"Natan Sharansky: Lover of Zion" (PAGES 6–7)

LESSON PLAN BY ANN R. BERMAN

After reading the interview with Natan Sharansky in BabagaNewz, students will further explore background information about Soviet Jewry and the Six Day War. They will have the opportunity to discuss how Sharansky's *ḥibat Tziyon*, love of Zion, provided him strength and morale during his incarceration and shaped his future life in Israel.

CONCEPTS AND OBJECTIVES

- *Ḥibat Tziyon*, love of Zion, has been a source of hope for the Jewish people in times of trouble throughout our history.
- *Ḥibat Tziyon*, love of Zion, can be a powerful enough feeling to motivate action—including, prayer, tzedakah, political and social action, and *aliyah* to Israel.

KEY QUOTES AND QUESTIONS

"Even in his dark prison cell in the Soviet Union, Anatole Sharansky kept a flicker of hope alive. Stooped over in the cold, cramped cell, he pictured himself living freely in the Jewish State...."

With your students, discuss the basic facts about Anatole (Natan) Sharansky's imprisonment and release.

Why was Anatole imprisoned? How long was he in prison?

According to the article, what gave him hope during this time?

What does the article say about why he was eventually freed?

MOTIVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

1. Begin the lesson by playing the SAFAM song "Leaving Mother Russia," included on the BabagaNewz Pesach Music Sampler CD; lyrics for the song are available to print at www.babaganewz.com/teachers. This song recounts the details of Sharansky's imprisonment.

What do you think helped Sharansky go from being a Prisoner of Zion to a high-ranking member of the Israeli government? Would you consider these events to be miracles?

Why is it important to remember and retell these stories of heroism?

What role did world Jewry play in Anatole's release?

2. After listening to the song and reading the article, engage students in the following discussion:

During the time that Natan Sharansky was growing up and becoming an adult, the Soviet Union (made up of Russia and surrounding countries that were part of the Soviet Union) was under the tight grip of Communism. Religious practices were not permitted. Jews could not gather freely to pray. The study of Hebrew and Jewish texts was prohibited by law.

Discuss why Natan did not know much about his Jewish heritage when growing up.

What experiences did Natan have as a "Jew" in the Soviet Union? How is this different from your experiences growing up Jewish in America?

Sharansky mentioned that the Six Day War in June 1967 was very important to him. During the Six Day War, Israel was attacked by all of her neighbors. Israel fought for her life, and won the war, capturing the Golan Heights in the north, the Sinai Desert in the south, and the area of Judea and Samaria in the east. Jerusalem, a divided city since 1948, was reunited as a result of this war. The stunning victory by Israel was reported worldwide, and the story had an impact on the Jews of the Soviet Union.

What feelings do you think Sharansky had after hearing about Israel's victory?

How do you think he personally changed after these significant world events? Did his life become easier or harder as a result of these changes? (Explain to students that once Soviet Jews requested permission to immigrate to Israel, they often lost their jobs, and could be imprisoned. The Soviet Union was not a free or democratic country.)

Sharansky was born in 1948. Why is that interesting?

3. Despite the hardships that Sharansky had to endure, his love of Zion was not a value that he could give up, even with the threat and reality of prison. When Sharansky was in prison, he had nothing to lose. He used his time in prison to recite *Psalms* and remember the texts and information that he had learned before his imprisonment. He taught himself how to read and understand Hebrew. He now feels that he was freer while in prison than the Soviet guards who guarded him.

Why does he feel that way?

According to the article, how did Sharansky's love of Zion help him during these dark days of his life?

Study the Jewish texts below and discuss how each one may have helped Sharansky retain his morale.

Why was Sharansky released from prison?

Jews in free countries such as the United States participated in rallies and demonstrations, sent letters to elected officials, and urged Congress and President Reagan to pressure the Soviet Union on human-rights issues. Sharansky was not the only Soviet or Jew suffering from the Communist regime. The constant attention to this issue actually helped lead to Sharansky's release.

Why would Jews in the United States pressure their politicians about people halfway across the world that they didn't even know personally? [Sharansky's name was well known, and his release was successfully negotiated. Ask the students if they have participated in rallies and demonstrations in support of Israel recently. Remind them that these rallies and other political actions can yield results. Sharansky is proof of that.]

4. Sharansky's love of Zion did not end with his release.

How does he continue to demonstrate this value in his life today? [Sharansky is the founder of a political party in Israel called *Yisrael B'Aliya*. One of the main goals of this party is to help new immigrants, especially those coming from the countries of the former Soviet Union, to make a new life in Israel.]

JEWISH TEXTS

Excerpts From the Haggadah

In every generation we must see ourselves as if we personally were freed from slavery.

