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## Freedom vs. Tyranny: Sharansky's "Speech to the Soviet Union"

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Thursday, Aug. 26 at 7:00 PM EDT

### Course Description:

In July 1978, the Soviet dissident Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky was sentenced in a Soviet court for the "crimes" of teaching Hebrew, seeking emigration to Israel, and being part of the human rights movement in Moscow. He was charged with treason and espionage and sentenced to 13 years in prison and hard-labor camps. At his sentencing, he delivered the moving "Speech to the Soviet Union." In this seminar, students will do a close reading of Sharansky's powerful address to the Soviet court, exploring the foundations of Sharansky's Zionism, his unwavering commitment to human rights, and his enduring message of Jewish freedom that continues to resonate today.

### "Speech to the Soviet Union"

Natan Sharansky



*Natan (Anatoli) Sharansky was arrested in 1977 for his Zionist activism, his insistence on the right of Russian Jews to make aliyah to Israel. However he was accused of the much more serious crime of treason, for spying for the United States. He sat in prison from 1977 to 1986 including eight years in a Soviet prison camp in Siberia. After continuous public protest in the West, spear-headed by his wife Avital, Natan Sharansky was released in a spy exchange between the US and the USSR in 1986. After making aliyah and establishing a Russian immigrant party in 1996, he became Israeli Minister of Industry and Trade and later of the Interior.*

*His memoirs of the Soviet period are filled with sparkling anecdotes about the power of the few against the many — the power that derives from "fearing no evil" and laughing in the face of oppression. The phrase, "fear no evil," is taken from the little book of Psalms, which he carried with him through his long imprisonment.*

The holiday of Hanukkah was approaching. At the time, I was the only Jew in the prison zone, but when I explained that Hanukkah was a holiday of national freedom, of returning to one's own

culture in the face of forced assimilation, my friends in our "kibbutz" decided to celebrate it with me. They even made me a wooden menorah, decorated it, and found some candles.

In the evening I lit the first candle and recited a prayer that I had composed for this occasion. Tea was poured, and I began to describe the heroic struggle of the Maccabees to save their people from slavery. For each zek [a prisoner in the Soviet Gulag] who was listening, this story had its own personal meaning. At one point the duty officer appeared in the barracks. He made a list of all those present, but did not interfere.

On each of the subsequent evenings of Hanukkah I took out my menorah, lit the candles, and recited the appropriate blessing. Then I blew out the candles, as I didn't have any extras. Gavriulik, the collaborator whose bunk was across from mine, watched and occasionally grumbled, "Look at him, he made himself a synagogue. And what if there's a fire?"

On the sixth night of Hanukkah the authorities confiscated my menorah with all my candles. I ran to the duty officer to find out what had happened.

"The candlesticks were made from state materials; this is illegal. You could be punished for this alone and the other prisoners are complaining. They're afraid you'll start a fire."

I began to insist. "In two days Hanukkah will be over and then I'll return this 'state property' to you. Now, however, this looks like an attempt to deny me the opportunity of celebrating Jewish holidays."

The duty officer began hesitating. Then he phoned his superior and got his answer: "A camp is not a synagogue. We won't permit Sharansky to pray here."

I was surprised by the bluntness of that remark, and immediately declared a hunger strike. In a statement to the procurator general I protested against the violation of my national and religious rights, and against KGB [Russian secret police] interference in my personal life.

When you begin an unlimited hunger strike, you never know when or how it will end. Are the authorities interested at that moment in putting a swift end to it, or don't they give a damn? In a few weeks a commission from Moscow was due to arrive in the camp. I didn't know this at the time, but the authorities, presumably, were very aware of it, which probably explains why I was summoned to Major Osin's office two days later, in the evening.

Osin was an enormous, flabby man of around fifty, with small eyes and puffy eyelids, who seemed to have long ago lost interest in everything but food. But he was a master of intrigue who had successfully overtaken many of his colleagues on the road to advancement. During my brief time in the camp he had weathered several scandals and had always managed to pass the buck to his subordinates. I could see that he had enjoyed his power over the zeks and liked to see them suffer. But he never forgot that the zeks were, above all, a means for advancing his career, and he knew how to back off in a crisis.

Osin pulled a benevolent smile over his face as he tried to talk me out of my hunger strike. Osin promised to see to it personally that in the future nobody would hinder me from praying, and that this should not be a concern of the KGB.

