

Natan Sharansky: Historical echo of Haredi draft refusers

In an era where the consequences for non-compliance with governmental mandates stir profound debates, the plight of Haredi draft refusals finds an unlikely historical echo in the meditations of a 1970s Soviet refusenik.

Incarceration, Natan Sharansky's experience suggests, does not merely constrain; it also purifies. "In freedom, I am lost in a myriad of choices," Sharansky reflected, contrasting the inertia-inducing liberty of the free world with the stark, binary choices of his captivity—choices that boiled down to good versus evil, each day reductive to a fundamental question.

His memoir, *Fear No Evil*, chronicles not just his struggle but that of an entire Jewish movement in the USSR, grappling with an alienation wrought by a totalitarian ideology that eroded empathy and mutual understanding.

Sharansky's experience, I dare to suggest, mirrors the plight of the Haredi draft 'refuseniks' today. Though it is unlikely Sharansky himself would support this conclusion, there is no reason why his thesis – that the purity of the ontological struggle of a minority to overcome the dictates of an alien majority – cannot be equally applied in this context.

The title of his memoir, *Fear No Evil*, inspired by the 23rd Psalm, encapsulates the essence of Sharansky's journey and his enduring faith. His small book of Psalms, a source of solace and strength, was frequently confiscated, leaving him to cling to the verses he had memorized. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me," served not just as a personal mantra but as a declaration of an indomitable will.

Drawing a parallel from Sharansky's reflections, one might consider the modern predicament of the Haredi draft refusals. Such a reliance upon G-d for divine protection ("your rod and your staff protect me") gives the Haredi supreme confidence in their struggle to avoid the rallying call of a secular power.

What was the sacred connection to the land that fuelled Sharansky's struggle, and how is this supernatural link to be understood except through the eyes of faith, the same faith which the Haredi now appeal to in their refusal to yield to the dictates of a secular body.

Like Sharansky, the Haredim face a society that views them as problematic to the aims of the state. They are signs of contradiction refusing to yield to majority opinion. The forced solitude of the prison cell (if they are to be incarcerated) judging from Sharansky's own experiences, offers the modern refusals a profound opportunity to meditate on the validity of their decisions, not as defiance but as expressions of absolute moral conviction.

The Haredi draft refusals stand as outcasts not merely from a society but as custodians of a conscience, carrying on their shoulders the heavy mantle of truth and conviction, echoing Sharansky's own struggle.