

[Bush's book club]

Sharansky's Double Standard

For the advocate of universal democracy, human rights don't begin at home.

By Michael C. Desch

FOR THOSE WHO became politically aware during the 1970s, no cause added greater moral urgency to the Cold War than the Soviet Union's refusal to allow Jews to emigrate to Israel. And apart from signs demanding "Free Soviet Jews" in front of almost every synagogue or temple in America, nothing symbolized the plight of captive Soviet Jewry better than the tribulations of Anatoli Shcharansky.

In 1973, after being denied permission to emigrate to Israel, he became one of the leading Jewish refuseniks lobbying for greater human rights in Brezhnev's Soviet Union. After four years of waging this campaign, constantly harried and harassed by the KGB, he was arrested in 1977 and tried and convicted of being an American spy in 1978. He served nine years in the gulag, much of it in solitary confinement.

During his incarceration as a prisoner of conscience, Shcharansky's stature in the West grew. As the citation for his Congressional Gold Medal noted, he "became a living symbol of Soviet human-rights abuses in the post-Helsinki era." Released in 1986 as part of a spy exchange with West Germany, he received a hero's welcome in the West where he was rechristened Natan Sharansky by Israel's ambassador to West Germany and whisked to Israel to make *aliyah*. The *New York Times* put it succinctly: he had become a "Jewish saint."

After his ascent to Israel in 1986, Sharansky was only intermittently in the limelight in the United States. That changed in November 2004 when Tom Bernstein, a former business partner and political supporter of George W. Bush, passed the president an advance copy of Sharansky's new book, *The Case for Democracy*. In it, Sharansky argues, "I am convinced that all peoples desire to be free. I am convinced that freedom anywhere will make the world safer everywhere. And I am convinced that democratic nations, led by the United States, have a critical role to play in expanding freedom around the globe."

This message resonated with Bush, and the book rocketed to bestseller status on the endorsement of a president not known as a bibliophile. After meeting with Sharansky for an hour in the Oval Office, Bush told the *New York Times*, "I felt like his book just confirmed what I believe. He writes a heck of a lot better than I could write, and he's certainly got more credibility than I have. After all he spent time in a Soviet prison and he has a much better perspective than I've got. I think that it's an important book and I think people ought to read it." He affirmed the same on CNN, adding, "[Sharansky] talks about freedom and what it means, and how freedom can change the globe. And I agree with him. I believed that before I met Natan Sharansky. This is a book

that, however, summarizes how I feel." *Newsweek* called it Bush's "manifesto."

One would have to go back decades, to Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism* and the Carter White House, to find an administration so swayed by an author. Bush's second inaugural speech closely tracked the themes—if not the actual words—of *The Case for Democracy*. Compare his admonition, "We do not accept the existence of permanent tyranny because we do not accept the possibility of permanent slavery" to Sharansky's assertion, "Just as the institution of slavery has been all but wiped off the face of the earth, so too can government tyranny become a thing of the past."

In her confirmation hearings, Condoleezza Rice cited what she called Sharansky's "town square test"—repeating that if a person cannot walk into the middle of a town square and express his or her views without fear of arrest, that person is living in a "fear society." For weeks Sharansky's work was sold-out in Washington area bookstores.

The one-time Soviet prisoner, now an Israeli cabinet minister, became the personal embodiment of the link that neo-conservative intellectuals had long asserted in print between the Cold War and "World War IV"—a long twilight struggle against totalitarianism morphing seamlessly into the War on Terror. Sharansky could claim authoritatively

that the battles against Soviet despotism and Islamic terrorists were essentially part of the same fight, the free against the unfree. As a result of his personal struggle, Sharansky embodied, to use a favorite catchword of the administration's ideologists, "moral clarity."

