

Before Yom Kippur I asked our community the question: “Who was your childhood hero and why?”

Here is a sampling of the answers I received:

- A third grade teacher
- A father (x2)
- Golda Meir (x2)
- Rabbi Kerman
- Superman
- Luke Skywalker
- The astronauts who landed on the moon
- Yogi Berra
- Samson

I most especially appreciated the wonderful anecdotes that with the replies. These were the people, as Judith Bluestone wrote, “spoke to me of all the possibilities in the world. Let your imagination run wild. Your dreams may come true.” Or, in the words of Janice Sufrin, showed us “determination in the face of adversity” and, helped us “recognize unexpected opportunities.”

In this regard, there was one person who stands out for me as a childhood hero, someone who no doubt has also been the hero for others in the room today. He was someone with an indomitable will, Moses like strength, who took on a modern day Pharaoh and was able to win freedom not just for himself, but for our people; a symbol of human survival.

Anatoly Borisovich Shcharansky or as we know him today Natan Sharansky.

For nine years he lingered in a Russian prison, much of it in solitary confinement. Ostensibly, he was there on charges of treason, but he was really there because he was *refusenik*, a Russian Jew who applied for an exit visa and was refused.

The crusade to free him was led by his wife Avital, who had obtained a visa to Israel only a week after they had been married. Her cries of anguish crossed oceans, her tears spilling into our hearts of the entire American Jewish

community. And, for her, and for all of the oppressed Jews of Russia we led rallies and marches, went on missions bringing books and Yiddishkeit, and celebrated “twin” Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations.

When the rabbis ask the question in Pirke Avot/Ethics of Our Fathers: Aizehu Gibbur: Who is a Hero? The answer given is “Mi She HaKovesh et Yetzaro, “one who conquers his or her own impulses.”

Has anyone in our history controlled his impulses more than Natan Sharansky?

This is a man who played chess in solitary confinement. He played chess without pieces, without a board. He played chess only in his head.

This is a man who learned Hebrew from the book of Psalms Avital managed to smuggle into him during his incarceration. He refused to eat anytime they took it away from him; reading, slowly, methodically every day until he knew the language.

This is a man who was so determined to light a menorah on Hanukah after the guards confiscated it for being “state property,” that he went on a hunger strike. It was the sixth night of Hanukah when this happened, so there seemed to be little chance of his getting it back. But, sure enough, on the last night the head of the prison came to see him. Instead of returning his menorah, the captain took out a candle and promptly cut it into eight sections. Sharansky proceeded to light each of these small candle pieces, adding to the end of his prayer the words in Hebrew, “and may the day come when all our enemies, who today are planning our destruction, will stand before us and hear our prayers and say 'Amen.’” To which his adversary promptly replied, “Amen.”

This is a man who when finally released in February of 1986 was told by the guards to walk in a straight line. He refused, weaving his way to freedom.

And, this is a man, who refused to let his stand in Soviet prison be the end of his story, becoming an author, a politician, and now the head of the Sochnut, the Jewish Agency for Israel.

This summer I met Natan Sharansky. He came to speak to our Israel Mission on the last day of our tour. A little man, no more than five feet, he walks with a bounce in his step, and a joyful smile on his face. A few of the Russian Americans in our group came over to take pictures. And, then, one of the group leaders introduced him with a long list of his many accomplishments. To which he replied, “you forgot the main one – I am a father of two and a grandfather of two.”

The words he offered us, which were about the rising anti-Semitism in places like the Ukraine and France, and the flight of French Jews to Israel, were less important to me than that first statement: “a father of two, a grandfather of two.”

Even after everything he had gone through, nine years of his life gone in a second, he could still appreciate what was important. I am reminded of stories of my wife’s maternal grandfather, Papa Jack, who even after losing most of his family in the Holocaust, always said “every day is a blessing.”

A companion text to Pirke Avot, called Avot D’Rabbi Natan, also has a discussion about who is a hero, concluding with the answer: “mi she oseh sonah ohavo,” which is usually translated, “one who turns his enemy into a friend.” I would translate it instead, “one who turns his or her hatred into love.”

In looking back during a recent interview with an American magazine Sharansky said: “Twenty years have passed; the KGB doesn't exist, the Soviet Union doesn't exist, communism doesn't exist, the Warsaw Bloc doesn't exist, and 200 million people in that big prison which was called the Soviet Union are enjoying their freedom, and all the world is more secure. That shows the real power of inner freedom, the real power of the people when they unite their energy, which they take from inner freedom, the base of which is identity, national identity, religious identity, a feeling of connection and solidarity of free people.”

Can you believe it has been twenty years? We forget how difficult the struggle to save Soviet Jewry, how important it was, not only to our Jewish community, but to the world.

Journalist Gal Beckerman, in his book, *When They Come For Us We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle for Soviet Jewry*, writes that the fight to save Soviet Jewry not only “taught American Jews how to lobby,” and “flex their political muscle,” discovering the “strident voice they had never been comfortable using,” but it actually changed world history, keeping the Soviet Union “on the moral defensive in the eyes of the world” and, beginning the process that would eventually lead to its downfall.

