

“Isaac & Ishmael”

Rosh Ha-Shanah

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Once, Anatoly Sharansky was a vaguely familiar name from the “let my people go” supplements to the Haggadah about the plight of Soviet Jewry.

Once, my friends and I traveled to Washington, D.C. to demand that the USSR be accountable to its promises of political freedom called *glasnost* and economic liberty called *perestroika*, and we demonstrated for the release of prisoners of conscience such as Sharansky.

Then, a miracle took place: the Soviet Union collapsed. Sharansky, now calling himself by his Hebrew name Natan, meaning gift, and his wife Avital flew to Israel as free people in their own land. The Berlin wall was torn down by jubilant East Germans, the much-feared and hated iron curtain across Europe lifted. Yet liberty must be won again and again.

Beginning last January the Arab world has been rocked by widespread civil disobedience. Despite violent suppression this “Arab spring” has brought down the governments of Tunisia and Egypt. The women of Saudi Arabia have been so bold and audacious as to drive their own cars! (and some of these ladies have been flogged for such brazen behavior). An armed uprising backed by western military support recently succeeded in deposing Libyan strongman Muammar Gadhafi.

To what end? Is the uprising of the Arab people grounds for concern and anxiety, even alarm? Does the toppling of the established Middle Eastern order portend new trouble for the United States and Israel? Is a radical and violent form of Islam the real agenda? Even if the Arab demand for “democracy” is genuine, won’t the movement quickly be hijacked by the best organized political parties in the region: Islamists like Hamas, Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood – in other words, by people with the cruelest, narrowest understanding of God’s will? Is a global trend toward virulent anti-Semitism about to become all the more dangerous?

Our Torah portion this Rosh Hashanah morning, the Binding of Isaac, comes from the book of Genesis, chapter 22. Our story begins, “now it came to pass, after these things...” *va-y’chi acharei ha-d’varim ha-eleh* (Gen. 22:1) “*after these things*” is no mere formality, no simple “once upon a time.” Rather, “*after these things*” is biblical shorthand for:

“before Abraham put his younger son Isaac, one of the patriarchs of the Jewish nation, though a hellish ordeal (the story of our Torah portion this morning)... Abraham first put his older son Ishmael by Sarah’s handmaiden Hagar the Egyptian, the progenitor of the Arab nation, through a wholly different kind of ordeal.”

These two stories, the exile of Ishmael, Genesis 21, and the binding of Isaac, Genesis 22, are truly two different sides of one and the same story:

Isaac and Ishmael are half-brothers.

Just as Abraham is ordered to offer Isaac up for slaughter; so too, he is commanded to cast Ishmael and Hagar into the desert.

Abraham never explains himself to Ishmael, Hagar, Sarah, or Isaac.

Just as God hears Ishmael's and Hagar's despairing cry in the desert; so too, does god hear the groaning of the Israelites in slavery in Egypt.

Even the very name Ishmael, or "yishma-el," meaning "may God hear," contains within it the word sh'ma: as in sh'ma yisrael, "Hear, O Israel."

Our Torah's message that just as Isaac and Ishmael are both children of one father, a father who clung to his faith even in the most difficult times, so too, we descendants of Isaac and Ishmael, must remember that our Torah teaches that all people, are created in the image of God, that we must love our neighbors as ourselves, and that we must not do to them what we ourselves would find hateful.

Moreover, we are Temple Emanuel, committed to inclusion, universal love, and open welcome. We also affirm a sacred text of a different sort, our American Declaration of Independence. We believe it is the right of the people to replace their government if it is destructive of those inalienable rights given by our Creator: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is therefore *aleinu* -- incumbent upon us -- to welcome and support the Arab demand for democracy, a value supported by both Presidents Bush and Obama. Even though our questions are serious, even though our concerns are legitimate, even though our anxiety is grounded in very real circumstances; nevertheless, we must do everything in our power to ensure that the end result of these Arab uprisings will someday be a republican form of government.

Now, we must take seriously such blunt warnings as those made by Ephraim Inbar, professor of political science at Bar Ilan university and director of the begin-Sadat center for strategic studies, who says "the cultivation of a democratic political culture simply takes more time than some western pundits would like to believe." He continues, "The absence of an organized democratic alternative to dictatorship is a recipe for political instability." He concludes that there is greater potential for radicalization than democratization in the Middle East. Professor Inbar recommends that the United States, Israel and Western Europe invest in stronger military forces and prepare for a wide variety of contingencies, including large-scale war.

