YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# **SEFER Tehillim**

**Lecture 23: PSALM 30 -**

**"I will extol you, O Lord, for you have lifted me up"**

**(part I)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

**I. THE BOOK OF *TEHILLIM*, PSALM 30, AND THE IMPRISONMENT OF NATAN SHARANSKY**

In Natan Sharansky's unforgettable book, "Fear No Evil,"[[1]](#footnote-1) the book of *Tehilim* plays an important role in the account of the difficult years of his imprisonment until his release. This is already evident in the title of the book and in the citation from *Tehilim* 23 appearing at the very beginning: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me."

When I speak of "the book of *Tehilim*," I refer not only to the book's contents, i.e., the psalms themselves, but to a real miniature edition of *Tehilim* that accompanied Sharansky throughout those nine hard years.

This is the story of the book: Natan (Anatoly) Sharansky requested permission to leave the Soviet Union and immigrate to Israel in 1973. About a year later he married Avital, who already had an exit visa that was valid until the day after their wedding. Avital took advantage of the opportunity and left for Israel, the young couple hoping that Natan would speedily be granted a visa and that they would soon be reunited in Israel. For three years Natan fought for his right to leave the Soviet Union, and during that period he became a major activist in the refusenik and human rights movements in the Soviet Union.

After three years of open and public struggle, Sharansky was arrested by the KGB, found guilty of espionage and treason, and sentenced to 13 years of imprisonment. Several days prior to his arrest, Natan received a letter from his wife Avital (the letter was delivered by way of a tourist), which contained a small book of *Tehilim*: "I've had this little book a long time,” she wrote, “I feel it's time to send it to you."[[2]](#footnote-2)

Sharansky's book of *Tehilim* was confiscated by the KGB at the time of his interrogation, and afterwards it was kept in a storeroom in the prison in which he was incarcerated. Three years following his arrest, and after repeated requests to receive his "collection of Jewish folk songs,"[[3]](#footnote-3) the book was returned to Sharansky. A day after receiving it, Sharanksy was informed by way of a telegram sent to his prison that his father had died, and he was overcome by shock and profound grief:

I didn't want to do anything on the day I received the telegram, nor on the following day, but then I remembered the psalm book. I opened it and immediately decided that I must read all 150 of the Psalms – not sometime in the future, but starting today.

The print was very tiny and my eyes began to hurt[[4]](#footnote-4)… I began to copy the Psalms in large letters onto a sheet of paper, which took at least an hour for each one. After giving my eyes a long rest, I began translating.

Though he lacked systematic knowledge of the Hebrew language,[[5]](#footnote-5) Sharansky managed with great effort to decipher the meaning of the psalms of *Tehilim*:

I can't say that I understood the Psalms completely, but I sensed their spirit and felt both the joy and the suffering of King David, their author… I especially liked Psalm 23: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for You are with me…." And Psalm 27 was a particular comfort to me: "Do not forsake me, do not abandon me, O God, my deliverer. Though my father and mother abandon me, the Lord will take me in…"

For forty days I copied the Psalms and read them. For one thing, it was intense work, which left me almost no time for sad thoughts and painful recollections. For another, the project helped me study Hebrew and fill one of the many gaps in my Jewish education. Finally, through reading these Psalms, I thought continually about Papa, Mama, and Avital, about the past and the future, and about the fate of our family… My feelings of grief and loss were gradually replaced by sweet sorrow and fond hopes.

A few months later Mama wrote to seek my advice about the inscription on Papa's gravestone. Not surprisingly, I turned to the Psalms – in particular, to Psalm 25, with its prophetic reference to Israel, to my father, and to his imprisoned but hopeful son. The verse read, "His soul will rest in peace, for his seed shall inherit the Land."

Later that same year, Sharansky was transferred from his prison to a work camp, but owing to his unwillingness to cooperate with the KGB, he was moved to the camp's prison. About a year after the book of *Tehilim* that he had received from his wife Avital had been returned to him, it was once again taken away while he was in the work camp's prison.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In reply to my protests a representative appeared… who said, "It is the duty of the state to guard you in prison from harmful influences, so your religious literature has been confiscated with our consent."

