

The Jewish Ethics Workbook: Chapter Four

Ethical Genius

*Who is mighty? He who subdues his passions.
(Avot: Chapter 4, Mishnah 1)*

There are two theories about leadership. On the one hand, there is the view that in every generation there are a few special men and women—great heroes-- who set the agenda and call the shots for the rest of us. These men and women are larger than life. They think big and they act big because they are big!

On the other hand, there is the view that no one can rise above history like this. Even the greatest heroes, when examined carefully, are carried along by the currents of time. This theory says that real leadership is quieter, more prosaic, and more common. Let's call the first view, the "heroic model of leadership" and the second view, "quiet leadership."

Heroic Leaders

These men and women are exceedingly smart, full of energy, cunning as foxes, and almost always physically strong and alert. These are the men and women that we read about in history text books. In the United States, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Ben Franklin come easily to mind.

Just consider Ben Franklin for a moment. He was a prolific writer, a politician, a diplomat, and one of the founding fathers of the United States of America. Here are a few of his inventions: bifocals, Franklin stove, catheter, lightning rod, odometer, and daylight savings time. He founded the first fire department, the first fire insurance company, and he is given credit with penning the first political cartoon. And, this is only a partial list of his accomplishments!

In Jewish history, there is Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Isaiah, Devorah, Hillel, Rabbi Akiva, Maimonides, and Ben Gurion just to name some of the all time greats. There is no need to recount their outsized accomplishments here since you have probably been learning about them from the time that you first learned to talk.

These men and women from both Jewish and non-Jewish history are the "statistical outliers." They make up history's hall of fame. They don't just respond to circumstances, they are the forces that cause these circumstances. Each leader was outstanding in his or her own way. Ben Franklin's gift resided in his ability to invent. Abraham was the founder of monotheism. Maimonides was an unmatched legal scholar and philosopher (not to mention a world-class physician). Ben Gurion was a politician with few peers.

While all of these heroes were special in their own way, I want to suggest that the one thing that each of these great men and women shared was “ethical genius.” By this, I simply mean that--in their area of expertise--each of these great heroes was able to subdue or channel his or her passions. “Who is mighty? He who subdues his passions.”

This doesn't mean that these individuals *destroyed* or *uprooted* their passions and emotions. These heroes are not Spock-like creatures devoid of feeling. Rather, in subduing their passions they learned how to direct them in a positive way. Their passions become the fuel that provides the energy to create.

Think of the famous story of Abraham destroying his father's precious idols. No one would deny Abraham's flaming passion--who among us would have the guts to destroy his father's idols? But, in time, Abraham was able to channel this overflowing energy and youthful enthusiasm toward the noble goal of spreading monotheism.

Perhaps Nimrod, Abraham's arch-enemy, was just as strong or even stronger than Abraham. The difference though is that history and tradition remember Abraham as someone who learned to master his own power and direct his actions toward a positive goal. Nimrod, however, is best remembered for being a “mighty hunter” and the mastermind behind the building of the infamous tower of Babel. It's stories like these that the author of our Mishna, Ben Zoma, had in mind, when he wrote his famous statement quoted above.

This is not to say that these men and women never failed, after all, they were all humans. But in their special domain of greatness, be it invention, philosophy, or politics, these people harnessed their great power and passion in the service of pinpoint accuracy.

Quiet Leaders

Quiet leaders show up to work everyday. They take pride in their efforts and are modest about their accomplishments. They know what the right thing to do is and they usually do it. Quiet leaders don't try to alter history in a dramatic way. They are not planning a military conquest of any continents in the near future.

Quiet leaders enjoy the company of good friends and the warmth and care of members of their family. When faced with a difficult situation, quiet leaders rise to the occasion. In the previous chapter, Yosef didn't climb any mountains, he didn't discover electricity, and he didn't rule over any countries, and yet he is a quintessential quiet leader.

So far, in this book, I have examined almost exclusively people more like my former student Yosef than the biblical prophetess Devorah. This is by conscious choice because it is my strong belief that, in the long run, we need more down-to-earth role models and fewer super heroes. If the only leaders we ever talk about are the great heroes, it's too easy to get discouraged. “I'm never going to be like Rabbi Akiva, so why even bother?”

And, yet this approach has its limitations, too. If we set the bar too low, we begin to lower our expectations and, eventually our behavior, as well. “You can’t expect me to do *that*, after all, no one thinks I’m George Washington.”