But in real political life, moral clarity between liberty and despotism is not so easy to come by—and perhaps nowhere is that clearer than in Sharansky's own path since he entered Israeli politics. For there his career has been marked not by moral clarity but rather by moral ambiguity and inconsistency in his advocacy of democracy and human rights, particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Sharansky arrived in Israel five or six years before the wave of Soviet Jews who came in the 1990s in the wake of Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Initially, Sharansky used his public stature as a former Prisoner of Zion to lobby for better integration of these Russian Jews into Israeli society. But in 1995, he jumped directly into Israeli politics, forming a new party, Yisrael B'Aliyah, to represent these new immigrants. With

HIS CAREER HAS BEEN MARKED **NOT BY MORAL CLARITY** BUT RATHER BY MORAL **AMBIGUITY AND INCONSISTENCY** IN HIS ADVOCACY OF DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS, PARTICULARLY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE **ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**.

the votes of hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews, Sharansky won a seat in the Knesset and his political career took off. He served in ministerial positions under the Netanyahu (Industry and Tourism), Barak (Interior), and Sharon (Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs) governments. With the demise of Yisrael B'Aliyah, Sharansky formally joined Likud in 2003. Over the course of Sharansky's political career, he has steadily

morphed from avatar of universal human rights into a pillar of Israel's nationalist camp.

Soon after Sharansky's arrival on Israel's political scene, international human rights advocates and members of the Israeli peace movement began to suspect that he adopted a double standard in dealing with the Palestinians. After a long and exasperating exchange with Sharansky in 1997, an Arab reporter for *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* threw up his hands and exclaimed, "What you are in effect saying is that everything that the Israeli Government does today is right, that the whole world is wrong to criticize Israel, and that there is no possibility of making any changes in Israel's policies?" Sharansky blithely responded, "I would not put it quite so strongly."

In the years since then, these suspicions have spread widely. As former America-Israel Public Affairs Committee official M.J. Rosenberg observed in a letter to the *Washington Post* in response to a review of Sharansky's new book, "The test of whether one is a human rights activist or one who simply uses the issue for political ends is that person's willingness to apply the human

rights measuring stick to his own people. It is pretty easy to limit your calls for human rights to nations other than your own. For Sharansky, concern for Palestinians is the test of whether or not his claim to the mantle of human rights activist is genuine. As this book demonstrates, he fails—big time."

Sharansky has consistently argued that Israel can only make peace with a democratic Palestinian Authority. There-

fore, he has opposed territorial concessions in advance of political reform in the Palestinian territories. But his past behavior calls into question his commitment to democracy as the *sine qua non* for relations between Israel and other states. For example, he saw no problem with making peace with autocratic Jordan in the 1990s. As he told *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, "We achieved some excellent results, and here I must point out that our relations with Jordan are excellent. Our two states will become a model oasis of peace."

Sharansky has also become Israel's most ardent advocate for closer relations between the Jewish state and an increasingly autocratic Russia—though he recognizes "some unfortunate things are happening in Russia." During a 1998 visit to his former homeland, Sharansky told *Interfax* that the two countries "share numerous strategic interests, economic, political, sometimes even military." But even after the Jan. 9, 2005 Palestinian Authority elections brought Mahmoud Abbas to power democratically, Sharansky still demanded in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* that the Palestinians do more to democratize their system.

Nor has Sharansky been a consistent advocate of democracy and the rule of law within Israel itself. As minister of the interior in 1999, he refused to extradite two Russian Jews living in Israel who were former NKVD officers charged with massacring dozens of civilians in Lithuania prior to World War II. In December 2003, Sharansky addressed a rally in Jerusalem where some other speakers advocated disenfranchising Israeli Arabs.

But the issue that raises the most questions about Sharansky's commitment to peace is his consistent unwillingness seriously to consider returning occupied territory to the Palestinians. Sharansky maintains that in principle

he supports an independent Palestinian state, but in practice he has thwarted steps in that direction at nearly every turn. For instance, the 1996 platform of his supposedly moderate Yisrael B'Aliyah Party explicitly "opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state." As minister of the interior, Sharansky played a key role behind the scenes in undercutting Barak at Camp David. Even the suggestion that the Labor prime minister intended to make concessions to Arafat on Jerusalem and refugees led Sharansky to threaten resignation. Later, he would tell Frontpage webzine that Barak's Camp David offer was "overgenerous," a view that few serious analysts of the period would endorse.

