

Yom Kippur 5771
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On March 15, 1977, 29 year old Anatoly Shcharansky as he was then known, was seized by the KGB in Moscow. He was brought to a local prison where he was stripped and searched and told he was to be charged with treason. From that day on he spent nine years in prisons, in labor camps and in solitary confinement. Shcharansky was born into a Russia that found a dying Stalin reviving his Anti Semitic campaigns. Sharansky had been raised to function in Russian society on two levels at once: "What you really thought and what you allowed yourself to tell other people" (Fear No Evil, Anatoly Shcharansky). Until a certain age, he only understand being Jewish as something to be hated for. Four years before his arrest by the KGB, he became involved in the movement of Soviet Jews working for their right to emigrate to Israel. For this, he was humiliated and ultimately fired at work, beat up over the years, fined, humiliated in the public press constantly This was enough to begin years of investigations, meetings and ultimately an arrest and imprisonment.

I was privileged to hear him speak this summer in Israel. He has often reflected what kept him alive during his nine years of imprisonment. His answer? What kept him alive was all those in World Jewry who were fighting for his cause and the rights of all Soviet Jews to leave. The Soviet Jewry movement that had such a strong presence in Washington DC combined with Israel's efforts and the tens of thousands of Jews that would visit Jewish dissidents in the former Soviet Union. That is what kept him alive, he told us. Knowing other Jews cared about his survival. His nine years in prison ended when he was released as part of a prisoner exchange and he could finally join his wife in Israel. He is no longer Anatoly though – He is now Natan Sharansky. His nine years in prison had led him to become the face of Soviet Jewry both during this time and then, as Israel absorbed these immigrants, ultimately their voice there, where he served for nine years in the Knesset, the Israeli

Parliament. And today he is the head of the Jewish Agency – the body in Israel that serves as the primary connection between Israel and the Diaspora, the very people that gave Sharansky the will to live while in prison.

The catch 22 of being an American Jew today is that we no longer resound with that notion of fear that Sharansky once knew. We feel safe and secure that our government would not do such things as the Russian government did to Scharansky. In fact if you are a Jew younger than 40, these notions of it being dangerous to be a Jew may have no resonance with you at all, particularly in relation to the security of Israel. According to a recent study of young adult Jews by Jewish demographer Steven Cohen, “One of the hallmarks of this younger Jewish group is the diminished sensitivity to matters of external threat.” (JCPA, August 2010) But Cohen reflecting on his finding, raises alarm. “The declining commitment of many Jews to the Jewish people, to Israel and the Jewish communities is deeply worrying. Fewer Jews see themselves obligated to support the collective interests of the Jewish people, or even to relate personally to the very notion of the Jewish people at all.”

Judaism has never been a religion of “Who cares?” It is about you and I making a difference. It is about you and I as part of a peoplehood - part of something greater than any individual. Nobody knows that better than Natan Sharansky but the irony now is that in his role as head of the Jewish agency he has to deal with the very problem of a Jewish people who forgot that they matter. I wonder if he must look at the Jewish world on some days and wonder – Would they have fought for my freedom today? Would they have rallied for my cause? Would they have kept me alive in prison? Do they know they did? If you had asked Natan Sharansky sitting in that Russian jail where he thought he would be decades later, a part of him may have wondered if he would even live to see a future let alone one where there are those who say, “Who cares?”. But live he did and today as the head of the Jewish Agency he

believes that a strong identity is a “basic building block of human existence and spends his time teaching the Jewish world how they can know that they are Jewish and understand the meaning of how our own Jewish makeup and shared experiences with other Jews comes the Jewish identity that is felt in the kishkes.” (Jewish Agency Report)

