Fear or Freedom: Thoughts for Parashat Devarim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Devarim

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In his book, “The Case for Democracy,” Natan Sharansky divides the world into two kinds of societies: fear societies, and free societies. Fear societies are tyrannies which rule by terrorizing their subjects, by restricting freedom of speech and movement, by instilling fear so that people will not voice opposition to the rulers. Fear societies are controlled by tyrants who are not hesitant to brutalize their people in order to quash dissent.

Sharansky who was himself a prisoner of the KGB due to his outspokenness as a Soviet Jew, had high respect for the great Soviet dissenter, Andrei Sakharov. Sakharov lashed out against the Soviet’s repression of human rights, and called on the nations of the world to protest on behalf of the people of the Soviet Union. Sakharov stated: “A country that does not respect the rights of its own people will not respect the rights of its neighbors.” (p. 3) Tyrannies, when allowed to persist, are a danger not only to their own people but to other nations as well. In contrast to fear societies, free societies provide their people with the ability to speak freely, to express dissent, to move about in freedom.

Sharansky writes: “A society is free if people have a right to express their views without fear of arrest, imprisonment or physical harm.” (p. 40) In a free society, a person may offer opinions without fear of being assaulted, imprisoned or murdered. A free society fosters diversity; it respects individual rights; it allows people to think and act freely. Whereas a fear society represses its people, a free society allows its people to grow and flourish. Whereas a fear society is ruled by tyrants and their henchmen, a free society is governed by the rule of law.

Sharansky argues that all people would prefer to live in free societies. Those who live under dictators regret their inability to function in freedom. If given the opportunity, all people would choose to live in free societies. Sharansky was

deeply grateful to those in the West who insisted on linking Soviet trade privileges with advances in human rights. He admired the courage of Senator Henry Jackson and President Ronald Reagan who were adamant in their confrontation with the Soviet Union's fear society. Because of their strength in confronting the evils of Soviet society, the Soviet Union ultimately collapsed. Millions of people were liberated from the fears and oppressions of Soviet rule, and people began to taste freedom for the first time.

The world today is still divided between fear societies and free societies. Just as in the past, many were willing to look aside at human rights abuses in fear societies, so today many are willing to keep the peace even if this means keeping tyrants in power in other lands. Sharansky argues that tyranny is allowed to persist because free societies do not stand up against them, and do not insist that they liberate their populations from oppression and terror.

In this week's Torah portion, we read of Moses' appointment of leaders over the Israelites in the wilderness: "So I took the heads of your tribes, wise men, and full of knowledge, and made them heads over you, captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds, and captains of fifties, and captains of tens, and officers, tribe by tribe. And I charged your judges at that time, saying: Hear the causes between your brethren and judge righteously between one another and the stranger that is with him. You shall not favor persons in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike; you shall not be afraid of the face of any man; for the judgment is God's; and the cause that is too hard for you, you shall bring unto me and I will hear it." (Devarim 1:15-17)

What an incredible description of the foundations of a free society. Each person, whether citizen or stranger, had personal access to a whole range of leaders. Each leader was obligated to render honest judgment, without showing any favoritism to one party or the other, and without fear. If the various levels of leaders were unable to resolve an issue, the problem was brought to Moses himself. All members of society, rich or poor, were to be governed by rule of law. All members were free to state their opinions. In free societies, people live without harassment from or fear of the government. There are laws to punish lawbreakers and to maintain safety and security among the people.

Tyrannies are an affront to the human spirit, an affront to human dignity. Tyrannies persist because their subjects are too weak and/or too afraid to rise up against the tyrants. Tyrannies persist because free societies do not exert enough pressure to change the status quo.

In our world today, we have free societies in the Western world, in Israel, and in some other countries. But many of the nations of the world are controlled by dictators who rule through fear and manipulation of their populations. They restrict free speech. They use the press for self-serving propaganda and do not allow independent voices to be heard. Some of these nations possess highly dangerous weapons, and other of these nations seek to develop highly dangerous weapons. As Andre Sakharov observed, nations that do not respect the rights of their own people will surely not respect the rights of other nations. So we live in a world where war and terrorism are constantly bubbling over, often in the name of an extreme brand of religion or political ideology.

Even in democratic societies, we witness an increase of thuggery and brutality, where extreme groups seek to silence or harm others with whom they disagree. Unless the free societies of the world stand forcefully against tyranny and terrorism, these horrible conditions will persist. Anyone who compromises with tyrants and terrorists is not only endangering the people who live under these tyrants and terrorists, but is endangering the safety and security of people who are currently living in free societies.

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For Rabbi Hayyim Angel's article on Eikha, please see: https://www.jewishideas.org/article/confronting-tragedy-thoughts-eikha

Angel for Shabbat