We did that. Together. Soviet Jews, American Jews, Israeli Jews, World Jewry, all working together. (Well, maybe not in full agreement, as Sharansky reminded our group this summer, but still with a unified purpose.)

This year, actually marks the fiftieth anniversary of the American side of the story. In 1964, at the peak of the civil rights movement and the beginning of the Vietnam era, a British Ex-pat named Jacob Birnbaum set up shop in Washington Heights to begin to instigate for the rights of Jews living in the USSR, or Soviet Union. Birnbaum’s father and grandfather were experts in Eastern European Jewry, and Birnbaum wanted to take that knowledge to practical use.

While still living in England he had been heavily involved in assisting Holocaust survivors, and had even flown to Jerusalem in 1961 to witness the Eichman trial in person. Now, as the American Jewish community was just becoming aware of the persecution of Jews in the USSR, Birnbaum was ready to pounce. He created the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), raising awareness by passing out buttons with a shofar and the simple words “Save Soviet Jewry.”

Amazingly with limited resources and few people involved, Birnbaum created one of the most successful, and least appreciated social movements of our time. Jacob Birnbaum died this April at the age of 87. And, we, too, are indebted to him. He also was a hero.

The truth is, I too had forgotten about this very important part of our history. Jewish immigration to America, came in a flood from the early 1880s when Emma Lazarus penned the words, emblazoned on the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Millions of our brethren fleeing persecution came to America, doubling, tripling, and quadrupling the size of the Jewish community.

All the greenhorns, arriving on the East Side, and then moving to the West. Forming neighborhood institutions like Steinhart’s Kosher Deli, Lester’s, Silverbergs, Kaufman’s Bakery, all pictured in Chana Kotzin’s wonderful pictorial history of Jewish Buffalo. And, the same was true in Philadelphia, where I am from, and in every Jewish community in America; an immigration cycle that spanned all the way into the 1990s, and then suddenly stopped.

Institutions like HIAS and Jewish Family Service led the way. Today, HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and Jewish Family Services deal almost exclusively with non-Jewish refugees. I did not realize the extent of the change in our community until a recent conversation I had with a European Jew hoping to move to America. In sitting with him, I realized the Jewish community no longer had a single agency that could help make his dream a possibility.

But, it was while officiating at a wedding ceremony of a Russian Jew who had come to America as a child that I fully understood what a gift the Russian Jewish immigrants had been for our community. Under the chuppah at the Buffalo Country Club, was the groom, a Russian immigrant, handsome, and dashing, fully Americanized, standing with his beloved.

To all the Russian Jews here, I will never fully understand what you have been through to make it to Buffalo, but I am so very proud to have you as part of our community. Even after all these years, we are all proud you are here with us.

I am proud every time I hear a Russian Jewish success story in the news: Mila Kunis (who just had a baby girl with Ashton Kutcher) or the singer/song writer Regina Spektor of “Orange is the New Black” fame. I am proud every

time I hear one of our own Russian Jewish community members, doing well, happy here in a country that is now fully their own. We kvell with you!!!

“Aizehu Gibbur – Who is a Hero? One who turns his or her hatred into love.”

Natan Sharansky has always represented for me the story of the Jewish immigrant, overcoming persecution, building a new life either here or in Israel. He and Avital are demonstrations of how hardy we are. As we say on Passover, “In every generation they rise up to destroy us, and the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-God, rescues us from their hands.”

So, many times, when meeting with families after the death of their loved one, I hear the stories. The incredible strength it took to leave a country of origin, to immigrate to a new country, to learn a new language, to make a new life.

Here are just a few that I have compiled from the past year:

Sam and Mark Noznisky, who, in 1956, were fleeing another country on the other side of the world. Their beloved Cuba was in trouble, with Castroitis quickly taking over. Their mother Rachel, who had escaped Russia in the 1920s, understood right away what was happening. “We’re going to America,” she told the boys, giving them only a week to prepare. Together with their brother Jerry, they got out, finding safety here in Buffalo.

Mirel Puius, who, together with his wife Melania, fled Romania one morning, without even packing.

Holocaust survivors like Greta Bauer, who had to flee her house in Viena with her five-year-old son Ulriech, hiding in the field from the Nazis.

Robert Klein, who stood line with his family, having to watch his father go one direction to the work camps, while he and his mother went to the ghettos.

And, Betri Arywitz, who was on the kinder transport to Great Britain during the war.

“Aizehu Gibbur? Who is a hero?”

These are my heroes; people who crawled and scratched their way to be able to celebrate their religion in freedom, to live in peace.

And, on Yom Kippur, their lights surround us. Feel the warmth of their memorial plaques; every one of them lit.

These are the people who built Temple Beth Am, who built Temple Sinai, who built Congregation Shir Shalom, who built Jewish Buffalo, who built Buffalo, who built America.

Think of them later today when we conduct our Yizkor service. Think of them anytime you feel lost and are in need of strength. Zichronam L'Vrachah, May their memory be always for a blessing.

An easy fast. G'Mar Chatimah Tovah. May you be written and sealed in the book of life.