

Let Freedom Ring

Natan Sharansky

**The Case for Democracy:
The Power of Freedom
to Overcome Tyranny and Terror**

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Reviewed by Jeremy Rabkin

It required tremendous courage and resolution for dissidents to mount public challenges to Soviet repression in the 1970s. Yet even among such heroic figures, Natan Sharansky achieved exceptional prominence. His arrest and imprisonment, for example, provoked personal protests by U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his successor Ronald Reagan. In fact, it was Reagan's direct intervention that ultimately secured Sharansky's release from prison and his safe arrival, on that same day, in Israel. A mere ten years later, Sharansky won a place in the Israeli Knesset as head of his own political party. He continued to serve in various capacities in the cabinets of Benjamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, and Ariel

Sharon, even as his own party dwindled to insignificance. Throughout, Sharansky combined the spirit and daring required of a dissident under tyranny with the agility and tact of a successful politician in a free society.

Such a combination is rare. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a much grander figure in the opposition to Soviet Communism, was never able to find a role in the political life of post-communist Russia. He did not let his fierce antagonism to Soviet tyranny prevent him from voicing sharp criticism of the West and from pursuing open quarrels with fellow dissidents. Sharansky, by contrast, managed to merge his initial priority—securing the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate—with the larger struggle against Soviet repression. He was thus able to make common cause with secular intellectuals like Andrei Sakharov, Christian visionaries like Andrei Amalrik, and an assortment of Ukrainian and Baltic nationalists, all of whom were united in the fight against Russia's Communist regime.

From Sharansky's point of view, the struggle against Soviet repression ended in success, as most of his initial goals were achieved. By contrast, Israel's efforts to achieve peace with its Arab neighbors, the dominant concern of Sharansky's political life over the past decade, have been far less successful. Sharansky's new book, *The Case for Democracy*, thus urges that the central lessons of the campaign against Soviet tyranny be mobilized anew in the struggle for peace—not only in the struggle between Israel and the Palestinians, but also in the wider struggle between Western democracies and the world's remaining tyrannies, particularly those that connive with terrorism. In a book that combines memoir and political manifesto, Sharansky bears his own witness to the truth that powerful ideas can achieve astonishing results, if applied with the right proportions of imagination and discipline.

Sharansky does not advocate ideals divorced from reality. Rather, he argues for a better understanding of political realities. For instance, he insists that those who sought accommodation, or *détente*, with the Soviet Union in the 1970s turned a blind eye to the true nature of the Soviet state and its implications for the prospects of peace: "There were few leaders in the West who could look beyond the facade of Soviet power to see

the fundamental weakness of a state that denied its citizens freedom." The same mistake, he argues, characterized efforts to make peace with Yasser Arafat's corrupt terrorist regime in the 1990s. This sort of *realpolitik* is not merely lacking in moral clarity. In the end, it lacks political realism.

Sharansky further argues that real peace requires the willingness to set a higher goal than an end to violence. To subordinate every concern to the immediate cessation of violence means, in effect, that those who threaten violence will always have the upper hand. Furthermore, temporary agreements with those who threaten violence will never be reliable. "While the mechanics of democracy make democracies inherently peaceful," he writes, "the mechanics of tyranny make nondemocracies inherently belligerent." Since peace with dictatorships is not, then, a reliable peace, it follows that the goal of Western nations should be to extend democracy—in the Palestinian territories, in Arab nations, and ultimately in the world at large.

This, Sharansky explains, was his main concern during the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations of the 1990s, when he urged successive prime ministers to link Israeli concessions with guarantees for human rights in Palestinian territories. In expounding the general logic of this strategy,

Sharansky makes a good case that support for human rights can be not just a pious ideal, but also sound strategy.

His first point is that democracies that do not feel strongly threatened are reluctant to resort to war. He cites, as one indication, the well-documented fact that no democratic nation has ever resorted to war against another democracy. Sharansky offers a simple explanation: Most people, most of the time, seek to avoid the risks and costs of war, so governments accountable to the majority find it hard to sustain belligerent postures. This is especially true for a dispute with another democracy, whose own citizens will also likely pressure their government into finding alternatives to the use of force.

Sharansky's next point is that dictatorships tend to mobilize support by intimidating opponents at home and inventing enemies from without, whose alleged threats are in turn used to justify even more repressive measures. Hence dictatorships have strong incentives to resist paths to peace and to keep their nations always on the edge of conflict. As Sharansky sees it, the crucial question is not whether a state holds elections. For communist states and other tyrannies have often been prepared to mount elections,

so long as they control everything preceding the casting of ballots. The vital question, rather, is whether critics can contest government policy in open debate and hold the government's claims up to scrutiny. If a government suppresses criticism, it is organizing what Sharansky calls a "fear society" rather than a "free society."

Having thus described the stakes, Sharansky argues that it is wrong to think that democracy appeals only to Western nations. Given a choice, peoples throughout the world would surely prefer to live in a "free society" as opposed to a "fear society." Nations that do live in freedom must, accordingly, keep the rulers of fear societies under pressure to reform, and must not accept their tyrannies as inevitable. Precisely because dictatorships do not know how to cope with internal debate, they are often vulnerable to outside pressure; indeed, the mere fact of outside criticism may remind a subject people that an existing government is not the unshakeable wielder of power it claims to be. Democratic governments can increase the pressure for reform by making financial assistance conditional on it, as the United States did in the 1970s when it made trade agreements with the Soviet Union contingent on the loosening of restrictions on emigration.

