

Faith to Help Us Walk Upright

By Rabbi David M. Glickman

On February 11, 1986, reporters from around the world gathered in West Berlin on the Western side of the Glienicke Bridge as Natan Sharansky was released as Mikhail Gorbachev's first freed political prisoner. Sharansky had been in Soviet prison since 1977. His release was symbolic of the floodgates that would open as our brothers who lived under Soviet rule were free to leave, and hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews came here to Kansas City, to America and to the State of Israel.

During his imprisonment, his wife, Avital was a tireless advocate crisscrossing the world, giving speeches at protests, speaking with world leaders, a brave advocate for her husband's release. Here in America Jewish youth who were secular, religious, of every denomination demonstrated, sang, prayed and learned about the struggle for Soviet Jewry.

Sharansky's freedom, though, came not only through external forces. It was not only the amazing work of his beloved Avital. It was not only the advocacy and championship of Jewish communities throughout the world. It was not even the political work in America and elsewhere that worked to secure his release from the changing Soviet regime.

Natan Sharansky's freedom first came from within. During his time in prison, he played countless chess games against himself. He also kept with him a small book of psalms given to him by Avital. He read and reread these psalms throughout the imprisonment. Sharansky's internal strength and inner faith is what kept him a free person even when inside a tiny cell.

Upon his release at that famous bridge of spies, Sharansky demanded the book of psalms be returned. He would not leave his own captors until he had the book of freedom given to him by Avital. The Russians told Sharansky to walk in a straight line across the bridge. As a final act of rebellion, Sharansky zigzagged across the bridge. By that night, he was celebrating with throngs of Israelis at the Kotel in Jerusalem. His first words to his wife upon their reunion: I'm sorry that I was late.

In this week's Torah portion, we read the famous blessings and curses that conclude the book of Vayikra – the Book of Leviticus. In this passage we see a short few verses that describe the type of relationship we can have with God through faith.

(יג) וְהַתֵּלֶךְ תַּבְצֹצֶם וְהִיְתָי לְכֶם לְאֱלֹהִים וְאַתֶּם תְּהִיוּ־לְעַם: (יב) אָנֹי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הִזְמַנֵּיתִי אֶתֶּכֶם מֵאָרֶץ מִצְרָיִם מִרְהַנִּית לְכֶם עֲבָדִים וְאַשְׁבָּרִים מִטְּהָרָת עַלְכֶם וְאוֹלֵךְ אֶתֶּכֶם קְדוּמִים:

(12) I will be ever present in your midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people. (13) I the LORD am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright.

Sforno, the 15th Century Italian commentator says that God's promise to help us walk upright is the opposite of how Isaiah describes the desires of our enemies. Isaiah says that our enemies tell us to get down so that they may walk over us.

The final and most triumphant reward that we can have in our relationship with God is the internal faith to walk upright. As we pass through dark times, having both faith in a better future and working together toward a better future can give ourselves uplift – and bring uplift toward others. As we in the Talmud, the way that we walk after God's ways is to act like God through acts of Hesed. One quality, though, that is not mentioned in the Talmud and is worth listing is to we can help others walk upright. I believe that by digging deep for the faith that can help us walk upright, it will give us the strength to also lift up the others around us.

In a profile of Sharansky in the Washington Post, he is described as “no more than 5 feet 4 in his socks.” His strength of

mission, his internal courage, the devotion of his wife, and the faith he had in his people and his God brought him out as tall as a giant. More than that, he raised up the heads of every Jew – and also shone a spotlight on the plight of political prisoners everywhere.

My hope for this Shabbat, is that we not only dig deep for the faith to stand upright – but to have also the courage and strength to raise up one another.