The great heroes are necessary, after all. If we think of them as real human beings and not mythical giants, and if we approach them with a heavy dose of realism and caution, these ethical geniuses are the only ones that can teach us about what is best and most noble in being human. They teach us about our true potential.

By definition, the great heroes are statistical outliers and this implies that very few of us will ever rise to such great heights. It doesn’t mean, though, that we shouldn’t try. It may very well be the case that in time, the statistical outliers of one generation become the norm in the next.

Natan Sharansky: Great Hero *and* Quiet Leader

In March 1977, the Soviet Union’s secret police force--the KGB--arrested Natan Sharansky under the false charges of treason and espionage, capital crimes under Soviet law. His continuing story has been one of the great inspirations for me to write this book on ethics.

Sharansky had applied to government authorities for an exit visa years earlier. His dream and unshakable ambition was to make *aliyah*. Unfortunately, his request was denied for “security reasons.” But, in a bittersweet twist of history, in 1974, his wife Avital *was* able to emigrate to Israel, leaving Sharansky behind just one day after their marriage.

Natan Sharansky was a computer scientist by profession (he graduated from the prestigious Physical Technical Institute in Moscow) and a brilliant chess master by avocation. But, during the mid 1970s, before his arrest, he became better known as a spokesperson for Soviet dissidents and human rights activists. In 1976, he helped to establish the Helsinki Monitoring Group, a movement headed by Andrei Sakharov.

In time, his heroism and altruism thrust him onto the world stage. He became an inspirational role-model for those fighting for the freedom of Soviet citizens, Jews and non-Jews alike. As punishment for his unselfish and uncompromising activities, he was eventually “found guilty” and spent nine years as a political prisoner of the immoral, crumbling, and decrepit Soviet Empire. His only real “crime” was his desire to live a fully Jewish life in the state of Israel with his wife Avital and being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Today, with the Soviet Union gone, it difficult to imagine what it was like being a prisoner of conscience, suffering under one of the most brutal and evil regimes in history. The KGB’s goal from the time they arrested Sharansky was to humiliate and break him, to make him admit that his political activities were wrong-headed and subversive to the Soviet Union.

Despite the fact that it seemed to everyone at the time that the Soviet Union was made out of the hardest rock and would last forever, in his heart of hearts, Natan Sharansky always knew that the

KGB could never humiliate him unless he let them. In his book, aptly titled, **Fear No Evil** (now translated into nine languages), he writes “Only I can humiliate me.”

“Who is mighty? He who subdues his passions.” But, how does it work in real life? Natan Sharansky helps us to understand.

Following his arrest, the KGB met with Sharansky in prison and warned him about his dire circumstances. Unless he recanted from his pro-Zionist position, they told him, he would face capital punishment. His captors lied to him over and over and said that they had sufficient evidence to convict him and kill him. Sharansky was scared, but he did not panic.

Thinking about his own situation, almost as if he were playing a game of chess, Sharansky reasoned as follows:

I came to the obvious conclusion that I hadn't been psychologically prepared for a charge of treason—and especially the horrifying possibility of rasstrel [capital punishment]. My only hope was to quickly become accustomed to that idea, to steel myself against it. Just as the skin on my feet used to toughen up every summer during my childhood, when I walked around barefoot, I now had to toughen up my ears and my heart until the sound and the prospect of rasstrel meant nothing to me. (p. 40)

The path of least resistance for Sharansky would have been to tell the Soviet authorities that he had been wrong, and that he now understood the error of his ways. Others before him had been weaker. Recanting like this would have almost guaranteed him a reduced sentence and might have allowed him to make aliya and to be reunited with his wife Avital. In Israel, he could have repudiated his statements to the KGB and set the record straight.

Natan Sharansky's overarching dream was to resume his marriage to Avital in Israel as soon as possible, but not on these terms!

Sharansky would not give in to the Soviets for three distinct reasons. First, he felt that if he confessed, he would be hurting his good friends who were still on the outside and still working hard for the cause of freedom in the Soviet Union. Simply put, he could not betray his friends. Second, any collaboration with the KGB, even a feigned collaboration, would undercut his strong moral position. Sharansky knew that the reason that the world was concerned about a few Soviet refuseniks and political prisoners was because of the “moral righteousness” of their struggle against evil. To compromise with the KGB would diminish the power of their cause. Finally, if he cooperated with the KGB, it would be understood as a major victory for them and would only encourage the political elite to arrest more dissidents. Sharansky drew his line in the sand and he would never cross it. Never.