Sharansky proclaimed a work strike until his book of *Tehilim* would be returned to him. As punishment, he was sent to a punishment cell in exceedingly difficult conditions for fifteen days, and every time that he refused to go back to work before his book of *Tehilim* was returned to him, he was sent back for another fifteen days. In this way his time in the punishment cell continued for about 100 consecutive days, and his health deteriorated to such an extent that his jailers were forced to admit him into the infirmary. When his health showed a slight improvement, he was returned to the punishment cell, where he stayed for another 86 days. He was then judged for his "crimes" in the work camp, and sentenced to three years of incarceration in the prison from which he had been taken to the camp, and there his book of *Tehilim* was finally returned to him.[[7]](#footnote-7)

After he was back in prison, he embarked on a hunger strike, because the prison authorities refused to allow him to send and receive letters to and from his family.[[8]](#footnote-8) After 110 days on his hunger strike, during which Sharansky was forcibly fed by the prison authorities, and after he had put his life in danger, the prison authorities gave in and renewed the mail connection between him and his mother. When he finally received a letter from his mother, Sharansky read it and knew that he was not to die:

Slowly, the realization that I would live took possession of me – my head, my heart, my entire body. The weight of impending death was leaving me… I took my Psalm book and for days on end, with the photographs of my dear ones in front of me, I recited all one hundred and fifty of King David's Psalms, syllable by syllable.

The enormous importance of the book of *Tehilim* for the courageous stand taken by Sharansky during the difficult years of his imprisonment and the great impact that the book had upon him, are described in other places in his book as well.[[9]](#footnote-9) Let us move now to the amazing chapter in which he recounts his surprise release from prison, nine years after his arrest, and his expulsion from the Soviet Union.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Twice during the course of his release, Sharansky feared that his book of *Tehilim* had been taken away from him, not to be returned. Owing to these concerns he refused to cooperate with his escorts and continue on the path to freedom before his book was returned to him. And of course, he "won" on these occasions as well.[[11]](#footnote-11)

On the flight from Moscow that was to bring Sharansky to East Berlin, the person in charge of the flight appeared suddenly from behind a curtain and announced in a solemn voice:[[12]](#footnote-12)

Sharansky, Anatoly Borisovich. I am authorized to declare to you that by order of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, for conduct unworthy of a Soviet citizen, you have been stripped of Soviet citizenship and as an American spy you are being expelled from the Soviet Union.

Sharansky responded with a counter-declaration, in which he denied being an American spy, and then:

I sat down with the sound of fanfare in my ears. I knew all along that this day had to come. **And now I took the Psalm book and turned to Psalm 30, which I had long ago decided to recite at the moment of my release.** "A song of David at the dedication of a house," it began. Now I was reading these words en route to my own house in Jerusalem!

At this point in the book, Psalm 30 appears, transcribed in short lines as a poem of thanksgiving, the psalm that Sharansky deemed most appropriate for this exalted moment.[[13]](#footnote-13)

(To be continued.)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil: The Classic Memoir of One Man's Triumph over a Police State*, translated by Stefani Hoffman. The references below are to the Public Affairs Edition, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The events related here appear on pp. 266-270 of the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sharansky used this definition of the book of *Tehilim* in an attempt to hide its religious nature from his jailers, because "religious literature" was forbidden to prisoners. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The severe conditions of his imprisonment and the lack of sunlight caused Sharansky serious eye problems, to the point that he had difficulty reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sharanky's knowledge of Hebrew was very elementary, and while in prison there was no chance whatsoever of obtaining books to improve it. Sharansky therefore requested and even received books for the study of Arabic, in the hope that knowledge of Arabic would help him understand Hebrew. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. P. 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. P. 318. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Chapter 22, "Hunger Strike," pp. 330-348. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See p. 356; p. 363; p. 368. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Chapter 25, pp. 394-411. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. P. 396 and p. 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. P. 403-404. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sharanksky adds there (p. 305): "I continued reading one triumphant psalm after another. 'A song of ascents. When the Lord brought back the exiles who returned to Zion, we were like dreamers.' Yes, exactly like dreamers."

    So too later on the road to freedom, the book of *Tehilim* did not leave his hand (p. 408): "It was clear that I couldn't sleep [= in a villa in East Germany, where he was held the last night prior to his release]… I got up and didn't lie down again… Tomorrow – no, today! – I'll be free. Today I'll meet Avital. Today we'll fly to Israel. I turned on the light and started reading the Psalms."

    Later, when he arrived in Jerusalem immediately following his landing in Israel, and was brought to the Western Wall, the book of *Tehilim* once again makes an appearance, as the motto concluding that great drama (p. 411): "Holding our Psalm book in my hand, I kissed the wall and said, '*Barukh matir asirim.'* Blessed is He who liberates the imprisoned." [↑](#footnote-ref-13)