Especially given recent events on the Israeli-Egyptian border, riots against the Israeli embassy in Cairo, and the collapse of the formerly close relationships with Turkey and Jordan that Israel used to enjoy, it seems like sound advice. I could end here and now.

But this is Rosh ha-Shanah, also known as Yom Ha-Zikaron, the day of remembering. Remember last year, when we partnered with the Islamic foundation of greater Saint Louis to display *Besa*, the photography exhibit about the courageous Albanian Muslims who rescued Jews during the Holocaust?

Remember how we received media coverage from CNN's religion blog, the Houston Chronicle, even *Al-Hurra* Arabic TV news service?

It was not because of the photos – we were hardly the only venue to display the exhibition - it was because we reached out to the mosque and because we made it clear that we felt an obligation to speak up for Muslims at a time of anxiety, even persecution for them.

And remember: for two years now we have held distinguished, spirited, and fitting, even ground-breaking celebrations of the legacy of Rev. Martin Luther king, Jr. And his close friend and ally, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel. This legacy we celebrate stands for nonviolent social change, inspired by the Hebrew prophets and characterized by love and respect for the entire human race.

So how could we balk at the idea that Arabs, too, are entitled to be governed by their own consent?

If it were King preaching today, wouldn't he tell us that all the children of Ishmael and the children of Israel wear one single garment of destiny?

Wouldn't he admire those people in Syria who face not batons and glass bottles as the Egyptians did, but bullets?

Might King even say, "my Jewish brothers and sisters: you have been so proud for so long that Israel was 'the only democracy in the middle east.' would you now be upset that it is no longer the case?"

No, King would not be surprised by the Arab spring but only at the length and depth of the long, cold Arab winter of authoritarianism and corruption.

But King faced a very different adversary. We face the possibility of radical political takeover by violent religious extremists. Would taking king's advice be dangerously naïve?

None other than Natan Sharansky, winner of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, says otherwise.

Sharansky has been an impassioned advocate of democracy in the Arab world since the 1993 Oslo accords and is all the more so today. If Sharansky were here, he would remind us that no movement toward freedom has succeeded in the blink of an eye, without struggle, or without periods of time when all seemed lost. Sharansky would recall that for decades the West spent billions buying two things from cruel, corrupt, and autocratic Middle Eastern regimes: petroleum and political stability. We were aided and abetted via rationalization by political ease and moral relativism.

It is the Arab peoples themselves, willing to live in societies dominated by fear no longer, who have repudiated this arrangement.

The United States once came to the aid of democracy activists in the Soviet Union with generous foreign aid conditioned upon freedom of the **press**, of **religion**, of **association**, and upon the rule of law with civil reform. We can do so again to enable Arab nations to build active, open and free societies.

When it comes right down to it, we all know that democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others. Real democracies do not invade or destabilize one another. Let Israel deal generously with its Palestinian neighbors; let it reach out to make the code of its vibrant democracy an open-source code. Israel could be newly relevant in its new reality. And it would find the outrage slowly subsiding. Treaties struck with democratic regimes will prove more enduring and valuable than those struck with authoritarians; and friendships with the peoples of the region to be finally, a real possibility.

From the depths of that fetid jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, King concluded his letter, “but even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future...we will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.”

Shall we despair about the future? Are Islamic militants smirking? Or are they trembling because they know that the sacred heritage of liberty and the eternal will of God is also embodied in the echoing demands of the Arab street?

Will we, who once were strangers in the land of Egypt, really turn our back on the Egyptians of today?

Vibrant democracy in the Arab world seems naïve, a dream. Yet Dr. King’s and Natan Sharansky’s dreams came true. Why not this one?

From the Mediterranean breezes of Tunisia, to the scorching sands of Libya, to the pyramids of Egypt, to the sunbaked clay towers of Yemen, to the swirling markets of Syria – let freedom ring.

May democracy prevail, bringing with it peace at last to the world and especially peace at last to the children of Israel and the children of Ishmael. Not an obnoxious negative peace based on the absence of tension, nor the false “stability” provided by hated regimes that rest upon the slippery petroleum jelly of one-party or one-man rule – but a peace that rests on the granite bedrock of consent by the governed; peace that follows simply from the presence of justice.

So may it be God’s will.