When G-d called to Abraham, the very first Jew, these were the nutrients that enriched the soil of what was to become the Jewish people – that we were to wander and yet always be tied to the holy land, that we were to pursue a life of our own doing with its highs and lows and yet at the same time tied up with devotion to G-d. That intensely rich nature of our people – to follow multiple purposes at once has continued to this day. We are modern people partaking in ancient rituals. We are part of secular society while engaging in a religious experience. We are concerned with home and holyland. This only expanded further over time. 600 years after Abraham, by the time of Moses, the promise that G-d had made is reaffirmed once again with the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai. As Modern Jewish philosopher David Hartman understands it, that intense interaction between G-d and humans – first with Abraham and then furthered with Moses was meant to be in stark contrast to the first scenes of our Torah in the Garden of Eden. Hartman writes, “Genesis chronicles a series of divine schemes and failures that led up to the Sinai covenant. Although G-d surrounded man and woman with idyllic conditions in the Garden of Eden and expected that they would reflect the divine image...” it was not so. It took the interaction and partnership of Abraham and then Moses to create “G-d’s interaction with humans in history and[G-d’s] choice to involve them in the determining the course of their history.” (David Hartman, A Living Covenant) From the very beginnings of Judaism, you and I were the threads in the essential fabric of our tradition. But we have lost that intrinsic understanding.

How did we lose sight of our essential role in our religion?

First and foremost, we have so many worries about our own health and wellbeing, how in the world could we find time to worry about others thousands of miles away? The story is told of a Rabbi Simcha Bunim who was always happy. His students once asked him how he maintained this jovial outlook. Rebbe Simcha Bunim said that every morning he would go to the local hospital, approach the receptionist, and say, "Excuse me...is Simcha Bunim a patient in this hospital?" And when they would say no, he would breathe a sigh of relief, and say, thank G-d and go on with his day, maintaining his happy outlook no matter what was going on around him. Our individual welfare, like Simcha Bunim, is the focus of our efforts and there is no room to engage beyond that realm.

And there are external reasons we are so disconnected.

What we find on our airwaves and in our papers is the world's arguments again and again that Israel as a nation has no right to exist. The Time Magazine cover last week. It's cover – A Star of David made of daisies - declared, "Why Israel Doesn't Care About Peace" (9/13/10) and went on to portray a money-hungry Israeli society whose citizens in Tel Aviv lounged at the beach and viewed the Palestinian problem as a nuisance but not much else. Allusions throughout the article to the attitudes and concerns of Israelis painted a heartless, cold and money hungry society that glossed over the complexities of life and living in Israel. The problem is that so much time has been spent convincing the world that Israel has no right to exist, that in the process, according to Jewish commentator Danny Gordis, ultimately American Jews are getting convinced of this same thing. You may balk at that notion but from the viewpoint of Gordis, a true spokesperson for Israeli society to the Diaspora, "The country is about an idea and that idea is being contested and no one is speaking up." And what widens the chasm between us and Israel is the message Gordis says the Israelis are getting from us. What is that message? It is, "Who cares?" Israel pursues a foreign policy inspired by Jewish values and morality. Yet the

Israelis are overwhelmed by disproportionate criticism. They keep an ear to the ground straining to hear what those of us in the diaspora are saying and all they perceive hearing from us is “Who cares?”

Every year at Temple Beth El I am asked to teach the session of the Introduction to Judaism class on the topic of Israel because my passion and love for Israel, I have been told, is contagious. But I always end that class with a documentary about one of the worst nights in modern Israel's history, the night when the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. Because in that event is not just a lesson about Israel but about what it is to be a Jew. Here's how. If you visit Kikar Rabin, the site of the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, amongst the graffiti you will find the Hebrew words Selach Lanu – meaning Forgive Us – because Israelis count themselves guilty in Rabin's assassination for not responding to the extreme elements in Israel's society that were hinting at the potential for something like the assassination to happen. They use the liturgy of THESE High Holy Days – Slach Lanu, Machal Lanu, Kaper Lanu – Forgive us, Pardon us, Grant us atonement, to illustrate their anguish over the loss of their prime minister. And they view their actions and their way of life and living directly connected to the unfolding history of the Jewish people and all its events – both wonderful and tragic. It is the farthest thing from the sentiments expressed by Time magazine and we must make sure to understand that indifference is so contrary to what our tradition urges us towards.

