The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror
Natan Sharansky with Ron Dermer
New York: Public Affairs, 2004, 320 pp.

Natan Sharansky has been a gadfly notable for his conviction and persistence. In the Soviet Union, he defied the Soviet authorities and became perhaps the best known of the Jewish dissidents. Released from prison, he emigrated to Israel, where his criticism of existing affairs led him to enter politics and to become a minister in the government—and then to resign when he disagreed with policy. This book is his testament to the ideas that motivated him, which he believes led to the collapse of the Soviet Union and which can, he argues, ultimately transform the world into a better, more peaceful place.

Sharansky's basic thesis is very simple. There are two types of societies: those characterized by fear and those motivated by freedom. To distinguish between the two, he applies the "town hall" test. "Can a person walk into the middle of the town square and express his or her views without fear of arrest, imprisonment, or physical harm? If he can, then that person is living in a free society. If not, it's a fear society." He stresses there is "nothing in between . . . because a society that does not protect dissent will *inevitably* be based on fear" (pp. 40–41).

Sharansky's sharp and uncompromising distinction, which eliminates any shades of gray, reflects his belief in the need for moral clarity. It is moral clarity—in particular, the requirement to recognize evil as evil—that is the foundation of any effort to create a more peaceful world. He has glowing praise for President Ronald Reagan for condemning the Soviet Union as an evil empire and acting accordingly, which leads to Sharansky's proclamation of the "formula that had achieved victory" in the Cold War:

> Beset on the inside by dissidents demanding the regime live up to its international commitments and pressed on the outside by leaders like Reagan willing to link their foreign and defense policies to internal Soviet changes, leaders in the Kremlin eventually buckled under the strain (p. 140).

Sharansky believes this formula can be reproduced anywhere. "The same formula will work again today," he insists. "The nations of the free world can promote democracy by linking their foreign policies toward nondemocratic regimes to how those regimes treat their citizens," especially since these regimes "are much more dependent on the West than

the Soviets ever were." This is especially the case in the Middle East because "the Palestinians were so dependent on the outside world that it is hard to imagine a case when the West had greater leverage to insist on the creation of a free society" (p. 143).

Two questions, therefore, confront us. First, is Sharansky correct in his assessment of how the Cold War ended? And second, is he correct in assuming that he has found a formula that can be applied anywhere?

Although the dissidents must be admired for their courage in confronting a terrible regime, Sharansky exaggerates their importance while misunderstanding the Soviet Union's economic collapse, which he attributes to the American arms buildup. If communism had worked, the Soviet Union would have been able to maintain the arms competition with the United States. Its inability to do so was a result of the inherent deficiency of a planned economy. "Human flaws in the command method cannot be compensated for by even the most sophisticated computers," Alexander Yakovlev, one of Gorbachev's top aides, forthrightly acknowledged in 1988. "The market . . . is the measure of the social usefulness of work, the regulator of thriftiness, the incentive for building up efficiency and for scientific-technical progress."

A market economy cannot operate effectively in the absence of the rule of law, since investors need to know the government will not arbitrarily seize their property. This point was underlined when Gorbachev told a meeting at the Central Committee in 1988 that "a person must come into his own. . . . People need to have their hands untied, and be given the opportunity of living and doing their work on the land." Someone replied that "to untie people's hands, there must be a law protecting the worker." Gorbachev agreed that "work must be protected by law."

Accordingly, at this time there was much attention to creating a "rule of law" state, with a particular focus on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (which, not so incidentally, amounted to a repudiation of Lenin). Whatever the source of this inspiration, it does not appear to have come from the dissident movement. Sharansky, for example, does not mention Kant. In short, although the dissidents undoubtedly contributed to the reassessment of communism, other influences were also at work.

Similarly, it is a common mistake to attribute the collapse of the Soviet empire to foreign pressure. Rather, it appears the Soviets learned they lost not only when they lost, but also when they won—because all they acquired were economic liabilities that drained their resources. As Politburo member Geidar Aliyev told the Vietnamese during a 1983 visit, "in helping Vietnam develop its economy, the Soviet people have to share with you even things they are also needing."

