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Lech Lecha: *Ivri*

In 1978, Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky was sentenced on trumped-up charges for treason and espionage by the Russian court. Facing the threat of execution or long-term imprisonment, Sharansky refused to bend. His defiant, final statement in the Soviet court was a message of resistance and faith, addressed to his wife Avital and the world: “I am happy that I lived honorably, at peace with my conscience. I never compromised my soul, even under the threat of death... To the court I have nothing to say. To my wife and the Jewish people I say, *Next year in Jerusalem.*”

After nine years isolated and alone in prison, on an icy winter day in 1986, Sharansky was released in a prisoner exchange at Berlin’s Glienicke Bridge. Sharansky slowly climbed out of the car, closed the door behind him and began to walk.

Suddenly, he began to stagger; he zigged a step or two to the left before starting forward again. A few more steps and he zagged back toward the right. Left, right, zig, zag....

The American officials waiting to receive him on the other side watched with concern and disbelief. Was Sharansky drugged, injured or too traumatized to walk normally?

When he reached the western bank of

the river, Sharansky smiled and assured the American officers that he was fine, and explained: his KGB tormentors had instructed him to get out of the car and “walk straight across”, directly to the other side of the bridge. After so many long and painful years, in his first steps toward freedom, zig-zagging across the bridge was his last act of holy defiance. There was no way he was going to start following their orders now!

Our sedra chronicles the revolutionary journey undertaken by our great-grandparents, Avraham and Sarah. Every step of the way provides insight and moral instruction for us:

וַיֵּלֶךְ לְמַסְעָיו מִנֶּגֶב וְעַד־בֵּית־אֵל עַד־הַמְּקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה שָׁם אָהֳלָה בְּתַחֲלָה...
.....

“And he went on his journeys, from the south and until Beit El, until the place where his tent had been previously...”(13:3)

Rashi tells us that when Avraham returned to Eretz Canaan from Egypt, he lodged in the same *achsanya*, inn, that he had stayed at when traveling down to Egypt. This, Rashi explains — based on the Gemara (*Arachin*, 16b) — is to לְמַדָּךְ אָרְץ, “teach us the appropriate way to act.” For שְׁלֵא יִשְׁנָה אָדָם מֵאֲכָסְנָיָא שְׁלוֹ, “Despite the fact that Avraham Avinu came on his return trip a wealthier and more

influential man than he was on the first part of the journey, he showed respect for those who provided for him before he achieved fame and success along the way.

וילך למסעיו, “Avraham went on *his* journeys”...via the same routes he had taken before. This seemingly mundane detail is *limesedcha*, “to teach us” how to conduct ourselves, how to treat others, how to behave in a Jewish way. Reb Nosson Breslover explains that this is an example of מעשה לבנים, אבות סימן לבנים, “the actions of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are models for their children,” for every one of us must go through all the ten trials of Avraham Avinu and walk the paths of our *Avos* and *Imahos* before us (*Likutei Halachos*, Onah 3:1). Indeed, all of the journeys, travails, tests and experiences detailed in Torah are for the purpose of *limesedcha*, “to teach us”.

Yechezkel haNavi recalls the extensive and extraordinary accomplishments of Avraham Avinu, accentuated by the fact that אחד היה אברהם, “Avraham was *echad*, one man” (33:24). Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (*Likutei Mohara*”n, *hashmata*) explains why Avraham is called *echad*: he served God without being concerned for other people’s opinions. Unfazed by cultural norms and those who opposed his

way of life, Avraham was *echad*, a *yachid*, ‘individual’, a nonconformist who did not compare himself to others. He served God without ‘looking over his shoulder’. Furthermore, raised in an idolatrous home, Avraham Avinu did not follow their orders, rather he confidently blazed an original path in service of Hashem. Nor was he held back by doubts, demons or negative memories from his past.

According to the *Midrash*, our Zeidy is called אברהם העברי, Avraham *haIvri*, meaning ‘the one who is on the other side’, or ‘who stands opposite’: “The whole world stood on one side and he stood on the other.” This is the essence not only of Avraham Avinu, but also of us, heirs to his spiritual legacy. On one side, the world goes in its *derech*, and we, on the other side, if need be, walk in ours.

The image of Natan Sharansky, the released prisoner of conscience, criss-crossing the bridge dividing East from West is one of the enduring, iconic moments marking the eventual fall of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War. It is also a quintessentially Jewish moment, a reminder, לימדך, to teach us to zig-zag across the bridge toward a life of freedom, to blaze our own path, to forging an authentic identity as modern day *Ivri*. May we move forward with faith, joy, confidence and defiance... And no matter what the world may think, may we affirm, “Next year in Yerushalayim.” ■



ת"ב

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