

ON HEROISM

Let's play 'Word Association'. What's the first thing that comes to you mind when someone says: Hero? Well, for me I think Randolph Scott, John Wayne or, my personal favorite, Gary Cooper. What do they have in common, beside the lantern jaw? They were all about six foot four, that's about 193 cm. Heroes are huge. At least, in popular thinking. Since the early 70s, when I became aware of the plight of Soviet Jewry, one of my heroes has been Natan (ne Anatoly) Sharansky. So, it came as a bit of a surprise to me when I had the honor of meeting him in the early 90s. There I was looking down on this diminutive (5' 3", 160 cm) giant. I'm going to begin this piece on Chanuka with a story about Mr. Sharansky.

It's been told many times that Sharansky survived his terrible ordeal in the Gulag by reading from his hand written Tehillim (with a little help from chess). But less well known is the story about his release in East Berlin (on the Glienicke Bridge, just like in the movie, Bridge of Spies, February 11, 1986). He was told before his release: Sharansky, Anatoly Borisovich. I am authorized to declare to you that by order of the

Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, for conduct unworthy of a Soviet citizen, you have been stripped of Soviet citizenship and as an American spy you are being expelled from the Soviet Union. This is his description of his reaction: I knew all along that this day had to come. And now I took the Psalm book and turned to Psalm 30, which I had long ago decided to recite at the moment of my release. "A song of David at the dedication of a house", it begins. Now I was reading these words en route to my own house in Jerusalem! (Quotes from his memoir, Fear No Evil)

Why this Psalm? Well, that will take the rest of this article, but I must add that this is also the Psalm which we recite on Chanuka, and the reasons for both usages merge in my mind.

CHANUKA gets translated as dedication or rededication, but I don't think that's quite accurate. When you look at how the term is used in Tanach you get a slightly different picture. As a verb, this root (CHET NUN KAF) appears only five times.

In D'varim (20:5), one who has not CHANACH his house doesn't have to go to the army. Rav Arye Kaplan z"l translates the term 'begun to live in it', Okay. Dr. Robert Alter is closer to my thinking. He translates it as 'dedicate his house', but does much better in the footnote, where he explains that this is in keeping with

later Hebrew usage, but could mean 'to initiate use'. Bingo! The translation of Yonatan ben Uziel beautifully renders it 'and has not yet affixed the MEZUZA'. This is in keeping with our idea of Jewish education or CHINUCH, which means to have the young person actually do the mitzvot. Chinuch is hands on.

But the most famous usage is read on the last day of Chanuka and comes from the inauguration of the Mishkan: That was the inauguration of the altar... on the day it was anointed (Bamidbar 7:84). The anointing with oil is the ceremonial 'first pitch' or dedication; CHINUCH is putting the item to use or 'batter up!'.

However, that's not the real subject matter of Psalm 30. Our poem gets to work in verse 2: "I elevate You, O Lord, because You drew me up, and You gave my enemies no cause for joy!" What a great declaration, and so fitting for our hero, Natan Sharansky. God lifts me from a disastrous situation and allows me to have the last laugh on my persecutors. The term for 'drew up (D'LITANI)' is from the word for bucket, Dear Liza. This gives us the picture of King David being drawn from the depths of a pit or well. The poem is filled with expressions of ascent from an abyss: up from She'ol (perhaps Hell), saved me from descent into the pit (BOR, probably

grave), and descent into the depths (SHACHAT). This trope is also embodied in the image 'going down to sleep in tears, only to awaken to blissful joy (verse 6).'

I can't stop comparing Mr. Sharansky's experience to that of Yosef HaTzadik in this week's parsha: Then Par'o sent for Yosef, and they quickly brought him out of the pit (BOR, B'reishit 41:14). They spruced him up and ignored the indignities that had been endured. That's truly a Psalm 30 and Chanuka image.

And this describes the reality of the warriors, also called Chasidim (You see, the original Chasidim had no problem serving in the army), in the Chanuka story. They were the 160cm heroes against the 193cm Syrian Hellenists (just over 3 AMOT vs almost 4). They also went to bed in bitter tears over the desecration of their beloved Holy Temple, only to awake from that nightmare in blissful joy. Now we can understand why we thank God for GEVUROT (courage, heroism) in the Al HaNisim prayer. It was miraculous.

The whole experience of freeing their small nation from the oppression of the regional bully, with only the inspiring words of Torah to comfort them, is so similar to Natan Sharansky's tale. Climbing out of a pit of persecution, enslavement and depression to the light of a new day is almost a synopsis of

Jewish history.

Mr. Sharansky was prophetic to envision the day that he would recite Psalm 30. However, it wasn't only about inaugurating a new home with Avital, his saintly wife, it was initiating a whole new life of leadership and respect in our national home.

The Maccabees wrote the script of the puny underdog standing up to the 800-pound gorilla, but this plotline continues to describe our people's destiny. Thank you, Natan Sharansky for reminding us. Happy Chanuka! 