It may be easy for me as a rabbi to urge each of us on Yom Kippur to understand our essential place in the Jewish tradition and to ask you to act upon that in the year 5771. Because as a rabbi I am blessed to have access to both an incredible Jewish community here in Boca Raton and also in Israel where I am twice a year for a fellowship I have with the Hartman Institute. I view firsthand in both places the essential nature of each individual Jew as part of something greater than themselves. But I believe that each of us has the potential to achieve

the realization of our essential role in the fate of the Jewish people. It is very possible that each of these figures ancient and modern – Abraham, Moses, Sharansky and Rabin had absolutely no intention of ending up in the history books of the Jewish people. But for each, there was a moment when they were swept up in what it meant to be Jewish. What it meant to be tied to the ethical monotheistic G-d of Sinai that makes promises of a covenant while allowing us to pursue our own free will guided by that covenant. That Torah and all the teachings of Judaism were so precious they were nearly worth dying for to preserve. That the birthplace of our people thousands of years ago, reaffirmed with the founding of the modern state of Israel out of the ashes of the Holocaust was so important that it was worth defending.

Just this year, fifteen years after Rabin's assassination, Rabin's legacy is kept alive in the just opened Rabin Museum in Tel Aviv. The museum depicts three timelines at once that correspond with the years of Rabin's life. On the floor, under your feet as you walk are the major events in the world of that time. On the walls to one side are events of the modern history of the state of Israel. On the parallel walls are the details and artifacts of Rabin's own life. Rabin was the first Israeli born Prime Minister who wanted nothing more than to be a farmer. But he grew up in a time when his nation needed him to be first a warrior and then a peacemaker. And so he, as Chief of Staff of the Israeli army and then as Prime Minister, pursued these objectives for the greater good of the Jewish people, putting his dreams of being a farmer aside. The museum takes all this into account in order to teach that, like Rabin, we as Jews need to walk through life with three timelines at once – the timeline of the world, of the Jewish homeland and our own life. Our own personal life unfolds side by side with the state and the world. To live a life not influenced by all three neglects the nature of being Jewish. Rabin could have been the best farmer in Israel no doubt. But he was willing to give up that dream for the sake of a people whom he helped achieve far greater dreams. Would it be that we could live with that same

perspective – treating the events of the world AND of the Jewish state AND our own lives as what we need to care about.

On this most holy of days when you expect the Torah would demand incredible things of us, superhuman feats and unbelievable expectations and miracles and wonders, it is the exact opposite. Instead it asks every individual to be reminded that they stand before G-d on this day. The portion lists the workers of the most menial labors, water drawing and wood chopping to the highest echelons of ancient Israel, tribal head and reminds them they all stand before G-d on this day. And what are they commanded by G-d with a voice ringing from the heavens? They are commanded simply to care. To choose life and blessing – by loving G-d, listening to G-d's voice and holding fast to the One that is your life and the length of your days. And to understand that for us, the modern Jew in the 21st century, this means that freeing Natan Sharansky is as powerful as fasting on Yom Kippur, if not more so. How in the world Natan Sharansky did not just curl up in a ball and waste away in that Russian Jail when G-d must have seemed so very far away is amazing. But in his break – in his removal – in his absence from free life and living, his bond to the Jewish people was as strong as ever. And he gives back tenfold what the Jews of the world gave to him in the example of his life.

There is a Hasidic teaching that every human being is tied to God by a rope. If the rope breaks, and is later fixed with a knot, the rope is shorter and so that individual is then connected ever closer to God than as if there never were a break in the rope. Thus, errors, mistakes and failures have the potential of drawing us even closer to God.

Challenges and obstacles pull us ever closer when we overcome them. Restore your broken ties. The Jewish future depends on it. And in restoring those broken ties with our land, our people and our teachings, may we draw us ever closer to G-d.