When the quartet of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations proposed a roadmap to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and establish an independent Palestinian state, Sharansky grumbled to *Interfax*, "I reject this plan in its current form. The three drafts of the 'roadmap' I have read are a roll-back to the Oslo process, which was a complete failure. ... Our goal is to deprive [the Arafat] regime of its legitimacy and force."

After Ariel Sharon proposed a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and a small part of the West Bank in the spring of 2004, Sharansky joined with other Likud intransigents in opposing it: "We withdrew from 40% of the territory and ceased our rule over 98% of the population. In return, we received exploding buses. The world demanded more. We offered the Palestinians everything, the works, and in return, we received the cruelest terror. The world responded by treating us like lepers and war criminals. Why should the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip be any different?"

In a particularly cynical move, Sharansky and Sharon's other opponents sought to twist Israel's democratic

process to hobble even this very tentative step toward peace. As a recent *Ha'aretz* editorial characterizes this ploy: "The referendum campaign being waged by Sharon's ministers, his buddies in the Likud, the settlers and fanatics of every stripe, is a threat to the democratic-parliamentary structure of the state, no matter how you look at it." In a recent cabinet vote on Sharon's Gaza withdrawal plan, Sharansky cast one of five nays.

On the nettlesome issue of dividing the holy city of Jerusalem, Sharansky takes an uncompromising line. In the *New York Times* Sharansky warned, "if the Jewish people are not prepared to hold their ground in the city that for

The land was not really abandoned. Rather, the Palestinian owners could not assert their claim because their property was on the wrong side of Israel's security fence. Lower ranking Ministry of Justice officials objected to this decision, but it did not become a public issue until Israel's attorney general formally declared Sharansky's move illegal. Labor Member of Knesset Amram Mitzna simply labeled it "theft."

Sharansky also poses as the world's conscience on the rise of anti-Semitism around the world—particularly in the Palestinian territories. In January 2005, he released a study claiming he had "circumstantial evidence" that the Palestinians were conducting systematic Nazi

SHARANSKY ACCUSED LEFT-WING ISRAELIS OF BEING "COLLABORATORS" WITH THE NEW ANTI-SEMITISM AND CLAIMED THAT THEY ARE "SETTING THE JEWISH HOME ON FIRE."

2,000 years kept the dream of Jewish sovereignty alive, I shudder to think of where we are willing to draw the line." In the pages of *Ma'ariv*, Sharansky even rejected the possibility that Yassir Arafat might at least be buried in the city after his death. "The idea of setting aside a burial plot for Arafat in a building adjacent to the Temple Mount is another of Arafat's fantasies aiming to control the Temple Mount, but it will never materialize."

The issue that has done the most to convince many Israelis that Sharansky's commitment to democratic procedures is selective was his recent behavior as minister for Jerusalem. In June 2004, in a move *Ha'aretz* reported in an article aptly entitled "Like Thieves in the Night," Sharansky and another minister met secretly and declared large tracts of Arab land in Jerusalem to be abandoned and therefore subject to confiscation.

propaganda against the Jews through the textbooks used in Palestinian schools. But even before this report was released, the United States Consulate General in Jerusalem had commissioned its own study of Palestinian textbooks and found no incitement to hatred. As the *Jerusalem Post* reported in January 2004, Sharansky even accused left-wing Israelis of being "collaborators" with the new anti-Semitism and claimed that when they engage in criticism of the Israeli government's policies they are "setting the Jewish home on fire." So much for that town-square test whereby a society is deemed free if opponents can publicly criticize the government without fear of recrimination. If Sharansky had his way, few Palestinians—or Israelis for that matter—would feel confident criticizing Israel's policies for fear of being labeled anti-Semites.