That was not just a statement of solidarity; it was an acknowledgement of an increasingly untenable situation. Indeed, history demonstrates that military successes frequently drain the treasury of the victor, which must now support a new territory and population rather than be supported by them. "Whenever your victory impoverishes you or acquisition weakens you, you must forgo it or you will not arrive at the result for which wars

are made," Machiavelli warned in his *Florentine Histories*. Foreshadowing Aliyev, Machiavelli added that the prince "cannot entirely rejoice at a victory by which all his subjects are afflicted."

In short, Sharansky misconstrues the causes of the Soviet collapse, in particular its economic sources. In addition, his insistence on moral clarity fails to take account of the morally and legally ambiguous behavior of the United States in the 1980s, for example, the Iran-Contra scandal. How does that affect his conviction that his formula can be easily replicated in the Middle East?

Sharansky believes that peace in the Middle East is impossible without the spread of democracy, and consequently the West should use its power to encourage the development of democracy rather than seek Oslo-style accords. And since Israel is a democracy, this pressure should be applied to Israel's adversaries. In a telling passage, he writes, "those fighting for human rights who do not distinguish between free and fear societies will be shorn of a moral compass" (p. 210).

The paradoxical effect of this distinction is that once you are anointed a free society, you are held to a lower standard than your adversaries. Indeed, Sharansky portrays Israel's rule over the Palestinians as, in effect, benevolent. "Palestinians under Israeli rule," he explains reassuringly, "could speak freely, publish their ideas, practice their faith, appeal to independent courts, and contact human rights organizations" (p. 203). If Israel does occasionally violate human rights, it is for him a regrettable necessity. Organizations "indiscriminately condemning a free society that upholds human rights but which is sometimes forced to encroach on certain freedoms to save lives . . . do not advance the cause of human rights" (p. 209).

This division of the world is far too neat. Even if one accepts that Israel comes in for excessive criticism relative to the treatment of the Palestinians at the hands of their own leaders and other Arabs (e.g., refugee camps in Lebanon), the implication that Israel should be beyond human rights criticism is disturbing. Progress in human rights in the United States has emerged from the conflict of the American reality with the American ideal as expressed in, for example, the Declaration of Independence. When our Founders declared all men are created equal, "they had no power to confer such a boon," Abraham Lincoln acknowledged in his speech on the Dred Scott decision. "They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit."

In other words, when our reality diverges from our ideal, we must work to change the reality. That is the foundation of the international human rights movement, which challenges governments to live up to their obligations. No country should be immune from this criticism, least of all the free societies. If anything, countries that claim to be free should be held to a higher standard, since they purport to set an example for others to follow.

And that is ultimately what is so disappointing about Sharansky's

analysis. Having diagnosed the Palestinians as a fear society, he insists that peace cannot be achieved until they become a free society. To disengage before the Palestinians become free, as Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was doing, "will only bring the terror closer to our cities and our families, and create a terror state on our borders that will threaten Israel and the world" (p. 264).

But to create a free state among the Palestinians, Sharansky argues that the West should do what he believes was so critical in winning the Cold War: link Western benefits to domestic reform. "If the free world uses its enormous leverage," he assures us, "the Arab regimes will no longer be able to violate human rights with impunity" (p. 275).

As noted, this assessment of how the Cold War ended is questionable, and it is even more doubtful it would work in the Middle East today. It is extraordinary to read Soviet accounts at the end of the Cold War about how they had been wrong and we had been correct about the importance of human rights. Those days, sadly, are gone. If Sharansky believes people will not abandon freedom once they obtain it, he must explain the willingness of the Russian people to accept the current erosion of their freedom.

And what is true in Russia now is even truer in the Middle East. America's image has been devastated by human rights violations like the atrocities at Abu Ghraib. Similarly, continuing conflict in Iraq is undermining our superpower status, a war the president proclaimed effectively over on May 1, 2003.

Tellingly, a poll in March 2006 of 2,500 residents of Turkey's five largest cities revealed that none believed the United States had invaded Iraq to bring freedom to its people. And just a year after the Cedar Revolution, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora of Lebanon refused to receive Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice because of the U.S. position in the war between Israel and Lebanon, which was viewed as a betrayal of Lebanon's democracy.

Having misread the lessons behind the end of the Cold War, the administration now finds itself mired in the Middle East, with America's power being increasingly challenged and its reputation undermined. There is, of course, a case for democracy, or the United States would not be the success story that it is. But if Washington wants to make the case successfully, it will have to reexamine the assumptions that have led us to our current situation.

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