

{MARCH 12 2005}

BUSH'S GURU

An American and a Soviet soldier meet in Berlin in 1945 and get into an argument about which of their countries is more democratic.

“Why,” the American said, “I can stand in the middle of Times Square and shout ‘President Truman is a scoundrel’ and nothing will happen to me!”

“Big deal,” the Russian retorted, “I can stand in the middle of Red Square and shout ‘Truman is a scoundrel’ and nothing will happen to me!”

It is perhaps this story that inspired Natan Sharansky’s theory that the ultimate test of democracy is that a person can stand in the town square and denounce his government, without anything happening to him. True, but rather simplistic, I would say. Simplistic enough to catch the imagination of that other great thinker, George W. Bush.

When Israelis heard for the first time about Bush citing Sharansky as his guide and mentor, they gasped in disbelief. Sharansky? Our Sharansky?

To explain this reaction, one has to go back a little bit. We first heard of Natan Sharansky (actually Anatoliy Shcharansky, but the name was simplified and Hebrewized when he came here) as a “dissident” in the Soviet Union. After attracting international attention in Moscow, he was arrested by the KGB and sentenced for treason, in what looked like a particularly clumsy attempt to silence him. As we heard it, he was not broken in the hell of the Gulag but remained a proud fighter for his rights and ideas. A huge international campaign demanded his release.

In the end the Soviets decided to get rid of him and exchanged him for a valuable Soviet spy held in America. The picture of this small but upright figure crossing the bridge in Berlin has remained imprinted in our memories.

We waited for his arrival in Israel with bated breath. Here he was, a great, authentic hero, the man who had single-handedly defeated the Soviet colossus, a modern David defying mighty Goliath.

Seeing him in the flesh was an anti-climax. For a hero, he looked singularly unimpressive. But appearances mislead, don’t they?

At the airport, Anatoliy, now Natan, was reunited with his wife, another famous dissident. Since she had already achieved a certain notoriety in Israel as a fanatical right-winger and religious extremist, her connection with the human-rights activist seemed incongruous.

The real disillusionment, at least for me, started with the Hussein affair. Some good soul arranged a meeting between the great dissident and Feisal Hussein, the leader of the Arab community in East Jerusalem, a fighter for Palestinian human rights and a real humanist. Sharansky agreed, but at the last moment retracted, claiming that he had not known that Hussein belonged to the PLO. (Which is rather like not knowing that Bush is an American.)

At the time I wrote an article about him under the heading "Shafansky". "Shafan" is Hebrew for rabbit, the symbol of cowardice.

From then on, the great human rights fighter gradually became an uncompromising activist against the human (and any other) rights of the Palestinians in the occupied territories.

First he established a party of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, achieved a respectable election result and joined a coalition headed by the Labor Party. But after some time his party started falling apart. He tried to save it by resigning from the government of Ehud Barak, on the grounds that it had made too many concessions to the Palestinians over Jerusalem.

Finally, in an admission of political bankruptcy, he joined the Likud. He is now a quite unimportant member of the government, calling himself grandly "Minister for Jerusalem", but serving actually as a Minister without Portfolio, who has been put, pro forma, in charge of Jerusalem affairs.

In the meantime, he has suffered some unpleasantness. Another famous immigrant from Russia published an extremely critical book about him, alleging that he had never been a prominent dissident, but that his importance had been deliberately inflated by the KGB in order to exchange him for its genuinely important agent in the American prison. Also, the book insinuates that his role behind bars was considerably less heroic than advertised.

Sharansky sued for libel and won, but only after the indignity of hearing some other prominent former dissidents testify against him.

Throughout the years, Sharansky - in line with many "Russian" immigrants - was drifting to the extreme right. Already as Housing Minister, he had systematically enlarged the settlements on expropriated Arab land in the West Bank, trampling on the human and national rights of the Palestinians. Now he belongs to the Likud "rebels", the group of extreme right-wingers who are trying to undermine Ariel

Sharon's "disengagement" plan and prevent the dismantling of settlements.

For years now, he has peddled the idea that peace with the Arabs is impossible until they become democratic. In Israel, this was dismissed as just another propaganda gimmick serving the Israeli government's opposition to any peace that would mean an end to the occupation. Since Sharansky is totally ignorant of Arab affairs and has probably never had a serious conversation with an Arab, it is hard for Israelis to take him seriously. As far as I know, nobody does, not even among Rightists.

His highly unoriginal contention that "democracies do not make war against other democracies" is a perfect alibi for the United States to attack Iraq, Syria and Iran, which are, after all, no democracies (while dictatorships like Pakistan and Turkmenistan remain good friends).

The idea that the teachings of this particular political philosopher are the guiding star of the mightiest leader in the world, the commander of the biggest military machine in history, is rather frightening.