Now we are slaves. Next year we will be free people.
(from *Ha Laḥma Anya*)

When Sharansky was in prison, he did not have a Haggadah. On Pesach, he recited these lines, which he could remember by heart. Why do you think these particular lines were meaningful to Sharansky? Do you find any relevance from these lines to your life?

Psalms 23:1,4

God is my shepherd, I shall not lack.... Though I walk in the valley overshadowed by death, I will fear no evil for You are with me.

Sharansky's wife, Avital, gave him a book of *Psalms* that he read over and over again while in prison. After he was released, Sharansky wrote a book about his experiences, called *Fear No Evil*, taking the name from *Psalms* 23. Read the entire psalm to your class. Discuss why this psalm was important to Sharansky while in prison.

Rabbi Naḥman of Bratzlav

The entire world is a narrow bridge, but the main thing is not to fear at all.

Sharansky says that this was one of his favorite songs to sing upon his release. Why do you think that this text would be so relevant for him?

TEACHING TIP

Teach this song to your students. Perhaps they can form a choir for a *Yom Ha'atzmaut* celebration and include it in their repertoire.

FOLLOW-UP AND ENRICHMENT

1. Students draw a large heart on a sheet of mural paper or on a posterboard. Fill the inside of the heart with reasons for loving Zion. Use Sharansky's ideas as well as the student's own ideas. Along the border of the heart, write verses from *Tanakh*, prayer, poetry, and song that express *ḥibat Tziyon*. (Look through the magazine and this Teachers' Guide for text ideas; the text from the Torah Page is a particularly appropriate choice for this activity.) Decorate the background with symbols or pictures of Israel.

2. Chart the "Push-Pull" of immigration to Israel.

What pushed Sharansky out of the Soviet Union, and what pulled him to Israel?

When Jews today leave the United States to live in Israel, what "pushes" them from the United States and "pulls" them to Israel?

Compare the two cases. Why was the "push" to leave the Soviet Union then greater than the "push" to leave the United States is now?

What does this tell you about Jews from the United States who have made *aliyah*?

3. The Land of Israel remained important to the Jewish people through 2,000 years of exile. How did our leaders help us keep our love of Zion even when living in far away places for generation after generation? Our rabbis incorporated ideas and practices about *ḥibat Tziyon*, planting a love of Israel in the hearts of generations and generations of Jews. For centuries, even before the creation of the modern state, love of Zion has been part of Jewish practice in every aspect of our Jewish lives. We face Israel when we pray, for example.

What other prayers and special occasions keep the love of Zion in our hearts? Brainstorm a list together in class. [The list can include the *Birkat Hamazon,* the Pesach Seder, daily and holiday prayers, the wedding ceremony, the prayer for rain, the *mizraḥ* wall, and a Land of Israel component to most holidays. Throughout history, each blessing, prayer, and custom kept this love burning in our people's hearts until we could return to our country. Today, these elements of Judaism remind us of our ongoing obligation to help protect that gift. Even if we choose not to live in Israel, many still feel a special connection to the land and to the people.]

4. Teach any of the songs below to your students:

"*Kaḥol Ve'lavan*"—This song about the flag of Israel, originating from the Soviet Jewry movement, expresses the idea of love of Zion.

"*Im Ein Ani Li*"—Sung by Debbie Friedman (from "If Not Now, When?"), this song combines the saying from *Pirkei Avot*, with the phrase "In every generation..." from the Haggadah. The juxtaposition of these two famous lines reminds us of our obligation to help those who are oppressed. Listen to this song on the BabagaNewz jukebox at www.babaganewz.com.

"Just Another Foreigner"—This song sung by SAFAM portrays Israel as the welcoming home to immigrants from Russia, Ethiopia, and Iran (from "Greatest Hits, Vol. I").

"Grandfather's Train"—This SAFAM song tells the story of a Soviet Jew finally fulfilling his grandfather's dream of leaving Russia for Israel (from "Greatest Hits, Vol. III").

RELATED WEB SITES/ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Brief biographies of Sharansky
www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/sharansky.html
www.israel-mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH00gc0

Interview with Sharansky in 1997
www.join.org.au/aijac/97-04-11/sharansk.htm

Article from The Jerusalem Post *about Sharansky's politics and morality*
www.jewishmediaresources.com/article/82/

Yisrael b'Aliya web site with information on and articles by Sharansky
www.aliya.org.il/English/knesset.html

VOCABULARY FOR YOUR STUDENTS

אֶרֶץ מוֹלֶדֶת	homeland
בֵּית סוֹהַר	prison
אָסִיר	prisoner
הַפְגָּנָה	demonstration