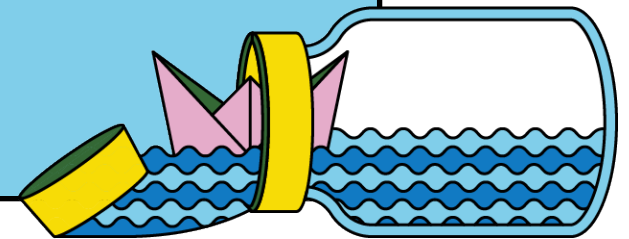


Amen: Reflections on Freedom and Isolation from Natan Sharansky

Natan Sharansky was born in 1948 and grew up in a Soviet system that maintained its rule through fear. In his twenties, he became interested in his Jewish heritage and in the State of Israel. Sharansky applied for a visa to immigrate to Israel in 1973 but was rejected; he was unable to leave the Soviet Union. That made him a refusenik. He was arrested in 1977 and spent nine years in prison and in labor camp, more than 400 days in punishment cells, and more than 200 days on hunger strikes. After a large-scale campaign led by his wife, Avital, he was ultimately released on February 1, 1986. He immigrated to Israel, becoming an activist and subsequently a politician and the head of the Jewish Agency.



#gratitudedays

Days of
Gratitude

m²

gratitudedays.com





Discovering Freedom

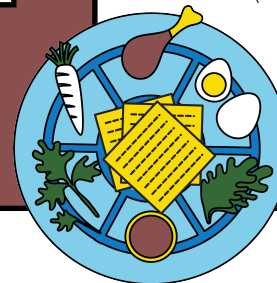
This was when I first learned that in order to survive in Soviet society you had to function on two levels at once: what you really thought and what you allowed yourself to tell other people. I lived with this dual reality until 1973, when I joined the Aliyah movement of Jews who were struggling for their right to emigrate to Israel ... Now, for the first time in my life, I was no longer afraid to say what I really believed — about my fellow citizens, the country I lived in, and the values I adhered to. At the age of twenty-five I finally learned what a joy it was to be free.

(Fear No Evil, Natan Sharansky, page x)

Passover As a Refusenik

The special relevance of the Passover story to a group of refuseniks in Moscow was so obvious that nobody had to point it out. We sat there enthralled as we discussed the story of our ancestors, enslaved and oppressed in Egypt, a powerful land where they were unable to practice their religion or learn about their heritage. Then, through a series of miracles, they succeeded in leaving this place of bondage, eventually reaching their homeland, the land of Israel. That night I came across a moving line in the Passover liturgy that would stay with me forever: “In every generation, a person should feel as though he personally went out of Egypt.”

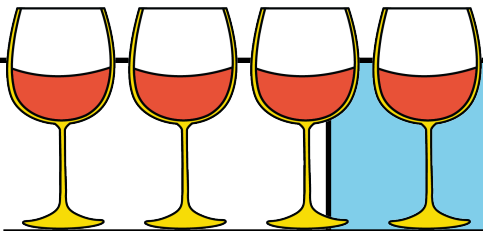
(Fear No Evil, Natan Sharansky, page 49)



Passover in Prison

Arkady Tsurkov had received a package of *matzoh* from home. He divided it into two parts, and for a long time sought an opportunity to send it to me and another Jewish zek. "I don't need it," he said. "After all, I'm going to be released." But instead of release he earned another two years of camp, and he greeted Passover, the holiday of freedom, somewhere far away, among criminals. And now, I too, at the last moment had lost the opportunity to use Arkasha's *matzoh*, which I received from a zek who was transferred to my cell. Well, so what? The salted sprats would be my *maror*, the bitter herb, and for the *charoset*, the sweet mixture of nuts, apples, and wine, I would use my cup of hot water. What could be sweeter in the punishment cell? I tried to recall everything I could from the Passover Haggadah, starting with my favorite lines: "In every generation a person should feel as though he, personally, went out of Egypt," and, "Today we are slaves, tomorrow we shall be free men. Today we are here; tomorrow in Jerusalem." The thaw was over, the future was fraught with new tribulations, and I hurried to steel myself with the words of the Haggadah.

(*Fear No Evil*, Natan Sharansky, page 361)



Internal Freedom

My arrest changed everything. When the prison gates closed behind me, the huge world that had opened before me in recent years as the arena of an all-encompassing struggle between good and evil was suddenly narrowed down to the dimensions of a prison cell and my interrogator's office. I had to take everything that was dear to me, everything that had meaning in my life, with me to prison. The world I re-created in my head turned out to be more powerful and more real than the Lefortovo Prison; my bond with Avital was stronger than my isolation, and my inner freedom more powerful than the external bondage ... Yes, we were bound to each other not merely by memories of the past, or by photographs or a few letters, but precisely by that elevated feeling of freedom from human evil and bondage to God's covenant that lifted us above earthly reality.

(*Fear No Evil*, Natan Sharansky, page 363)



#gratitudedays

Days of
Gratitude

m

gratitudedays.com



Democracy, Identity, & Freedom

Democracy — a free life in a free society — is essential because it satisfies a human yearning to choose one's path, to pursue one's goals. It broadens possibilities and provides opportunity for self-advancement. Identity, a life of commitment, is essential because it satisfies a human longing to become part of something bigger than oneself. It adds layers of meaning to our lives and deepens the human experience. Democracy asserts the value of freedom; identity gives reason *for* freedom. Identity gives freedom purpose, directs it towards a goal, makes it a part of a destiny: At stake is not only what your life is like but what your life is for.

(Defending Identity, Natan Sharansky with Shira Wolosky Weiss, page 5-6)

Freedom of Choices

In freedom, I am lost in a myriad of choices. When I walk on the street, dozens of cheeses, fruits, and juices stare at me from store windows. There are vegetables here I'd never seen or heard of, and an endless series of decisions that must be made: What to drink in the morning, coffee or tea? What newspaper to read? What to do in the evening? Where to go for the Sabbath? Which friends to visit? In the punishment cell, life was much simpler. Every day brought only once choice: good or evil, white or black, saying yes or no to the KGB. Moreover, I had all the time I needed to think about these choices, to concentrate on the most fundamental problems of existence, to test myself in fear, in hope, in belief, in love. And now, lost in thousands of mundane choices, I suddenly realize that there's no time to reflect on the bigger questions. How to enjoy the vivid colors of freedom without losing the existential depth I felt in prison? How to absorb the many sounds of freedom without allowing them to jam the stirring call of the shofar that I heard clearly in the punishment cell? And, most important, how, in all these thousands of meetings, handshakes, interviews, and speeches, to retain that unique feeling of the interconnection of human souls which I discovered in the Gulag? These are the questions I must answer in my new life, which is only beginning.

(Fear No Evil, Natan Sharansky, page 418)

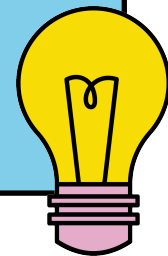


Last year, as the pandemic spread and people around the world found themselves in quarantine with many of their usual freedoms limited, Natan Sharansky produced **this short video** with five tips he shared about how to deal with solitude.



After reading the quotes and watching the video, reflect on the following questions:

1. What are the definitions of freedom according to Sharansky? When did he feel most free?
2. How can Jewish tradition, and specifically the Passover story, enhance our ability to experience or strive for freedom?
3. What forms of freedom are you grateful for?
4. What responsibility do you have to fight for the freedom of others? What actions can you take in that direction?



#gratitudedays

Days of
Gratitude

m²

gratitudedays.com