There was no way on earth, I could ever return to my former life as an assimilated Soviet Jew, a loyal citizen who said one thing but thought another as he tried to act just like everyone else. That was all behind me now. For the past four years I had been a free man, and it was unthinkable that I would ever give up the marvelous sensation of freedom that

came over me after I returned to my roots. For now I had purpose, I had perspective, I had peace of mind. And although we were separated by time and space, I had Avital. (p. 42)

Sharansky knew that he had committed no punishable crimes. Publicizing human rights violations in the Soviet Union did not violate Soviet law. Throughout his career as a dissident, his actions never compromised the sovereign independence of the Soviet Union nor did it diminish its military power.

Even while he was locked away in the Soviet Gulag, isolated from his family and friends—often in solitary confinement with meager food rations and cold winter winds chilling him to the point that he could not even escape into sleep—Natan Sharansky believed that he was a free man. He would never give up the marvelous sensation of freedom. In finding his roots, in discovering what it meant to him to be Jewish, he had discovered his real identity for the very first time in his life. He was not about to barter this away for anything.

One of the psychological tools that Sharansky used to ease his burden while in confinement was song. Not that Sharansky was a very good singer. In fact, he jokes that he was no good at all. But, now in solitary confinement with no one to hear him or criticize him, he sang the words of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, “The entire world is a narrow bridge, and the important thing is not to be afraid at all” to a haunting melody a visiting American rabbi had taught him just before his incarceration.

Natan Sharansky did not just sing these words in a rote fashion as we who are more comfortable than him often do. He lived and breathed Rabbi Nachman’s words:

This mystical feeling of the interconnection of human souls was forged in the gloomy prison-camp world when our zeks’ [prisoners’] solidarity was the one weapon we had to oppose the world of evil, and when the defeat of any of us had an immediate and painful effect on the others. It was tempered in the punishment cells, where the supportive voices of my friends reached me only if I summoned them through a mental effort and only if our hearts were tuned to the same frequency. This feeling of our great unity and solidarity that knew neither temporal nor spatial limits crystallized during my hunger strike when the voices from *their* world, the voices of the doctor healed me only in order to pour in another portion of the mixture or to remind me it was still not too late to join them (p. 361)

Sharansky did not just survive the Soviet system of total repression and thought control, he thrived. As his body weakened due to unhealthy living conditions and frequent hunger strikes, his spirit strengthened.

In the end, due to the intense political pressure orchestrated by his seemingly shy and unassuming wife Avital, the Soviets let Sharansky go.

Today, Sharansky is living in Jerusalem surrounded by a loving family—Avital and his two daughters Rachel and Hanna—and is a prominent and influential member of the Israeli government.

To me one of the most amazing things about Sharansky has been his ability to evolve—in response to his dramatically changing circumstances—into a quiet leader. In one of his most thought-provoking comments in his book, Sharansky notes that upon his arrival in Israel he, “soon learned that defending one’s freedom in the ocean of love can be no less challenging than defending it in the sea of hatred” (p. 419). To those who believe that quiet leadership is too easy, this statement, authored by one of the great ethical geniuses of our time, is an important reminder of just how hard the give-and-take of everyday leadership can be.

In the Soviet Union, life was harsh, but the moral and political issues were black and white. In Israel, daily life is much less harsh, but the moral and political dilemmas are grayer and less obvious. Since his release from prison, Sharansky has become a more prosaic and everyday leader, but no less of a role model for the Jewish people. In many ways, his being *less* of a superman, makes him even *more* valuable to the rest of us as a guide to everyday ethics.

In 1994, Sharansky co-founded Peace Watch, a group dedicated to monitoring compliance with agreements signed by Israel and the PLO. In addition, Sharansky has become increasingly active in Israeli politics. He founded a new political party *Yisrael Baaliya*, which translates to both “Israel on the Rise” and “Israel for Immigration.” In 1996, Sharansky was elected to the Israeli Knesset, and in 1999 he was appointed to the post of Minister of Interior. Today, he is one of the most articulate spokesman against world-wide anti-Semitism.

Conclusion

In learning about ethics and how to live a moral life, role models are essential. We need the examples of quiet leaders like my students Yosef and Sarah. We also need the other kind of leaders—the larger than life heroes. They show us just how big the human spirit, at its very best, can be. Natan Sharansky’s staunch stoicism and unblinking courage in the face of a totalitarian regime bent on destroying him certainly qualify him as a heroic leader for our time. His work in Israel, although quieter and less publicized, make him a more approachable figure, but no less important. In channeling his energy and “subduing his passions” for the good of the Jewish people and for the world at large, Natan Sharansky continues to teach us what true freedom is all about.