

Israel 2011

Natan Sharansky, who spent eight years in solitary confinement in a KGB prison for the crime of wanting to move from the Soviet Union to Israel, told a story recently that I'd like to share with you. He was standing near his apartment in Jerusalem when a neighbor said to him, "Natan, I so miss the days when you were in prison and we had such unity and passion working for your release."

Looking back at Israel's early years it indeed might seem as if things were simpler then, and better. We all agreed who the good guys were. We were very united. We loved Israel's leaders. American Jews had much Israeli epic history to admire—the pioneers made the desert bloom, the War of Independence where Israel fought off five Arab armies, the 6 Day War, the Entebbe Rescue. Those were the days. As Moshe Halbertal says, "There is very little or no epic history now." Now we are stuck in a diplomatic war, a political stale-mate, a Middle East neighborhood going through a massive identity crisis, and a culture war. There is little social unity in Israel. Its right vs. left, Orthodox vs. secular, and the level of hatred seems always to keep rising. The UN vote had all of us on edge—I know we in Israel certainly were wondering -- where will all this lead?

Shimon Peres was asked his opinion of the September we were facing. He answered, "After September will come—October." Indeed that is what happened.

Tonight I want to share with you three reasons I am not depressed despite the messy news I've just described:

1. I think Israelis and Arabs are tired of all this fighting. I get the sense that many are ready to move on. There are fresh breezes blowing among the Arabs—I give you an example—its still a very small number but more and more Palestinian leaders and journalists are traveling to Poland and Auschwitz to learn about what the Jews experienced there so they can better understand us.

For years I wondered—where are the Arabs who are more interested in making money than in making war? Where are the builders and creators? This summer I finally met some. I traveled to the new Palestinian city of Rawabi which is being built six miles north of Ramallah. It was stunning. In the middle of nowhere is rising a beautiful new Palestinian city, modeled after Modiin. The builders are building it for young professional yuppie Palestinians. The project leaders told us of their struggles—how they have had to fight both Israeli and Palestinian bureaucracy. But they are slowly raising what will be a gorgeous new planned city—green, wired, and aesthetically compelling. The builders want to make money. They want to create something new and enchanting. They want to create an environment in the new Palestine where no one would dream of doing anything to risk spoiling the good life.

2. It was a great summer in Israel. As a UC Berkeley alumni I love a good demonstration. We had some fine ones this summer. It all started when one ultra-Orthodox young man flipped out when he saw the price of a small container of cottage cheese. He went on Facebook and started the cottage cheese rebellion. Now you have to understand how refreshing this was for us Israelis. We are used to worrying about Iranian nuclear weapons or Palestinian rockets. Suddenly the whole country was focused on something more normal—the price of cottage cheese. Then like wild-fire this rebellion exploded in all directions. Young people who desperately want a middle class life and who feel like they are sentenced to a lower class life style took to the streets, set up tents on Rothchild Boulevard in Tel Aviv, and called out to the whole country—ha-am doresh tzedek chevrati—the people seek social justice. The demonstrations grew as young people

pushed us all to examine the economic hardships of young couples and the monopolies of Israel's richest families. The last big demonstration we had almost a tenth of the country out protesting.

It was magnificent. I say this because these young people are renewing Zionism... Early Zionism was built not only on the idea of a Jewish return to power. It was also built on the motif of social justice. Ben Gurion and his colleagues were determined to build a country where power was used well—a country where the poor were not exploited, a country with a safety net, a country where hard work was rewarded with opportunity. These young people are bringing it back home. All over Israel young people are volunteering, doing an extra year of service in addition to the army. Urban kibbutzim are springing up where young people are fixing up neighborhoods and building day care centers and homes for troubled teens and helping out in homes for the elderly. There's a buzz in the air. The songs that came out of this summer's protests combine old Zionist socialist words with religious words from our prayerbooks—kum heet-na-air may-avak, kum heet-o-rare le-ma-a-vak—rise up, throw off the dust, rise up, wake up to the struggle. Something is happening in Israel with our young. It's gone way beyond cottage cheese. As Israeli rock-n-roll star Avitar Banai sings—tashiri li shir chadash, chadash she-yair libi ve-et mee-ta-ri—I want a new song, a new song that will play the strings of my heart. That new song is being sung today in Israel.

3. Israel is a great place to live. It is a great place to heal. It is a great place to start new life. 35% of Palestinians in east Jerusalem say they don't want to live in Palestine, they want to live in Israel. The cafes and coffee houses are jammed. Starting Thursday night—you can feel the excitement in the air as we get ready for Shabbat. Despite the worries, despite the media, despite the threats from Turkey and Egypt, I want to report to you that the Jews are happy.

Finally, I want to say--we're not going anywhere. Israel is here to stay. Despite rumors to the contrary Israel has built a kind of normalcy for the Jewish people. Yair Lapid puts it nicely—"the state of Israel was not established so that the anti-semites will disappear, but rather so that we can tell them to get lost."

On this Yom Kippur I want to report to you that Israel is strong. September has come and gone. Life goes on. The hard work of building the third Jewish commonwealth is just getting started.