growing attacks on Israel in the academy, allowing the most despotic regimes to be celebrated and the Middle East's sole democracy condemned. In the book's most devastating passage, he notes that the anti-Zionist Jews who can be found on American campuses remind him of his past life: "These Harvard and MIT Jews acted like Soviet Jews in so many ways." He continues: "In the Soviet Union, always conscious that you were a Jew, you kept your internal censor on. You knew your words and actions would be judged differently. Now, on these elite campuses were the early warnings of a hyper-judgmental, suffocating, campus-based fear society, rife with anti-Zionism, the New Anti-Semitism, where people who thought they were the freest Jews in history didn't feel fully free. This Jewish skittishness in the world's strongest Diaspora community made me grateful for my new freedom in Israel."

Sharansky recounts how, visiting Rutgers as a

governmental minister, he took a pie in the face at the hands of a Jewish student, founder of "Central Jersey Jews Against the Occupation." He takes the episode with obvious good humor—a man who suffered solitary confinement will not be daunted by a pie—but it is hard not to cry when reading of it. A man suffers in prison, heroically dedicates himself to human rights and to the Jewish people, only to have baked goods thrown in his face by a Jewish college student who has done nothing with his life.

But here is what is unexpected—and inspiring. Sharansky refuses to give up on the segment of American Jewry that is becoming distanced from Israel. I myself have watched with wonder as he, in his current project, guides and inspires young Israelis to serve as *shlichim*, representatives of the Jewish state to Diaspora Jews, on the very college campuses where he was once decried. And in feeling bound to the very Jews who have rejected the true message of Isaiah, Sharansky shows himself worthy of the prophet's mantle. Upon hearing God's call to minister to Israel, Isaiah denounces the people to whom he has been sent: "Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips....Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand.... And he laid it upon my mouth." For the rabbis, Isaiah's lips are burned because he has insulted Israel; Isaiah's first lesson is that the prophet must love his people *even when they do not deserve it*.

It is this love that Sharansky always makes manifest. Sharansky describes meeting Nelson Mandela, who suggested that imprisonment in South Africa had been easier than in the Gulag, for Mandela had been able to see his compatriots.

When Sharansky protested that he, too, had felt a communion with Jews around the world, Mandela smiled: "I read your book. It was all in your imagination. My people were with me in real life, all the time." The new book's title is a response to Mandela. Sharansky truly never felt alone because he loved his people, and always will.

Israelis are not all disciples of David; nor are Diaspora Jews of Isaiah. But Sharansky, in his own life, captures the spirit of both; in prison he never gave up on God, and in freedom he never gave up on the Jews. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik once commented that one of the premises of Judaism is faith in the Jewish people. "It is not," he reflected, "an easy faith." This faith has driven Sharansky his whole life. We cannot help but be awed by it, and pray that his faith be vindicated soon. 🍞