So how did one of the moral paragons of the Cold War struggle against communism and one of today's most influential proponents of the spread of democracy also become one of the most unscrupulous and implacable opponents of a territorial compromise with the Palestinians? Three factors seem to be at work.

First, the corrupt nature of the Israeli political system encourages behavior that is inconsistent with how we hope democratic politics will operate. Indeed,

Sharansky in 1995 or 1996 for his charitable organization for Russian immigrants.

Sharansky was indignant when Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu was implicated in the Bar-Or corruption affair in Israel and promised to leave government if even 10 percent of the charges were true. But as *New York Times* correspondent Serge Schmemmann reported, Sharansky soon did an about-face, earning the nickname "Mr. Ten Percent" among some Israelis.

another Russian Jew, saw the potential for a political party based on the growing Russian Jewish community and better understood that this community was very hawkish, particularly on the issues of Islam (which for Russians was clearly identified with the Chechen War) and the Arabs. Subsequently, Sharansky and Lieberman formed the National Unity Block, which came to represent the most nationalistic edge of the Israeli political spectrum. Like their former countrymen back in the old motherland, Russian Jews in Israel are, in the words of Eduard Kuznetsov, editor of the Israeli Russian-language paper *Vesti*, "the descendants of an imperial attitude. Land is sacred. And though only 1 percent of them live in the occupied territories, they have an instinctive hatred of Arabs and see no reason to make any concessions." As an illustration of how extreme some in the Russian Jewish community have become, *Ha'aretz* recently noted that one Russian Jewish journalist called for the castration of Arabs in order to keep their population in check. Sharansky no doubt became more hawkish as he realized that this was the political center of gravity among most Russian Jews.

Belying his humanitarian image in the West, Sharansky routinely inflates the security threats that Israel faces and then argues that this dire peril justifies extreme measures in response. Listening to Sharansky, one would never know that Israel has the most powerful army in the Middle East and possesses a very large and sophisticated nuclear arsenal. In Sharansky's view "Israel is the only country that is officially threatened to be destroyed by a whole range of countries possessing a far greater military capacity. This includes Iran, which is developing lethal weapons, including nuclear weapons In these conditions we cannot limit our defense capabilities." Not only does Israel need to

HOW DID ONE OF TODAY'S MOST INFLUENTIAL PROPONENTS OF THE SPREAD OF DEMOCRACY ALSO BECOME ONE OF THE MOST UNSCRUPULOUS AND IMPLACABLE OPPONENTS OF A TERRITORIAL COMPROMISE WITH THE PALESTINIANS?

when Sharansky threw his hat into the ring in the mid-1990s, some admirers expressed concern. In a *Wall Street Journal* piece in October 1995, one worried, "What happens when a man of unimpeachable integrity walks into the imperfect world of politics? We may soon have our answer in Israel."

Even before he became formally active in Israeli politics, Sharansky was linked with some shady characters. The *Scotsman* tied Sharansky's Yisrael B'Aliyah to Russian mafia figure Grigory Lerner. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Israel's Internal Security Minister Avigdor Kahalani also confirmed that as minister for trade and industry, Sharansky organized a 1996 meeting between another Russian Jew, Grigory Luchansky, and Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The London *Times* called Luchansky "the most dangerous non-convicted person in the world" and the British government barred him from the country. The Israeli government also refused to renew his passport because of his suspected ties to Russian organized crime. Luchansky himself admitted to *Globes* that he gave money directly to

In July 2000, the Israeli paper *Ma'ariv* revealed that the U.S. Treasury Department had provided documents to the Israeli government showing that over \$300,000 had been transferred by an American nonprofit organization to an Israeli filmmaker to make a campaign film for Sharansky in violation of Israeli election laws. Sharansky refused to cooperate with that investigation. This reinforced the view of growing numbers of Israelis that Sharansky valued political power more than principle. Israeli human rights activist Hirsh Goodman told the *New York Times* that Sharansky is "wooing a constituency, and turning his back on the liberal human rights personality that he was. I think that he's an obstructionist, and intellectually and politically dishonest, but, hey, that's just playing the brutal rules of the political game in this country."

