

**“The Hero Within”**  
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After being denied an exit visa to Israel on the grounds of national security in 1973, Anatoly Sharansky became an activist in the human rights movement led by prominent physicist and dissident Andrei Sakharov. Anatoly Sharansky became internationally known as the spokesperson for the *Moscow Helsinki Watch Group*. "Once the world's most famous incarcerated Soviet dissident," Sharansky was one of the founders of, and spokesmen for, the Jewish and Refusenik movements in Moscow.

In March 1977, he was arrested, and in July 1978 convicted on charges of treason and spying for the United States, and he was sentenced to 13 years of forced labor. After 16 months of incarceration in Lefortovo prison, he was sent to Perm 35, a Siberian labor camp, where he served for nine years. The fate of Sharansky and other political prisoners in the USSR – repeatedly brought to international attention by Western human rights groups and diplomats – was a cause of embarrassment and irritation for the Soviet authorities. As a result of increasing pressure of a mounting international campaign led by his wife, Avital Sharansky, in 1986 he was released to East Germany and led across the Glienicke Bridge to West Berlin where he was exchanged for a pair of Soviet spies: Karl Koecher and his wife, Hana Koecher. Famed for his resistance in the Gulag, he was told upon his release to walk straight towards his freedom; Sharansky instead walked in a zigzag in a final act of defiance. Sharansky made aliyah to Israel, adopting the Hebrew name Natan.

In 1986, Congress granted him the Congressional Gold Medal. In 2006, President George W. Bush awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. On September 17, 2008, Sharansky was awarded the 2008 Ronald Reagan Freedom Award, by the former First Lady Nancy Reagan. This is the highest honor bestowed by the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation.

His heroic capacity to continue on and to keep alive his dreams of freedom, his dreams of making *aliyah* and ascending to the land of Israel, are an inspiration to every person around the globe. His almost superhuman power to keep dreaming, even on isolated, lonely, and vulnerable evenings before he was arrested and after he sought a visa to emigrate to Israel, provide an example to all of us about the spirit within every human being.

Even when he was considered an outcast and a pariah in Soviet society, he was more liberated than ever before. Long before he was sent to prison, long before he would spend nine years in the Gulag, long before he would eventually make his way to the Holy Land, he was already free. It was a time in his life, as he wrote in his latest book *Defending Identity*, “I destroyed my career prospects and many people began avoiding me. Despite the privations, the act of breaking out of the world of doublethink was a wildly liberating experience. Almost simultaneously, two struggles – the struggle for freedom and human rights, and the struggle to recapture my Jewish identity – joined as one experience. From the moment I publicly said what I thought, I gained both freedom and purpose. By fighting for my own right to immigrate to Israel, I was fighting for a basic freedom, the freedom to choose where I live – and I was also fighting to deepen my connection to my people and my history. Simultaneously, a life of constant self-censorship had

ended and a life enriched by identity had begun. Leaving the world of doublethink was like dropping a heavy pack after a long hike and I felt as if I could fly. Reconnecting to my own past was like drinking water after a long fast, I was filling a deep void.”

Jacob, too, was a wanderer, finding himself somewhere between the conflict with Esau and the captivity of Lavan. After this exhausting first leg of his journey, Jacob takes off his pack and lies down. He’s so tired that even a pillow made of rocks feels soft to him, and so he drifts off to sleep. Even in this purgatory he dreamed, and in fact, Jacob has two significant dreams in this Torah reading. The first dream is of a ladder with angels ascending and descending. It is pure fantasy whose symbolism is not lost on us. It is a metaphor of the aspiration of being connected to this world, while at the same time striving for new heights. That is precisely where Jacob finds himself. Contrary to the other dream Jacob has, this is not a dream of anxiety nor a dream that leaves Jacob scared, and this is not a dream that leaves Jacob paralyzed. Rather, this dream propels Jacob forward to a life of holiness, a life of elevation, and a life of success. As he wakes, he recognizes the miraculous power of a good night’s rest, a night of great dreams that bring healing and comfort and so he calls out *Achen yaish adonai bemakom hazeh, v’anochi lo yadati...* “Surely God is in this place and I had no idea.” *Mah Norah haMokem hazeh*, “What an incredible place this is.” (Genesis 28:16-17) He wakes energized and ready to take on the world as he starts his journey towards the rest of his life. Like Natan Sharansky, he has put down the heavy pack and he feels like he can fly. However, like Sharansky, the captivity is still to be endured.

