Sharansky: Identity, solidarity source of strength

By Sharon Wisch-Ray

When Jews remain silent in the face of antisemitism, Natan Sharansky says, history has shown what can happen.

"When Jews are silent, it only encourages our enemies to attack us more aggressively," Sharansky told the Texas Jewish Post in an email interview ahead of his Oct. 14 appearance at the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum.

Sharansky learned that lesson firsthand as a Soviet refusenik and dissident, imprisoned for nine years in the Soviet gulag after fighting for the right of Soviet Jews to immigrate to Israel.

Sharansky said Soviet authorities sought to isolate Jews from both Israel and the broader Jewish people, believing the United States would be reluctant to jeopardize its relationship with the Soviet Union by intervening on their behalf.

Instead, Jews around the world mobilized.

"It was the powerful movement of solidarity of world Jewry with Soviet Jews that gave us tremendous support and encouragement and influenced American policy," Sharansky said.

Some Jewish organizations had feared that the struggle could damage their relationship with the U.S. government, he said. The opposite happened.

"In fact, the Jewish community became more respected in the United States because of this struggle," Sharansky said. "The same will be true of the struggle against antisemitism today."

Sharansky, 78, will speak as part of the Museum's Funk Family Upstander Speaker Series, which highlights individuals and



organizations that stand up for human rights.

His visit comes three years after the Hamas-led Oct. 7 terrorist assault on Israel, when some 1,200 people were killed and 251 were taken hostage. The attack marked the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust and has been followed by a surge in antisemitism and hostility toward Israel around the world.

The relationship between Israel and Jews around the world has been a recurring theme in Sharansky's life. More than two decades after arriving in Israel as a freed Soviet refusenik, he became chairman of The Jewish Agency for Israel, serving from 2009 to 2018 and leading an organization focused on strengthening connections between Israel and world Jewry.

"What happened on October 7 — and, no less importantly, what happened on October 8 — showed that anti-Zionism and antisemitism are two expressions of the same hatred," he said.

Sharansky said the period also contributed to "a renewed feeling of Jewish solidarity and a shared fate."

"It also showed that you cannot succeed in the fight against antisemitism by leaving Israel out of that struggle," he said.

Sharansky has long described antisemitism through what he calls the "three Ds": demonization, double standards and delegitimization.

"For centuries, antisemitism meant demonization of Jews, double standards applied to Jews and the delegitimization of Jews in the countries where they lived," he said. "The new antisemitism uses these same three tools against the Jewish state."

"What we should have learned is that when antisemitism is directed against one group of Jews, it inevitably threatens all of us."

For younger Jews, Sharansky said a strong Jewish identity needs to begin long before they arrive on a college campus.

"First of all, they have to grow up with a sense of pride in belonging to the Jewish people," he said. "That can come only through a connection to Jewish history, the Jewish people and the Jewish state. And it has to start in the family and at school."

When parents complain to him that their children have gone to an American university and begun distancing themselves from their Jewish identities, Sharansky responds with a question.

"How deep was their connection to their Jewishness when they entered the university?"

As an example of young Jews publicly embracing that identity, Sharansky pointed to Jewish students at Columbia University who asserted their Zionist identities in the 2024 open letter "In Our Name."

He also believes young Jews need to understand the significance of Israel's existence.

"The other important point is to remind young Jews, in different ways, how helpless Jews were before the existence of the State of Israel."

Asked what he hopes people will take away from his Dallas appearance, Sharansky returned to the importance of Jewish identity.

"Young Jews in America are always seeking tikkun olam — to make our world a better place," he said. "One should know — even a small change of the world demands a lot of strength and energy. And there is no greater source of strength than your identity, connection to your history, your people and Israel."

Sharansky was released from Soviet imprisonment in 1986 following an international campaign for his freedom and immediately immigrated to Israel. He later founded the Yisrael B'Aliyah political party and served in four Israeli governments, including as deputy prime minister.

He is a recipient of the Israel Prize, the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal and currently chairs the Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy.

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