For outside pressure to succeed in moving repressive regimes toward democracy, human rights—a catchphrase Sharansky remains proud to embrace—must be viewed in context. For if human rights become a mere wish list of utopian aspirations, one can easily show that every government fails to measure up to the ideal. From this lofty perspective, all governments may appear fundamentally equivalent, since all have need for improvement. Sharansky thus dismisses the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Like “any attempt to bridge the unbridgeable moral gap between dictatorship and democracy, the declaration stood for everything and hence, for nothing.” Without denying that governments in “free” societies are capable of deplorable abuses, Sharansky rightly insists that people in democratic states who enjoy legal safeguards for free debate can expose and correct abuses in ways that dictatorships would never allow. He criticizes Amnesty International for focusing on human rights abuses by the democratic government of Israel, for instance, without acknowledging the context of these alleged abuses—namely, the war waged against Israeli civilians by Palestinian terrorists—or the fact that Israel remains, overall, a society with extensive legal and political protections for open debate.

For Amnesty and similar organizations to castigate Israel as if it were the equivalent of a terror-sponsoring dictatorship is, Sharansky laments, a sad lapse of “moral clarity.”

Compelling as it is, Sharansky’s outlook is subject to several basic objections. Most obviously, if advancing democracy is a strategic aim for democratic nations, that aim must accommodate the sorts of considerations that any strategy requires. For example, not every “fear society” poses the same level of threat to “free societies,” and free societies often need the help of unfree societies or less free societies. This was true during the cold war, when the free world had numerous allies among the less-than-free, and is bound to be true in the case of several current conflicts, as well. Sharansky himself tacitly acknowledges this when he refrains from criticizing President George W. Bush for relying on Pakistan for help in fighting the war in Afghanistan, despite obvious deficiencies in General Pervez Musharaff’s government.

Even when it comes to internal reform, there are obvious complications. Sharansky rightly points to the success of democracy in many places around the world, where American or Western experts had once pronounced it impossible, starting with Germany

and Japan. He also acknowledges that efforts to establish democracy have often failed, and that even elected governments have turned into tyrannies. But, he explains, this only underscores the importance of building institutions that protect open debate. The least one can say is that this may be a more difficult proposition in practice than Sharansky indicates in his brief remarks on the subject.

Sharansky does note that Palestinians had more freedom to express themselves under Israeli rule than they did under Arafat, but he does not pretend that Palestinians will therefore yearn for the return of the former. Instead he takes for granted that people have nationalist aspirations that sometimes conflict with aspirations to personal freedom. He does not fully acknowledge the complications that may arise, however, when opponents of liberalization depict reform as a foreign imposition. Building up reliable safeguards for democratic debate may prove much harder than shaking the foundations of an existing tyranny. In that sense, Sharansky's experience with the Soviet Union may not be entirely analogous to his current hopes for building a free society in the Palestinian territories.

Once one acknowledges these problems, Sharansky's call for moral clarity seems undermined by the

practical arguments for and against different sorts of contingent adjustments to circumstances. But Sharansky's underlying point remains a powerful one: Those who urge accommodation to tyranny—in the Palestinian Authority or elsewhere—do not simply invoke practical objections to demands for democratization. To soothe themselves and their supporters, advocates of accommodation always try to sound a moral theme of their own.

Sharansky is particularly eloquent in denouncing this false moralism, under the spell of which “those who dream of peace are willing to place a wolf and a lamb in the same cage and hope for the best—again and again.” He also berates the sentimentalism of the worldview according to which “cause and effect are deemed irrelevant” and “only suffering is important,” and therefore, “human sympathy and a deep desire for peace can turn into a weapon of tyranny.” Absent a sense of overall purpose, moral impulses may easily be hijacked by the enemies of freedom.

Skeptics may argue, on the other hand, that Sharansky's vision, even if morally compelling, remains impractical. Indeed, Sharansky himself acknowledges that the moral argument for standing up to tyrannies was easier, in some ways, during the

cold war: “By splitting the world into two, the struggle between the totalitarian East and the democratic West helped clarify the conflict—at least for those willing to open their eyes—as a battle between good and evil, right and wrong.” Sharansky now calls for the establishment of a forum in which democracies can manifest a common reprobation of the world’s remaining tyrannies. One may doubt, however, given all the practical objections that can be raised in relation to this or that case, whether democratic nations will often be able to commit themselves to a common stance, in the Middle East or elsewhere.

Still, Sharansky is not looking for a broad or even lasting consensus. At the end of the book, in fact, he acknowledges that the “diversity of the world ensures that there will always be argument and conflict.” But even during the cold war, and particularly in its last decades, when Sharansky and other dissidents openly challenged Soviet power, many nations in the “democratic West” were extremely eager to maintain respectful relations with the Soviet Union. Ronald Reagan was condemned in Europe for calling the Soviet Union an “evil empire.” It did not, as it turned out, require the total mobilization of all Western nations to encourage the dissidents and to rattle the rulers in the Kremlin.

The confidence to challenge the status quo, then, does not require a prior consensus. The struggle against tyranny does not require heroic exertions from all or most people, but usually owes more to the resolution of a few. Even the moral clarity of the minority can make a big difference, among nations as among individuals. Sharansky’s “case for democracy” rides on his subtitle: “The power of freedom.”

Sharansky’s experience in the Soviet Union proves this fact. In a different way, the history of Israel—indeed the entire history of the Jewish people—testifies that resisting a false consensus is not a hopeless endeavor. It is a good sign that, as Sharansky reports, the Bush administration has been listening to his pleas. This speaks well of another nation that is not afraid to challenge a false consensus.

Democratic statesmen need to know more than what Sharansky offers in this book. But they should never shut their ears to the call he sounds here.

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