"Then what's the problem?" I said. "Give me back the menorah, as tonight is the last evening of Hanukkah. Let me celebrate it now, and taking into account your assurances for the future, I shall end the hunger strike."

"What's a menorah?"

"Candlesticks."

But a protocol for its confiscation had already been drawn up, and Osin couldn't back down in front of the entire camp. As I looked at this predator, sitting at an elegant polished table and wearing a benevolent smile, I was seized by an amusing idea.

"Listen," I said, "I'm sure you have the menorah somewhere. It's very important to me to celebrate the last night of Hanukkah. Why not let me do it here and now, together with you? You'll give me the menorah, I'll light the candles and say the prayer, and if all goes well I'll end the hunger strike."

Osin thought it over and promptly the confiscated menorah appeared from his desk. He summoned Gavriiliuk, who was on duty in the office, to bring in a large candle.

"I need eight candles," I said. (In fact I needed nine, but when it came to Jewish rituals I was still a novice.) Gavriiliuk took out a knife and began to cut the candle into several smaller ones. But it didn't come out right; apparently the knife was too dull. Then Osin took out a handsome inlaid pocketknife and deftly cut me eight candles.



"Go, I'll call you later," he said to Gavriiliuk. Gavriiliuk simply obeyed orders. He was a fierce, gloomy man, and this sight must have infuriated him.

I arranged the candles and went to the coatrack for my hat, explaining to Osin that "during the prayer you must stand with your head covered and at the end say 'Amen.'" He put on his major's hat and stood. I lit the candles and recited my own prayer in Hebrew, which went something like this: "Blessed are You, Adonai, for allowing me to rejoice on this day of Hanukkah, the holiday of our liberation, the holiday of our return to the way of our fathers. Blessed are You, Adonai, for allowing me to light these candles. May you allow me to light the Hanukkah candles many times in your city, Jerusalem, with my wife, Avital, and my family and friends."

This time, however, inspired by the sight of Osin standing meekly at attention, I added in Hebrew: "And may the day come when all our enemies, who today are planning our destruction, will stand before us and hear our prayers and say 'Amen.'"

"Amen," Osin echoed back. He sighed with relief, sat down and removed his hat. For some time we looked silently at the burning candles. They quickly melted, and the hot wax was spread pleasantly

over the glass surface of the table. Then Osin caught himself, summoned Gavriiliuk, and brusquely ordered him to clean it up.

I returned to the barracks in a state of elation, and our kibbutz made tea and merrily celebrated the end of Hanukkah. Naturally, I told them about Osin's "conversion," and it soon became the talk of the camp. I realized that revenge was inevitable, but I also knew they had plenty of other reasons to punish me.

**Anatoly Sharansky's Final Statement in the Soviet Court  
*presented before being sentenced on trumped-up charges for treason and espionage, July 14, 1978***

*Sharansky addressed his first remarks to those who were not in the courtroom, his wife Avital who emigrated to Israel and the Jewish people:*

"During my interrogation the chief investigators threatened me that I might be executed by a firing squad, or imprisoned for at least fifteen years. But if I agreed to cooperate with the investigation for the purpose of destroying the Jewish emigration movement, they promised me freedom and a quick reunion with my wife.

"Five years ago, I submitted my application for exit to Israel. Now I am further than ever from my dream. It would seem to be cause for regret. But it is absolutely the other way around. I am happy. I am happy that I lived honorably, at peace with my conscience. I never compromised my soul, even under the threat of death.

"I am happy that I helped people. I am proud that I knew and worked with such honorable, brave and courageous people as Sakharov, Orlov, Ginzburg, who are carrying on the traditions of the Russian intelligentsia [in defending human rights in the Soviet Union]. I am fortunate to have been witness to the process of the liberation of Jews of the USSR.

"I hope that the absurd accusation against me and the entire Jewish emigration movement will not hinder the liberation of my people. My near ones and friends know how I wanted to exchange activity in the emigration movement for a life with my wife Avital, in Israel.

"For more that two thousand years the Jewish people, my people, have been dispersed. But wherever they are, wherever Jews are found, every year they have repeated, '*Next year in Jerusalem.*' Now, when I am further than ever from my people, from Avital, facing many arduous years of imprisonment, I say, turning to my people, my Avital, '*Next year in Jerusalem.*'

"Now I turn to you, the court, who were required to confirm a predetermined sentence: **To you I have nothing to say**