

This year's Pesach Seder 2021/5781 was again celebrated behind the screens of Zoom. For us it marked another Passover away from the community, and while it may be argued that it allows those who may not under normal circumstances to enjoy the service, we all struggle with Zoom in our household, be it work school or the community events.

I was recently reading a book about human rights activist Natan Sharansky and thought to myself that nine years, half in solitary confinement in a Siberian Gulag without a pen, paper or book, just how lucky we are in comparison. Four hundred and five of those days would be spent in a brutal punishment cell. Whilst Sharansky languished in jail his wife Avital would spend the next nine years going around the world fighting to free her husband. He was arrested and accused by the KGB of treason and espionage when in reality his only "crime" was to wish to emigrate to Israel. He would never see his father again and his mother made Aliyah six months after he was released from captivity.



Avital Sharansky spent years campaigning for her husband's release.

The message of Mr Sharansky to the court could not have been more apt on the mouth of Pesach, he proclaimed, " To the court I have nothing to say – to my wife and the Jewish people I say "Next Year in Jerusalem". It may have taken another nine "HaShanah HaBaAh's" until Sharansky was released in a prisoner exchange on 11th February 1986.

When incarcerated in solitary confinement, he claims to have maintained his sanity by playing chess against himself in his mind. He was a chess prodigy as a child, winning many championships and even beat the world chess champion Garry Kasparov in a simultaneous exhibition in Israel in 1996. After intense international pressure and a relentless campaign by Avital they arrived in Jerusalem upon the very day of his release. His final act of defiance was when released at the Berlin Wall and instructed to walk in a straight line he zigzagged his way to freedom across the Glienicke Bridge.



Then Israeli PM Shimon Peres welcomes Natan Sharansky to Israel.

Following his release Natan Sharansky received the Congressional Medal of Honour. They settled in Israel but did not rest on their laurels, becoming the driving force in the struggle to open the gates for Aliyah to Israel from the then Soviet Union. There would be a long line of important positions which culminated in his installation as head of the Jewish Agency in 2009. Sharansky was a MK from 1996 to 2006 forming his own party initially but being a member of Likud when he resigned in November 2006. He had resigned from the Cabinet in 2005 over the Israeli government to uproot the Jewish communities in Gush Katif and the Northern Shomron.



Returning to Russia and a meeting with Vladimir Putin in September 2000

Sharansky is the author of a number of books. The first is the autobiographical *Fear No Evil*, which dealt with his trial and imprisonment. The book was awarded the 1989 National Jewish Book Award for Biography.

His second book, *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* was co-written with Ron Dermer and was endorsed by George W Bush who had presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2006.

His other books are *Defending Identity: Its Indispensable Role in Protecting Democracy*, is a defence of the value of national and religious identity in building democracy and *Never Alone: Prison, Politics, and My People* tells about his political activity and how his personal experience influenced it.

He just finished his latest book titled, *Never Alone* and speaks of the main periods of his life which ironically can almost be divided into three equal parts of nine years, as a prisoner, a MK and as head of the Jewish Agency. It is the story of an immigrant who faced sabra disdain and changed a system, but also warns against rising anti-Semitism and broken communications among the Jewish peoples, especially on campuses. Lastly and most importantly it's a story of an undying love of democracy and an optimism that peace will prevail.

When in the Gulag Sharansky would have been galvanised by knowing that there was a nation supporting his struggle. As a Knesset member traveling to US campuses, he learned that not every Jew supports the Jewish state and in the final part of the trilogy of his life as a statesman as head of the Jewish Agency, he would have attempted to be a bridge builder between the two largest Jewish communities of Israel and the United States and the rest of the diaspora.

Sharansky describes the Israelis as being "davidic" and understandably preoccupied with the existential existence of the Jewish state. The Diaspora communities are more likely to be of the house of Isaiah and are concerned with building tolerant communities in which they can flourish.

"We have to understand that we are living in different environments and we have a different set of priorities, but we have something mutual in common, let us discuss, let us talk. We have to talk in a much more deep intimate way than we talk if you want to continue to be one family," said Sharansky.



I recall a story I heard last year when one awe struck Israeli met Natan Sharansky in a bakery in Jerusalem. (Even though his wife Avital became observant, Sharansky never did). The Israeli youth asked him about a small book of Tehillim which he was renowned for carrying on his person since arriving in Israel. On producing the small but precious book from his top pocket Sharansky replied, *"Is this what you mean?, I would not say I have carried it all this time, rather it has carried me!"*

So although it might be a year to late to share with you, Natan Sharansky gives us five tips for surviving the lockdown..

First, he says, remember that you are part of a huge global battle. *"We are at war with a very dangerous, though invisible, enemy, and whether we will succeed in the battle depends also on your behaviour."*

Second, don't assume that this will all be over within the next few days or weeks. Develop plans that are within your control. You can decide to read a book, or learn a new language. *"And then, it depends on you whether you will succeed or not."*

Tip number three is to never give up on your sense of humour. Sharansky often tells of how he used to enjoy telling his Soviet guards anti-Russian jokes.

Don't give up on your hobbies is tip number four. Sharansky is a chess protege, and in his prison cell, he was able to play *"thousands and thousands of games, in my head, with myself."*

Finally, feel your connection. *"Remember that you are not alone. We Jews, for thousands of years... we always had this feeling that we are part of a big people, a great people, with our mutual past and our mutual future and our mutual mission. Think about it."*

Many communities mark the first Shabbat after Passover with a special challah as they transition back to the world of chametz. They shape the first post-Passover Shabbat challah into a key. The key, or shlissel as it is called in Yiddish, is meant to symbolize openings, passageways, and transition. It is customary to bake a Shlissel (or Schtissel) challah to enjoy during the first Shabbat after Pesach and shlissel challahs are baked in the shape of a key or have a large key baked into them. It is hoped they bring good fortune and blessings to those who eat them and represent the key to the gates of the Promised Land.

We have started to do the same in the Haire household but does not often turn out as splendid as the masterpieces on display in the bakeries of Golders Green. This was last year's project and maybe next Shabbat the more gifted Challah bakers could attempt and post for next Friday Night. A kind of Great Challah Bakeoff.



Wishing everyone a peaceful and enjoyable Shabbat from Stephen, Gie, Kacey and Althea.

Shabbat shalom,

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