Second, the nature of Sharansky's political constituency in Israel drove him to the nationalist extreme. His original party started out narrowly focused on advancing the ethnic interests of Russian Jews and was fairly moderate on most other issues. But Avigdor Lieberman,

pursue continued military supremacy, but it should also employ all other means at its disposal to destroy its enemies. As Sharansky told Russia's *Interfax* in 1998, "over 5 million Israelis live in peace" thanks to targeted assassinations. Two years later, in the course of another visit to an increasingly authoritarian Russia engaged in a brutal campaign against Chechen separatists, Itar-Tass reported that Sharansky compared Russia's struggle in Chechnya with Israel's struggle against the Palestinians. Both were, in his view, part of the larger struggle against Islamic fundamentalism. In 2002, during yet another visit to his former homeland, Sharansky was quoted in *Izvestiya* as saying that Israel "must destroy terror. That will be our contribution to the struggle of the entire free world." When Sharansky addresses the Israel-Palestine conflict in English, he advocates promoting democracy in the Arab world to achieve peace. But when he speaks about it in Russian and Hebrew, he uses the language of brute force.

Finally, Sharansky told an American interviewer that he saw no incompatibility between his ardent Zionism and his commitment to the struggle for universal human rights and democracy. But when push comes to shove, Zionism trumps all else for him. Sharansky entertains few doubts about the Jews' exclusive claim to the biblical land of Israel. In a recent *Ha'aretz* interview, he maintained the "Jews came here 3,000 years ago and this is the cradle of Jewish civilization. Jews are the only people in history who kept their loyalty to their identity and their land throughout the 2,000 years of exile, and no doubt that they have the right to have their place among nations—not only historically but also geographically. As to the Palestinians, who are the descendants of those Arabs who migrated in the last 200 years, they have the right, if they want, to have their own state... but not at the expense of the

state of Israel." Faced with the choice of trading land for peace, Sharansky advocates keeping all the land and continuing the fight with the Arabs. In a 2003 *Jerusalem Post* opinion piece entitled "Temple Mount Is More Important Than Peace," Sharansky baldly stated, "It was not for the sake of peace that the State of Israel was established, and it was not because of peace that millions of Jews gathered here. Nor was it peace for which the Jewish people prayed for thousands of years. The Jewish people prayed for Jerusalem." Rhetorically, Sharansky can square his commitment with Zionism and the universal promotion of democracy and human rights. In practice, if he is forced to choose, Zionism wins every time.

Of course, none of this is to suggest that Sharansky does not deserve our

respect for his past suffering in the gulag. Nor does it deny that Sharansky's campaigns to promote democracy and combat anti-Semitism have been beneficial for many people around the world. But his views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while certainly clear, hardly represent the sort of moral clarity that sets democracy and self-determination as supreme political values. This divergence—between Sharansky's rhetoric and real-world political behavior—suggests that he is not the reliable beacon for American foreign policy that the Bush administration so desperately seeks. ■

Michael C. Desch is Robert M. Gates Chair in Intelligence and National Security Decision-making at the George Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University.

[gullible's travels]

Mr. Bush Goes to Europe

... and comes home empty-handed.

By Stuart Reid

LONDON—George W. Bush got one thing right in Europe last month. "Iran isn't Iraq," he said in Mainz. But Europe isn't the United States, and the president's charm offensive left most Europeans drumming their fingers or putting out the cat. Bush gave it all he had but received nothing in return—other than an undertaking by NATO leaders to train some Iraqi cops, and that had never been in doubt anyway.

Let's rewind the tape. Before a joint session of Congress on Sept. 20, 2001 the commander in chief declared, "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." Less than a month later, on Nov. 6, he told a press conference in Warsaw, "Over time it's going to be important for nations to know they will be held accountable for inactivity. You're either with us or