Jacob falls in love and then is married – and then married again – and then he finds himself unable to extricate himself from his life’s circumstance. The empowered Jacob slowly, almost imperceptibly, transforms into the trapped Jacob. The nights loose their fantasy and the doldrums of dreamless sleep meld into one another. Before he knows it and seemingly out of nowhere, the inner voice begins to rattle around and he becomes restless. Again he begins to look for a way out and dreams once more. He has no idea where his goals have gone. He has lost track of himself and now he dreams of commerce, sheep of color, and the next big deal to negotiate with his father-in-law. The rabbis offer us the most striking midrash. They imagine an angel coming to Jacob with an incredible wake-up call. *K’var Higaah a’eit... koom tzei min ha’aretz hazot v’shoov el eretz moladicha...* it is time to leave, it is time to go home. It is time to return to the land of your birth. It is time to be reborn. It is time to reconnect with who you once were.

The angel’s message to Jacob is, “Once you dreamed of stairways leading to heaven. Now you dream of how to increase the number of sheep and goats you own. You have been corrupted by the values of Lavan’s world. The time has come for you to leave this place and return to the Land.” (Midrash Hagadol 31:13 quoted in Etz Hayim Humash page 181)

Then in the most beautiful language, the midrash concludes with Jacob’s response, “*l’kayaim v’shavti b’shalom el beit avi*, I got up and without fanfare, without ceremony, and without pageantry, I got up in peace and returned to my father’s house.”

This is not just Jacob’s story. This is our narrative as well. We too have silenced a voice within, a voice that refuses to be quiet. We too have lost track of who we are because life happens. Responsibilities to others override our responsibility to self. There were times we dreamed of

who we would become but as time passed those dreams were transformed and, in fact, some even disappeared. Jacob teaches us that it doesn't have to be. You haven't yet arrived at your final resting place. There are more dreams to come and more ladders to climb. You can dust off the cobwebs of childhood ambition, you can aim high and you can live energized again.

Last week I was invited to a lunch with Natan Sharansky and, as is my usual, I arrived a little early. To my surprise I found myself face to face with Natan Sharansky. He had no entourage as is customary today with those who are "famous." There were just a few of us standing around and we began to talk. Truthfully, I have no real idea what came out of my mouth, but I do remember thinking, and maybe even saying, that he is greatest hero I have ever known. Please remember, I was raised in the era of the solidarity movement with Soviet Jewry. Anatoly Sharansky was a name I heard around the dinner table almost every night. It was certainly a name spoken by my father every Shabbat, while standing on the *bimah* in front of his congregation.

In this brief meeting he was asked, "What was the best speech you ever gave?" He responded, "The one I delivered when sentenced by the Judges in Moscow to hard labor in the Siberian Gulag." Defiantly, he spoke of his aspirations and his spirit of truth and commitment. Then he said, "Next year in Jerusalem." He uttered the words that have become the hallmark of the Passover Seder and he pronounced the words that are spoken as we relive the newborn freedom from Egyptian slavery. He gave voice to the inner hopes and dreams of a people newly-minted as a nation, the same words recalled each year as we gather around our tables. "Next year in Jerusalem," sums up the aspirations of an individual who knew that the physical confines of a frozen wasteland are no match for the indomitable spirit of the Jew that looks higher. "Next year in Jerusalem," is not just a real desire, but a metaphor for the heights we can soar if we are only able to break loose from the shackles of the person we have been forced to become. "Next year in Jerusalem," is the mantra we sing, when we are searching for the home within.

For some, maybe we can and maybe we can't become a hero like Natan Sharansky, but my sense is each of us has a Natan Sharansky inside – a voice that longs to speak its truth, to uncover and rediscover an honesty of purpose and a sincerity of vision. Just two days ago we sat around the table and thanked God for so much in our lives, for family and friends, for food and shelter for kindness and for generosity. Today I would like to offer one more prayer of thanksgiving.

*"Todah La'El"*

Thank you, God, for keeping still the small voice alive within us.

Thank you, God, for keeping us grounded even as our dreams carry us higher.

Thank you, God, for never letting us lose sight of who we are as we discover new aspects of who we are becoming.

Thank you for allowing us to return home, accepted by family for the person we have become, ever in touch with who we were, and to love us unconditionally for who we will be.