Defending Identity: Its Indispensable Role in Protecting Democracy

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In a celebrated essay written nearly 40 years ago, Isaiah Berlin invoked Schiller's image of the 'bent twig' to portray the phenomenon of nationalism as a people's aggressive response to persecution and humiliation – 'an inflamed condition of national consciousness.' But nationalism, he acknowledged, does have a number of positive characteristics, crediting another German poet/philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder, with helping nationalism emerge in the 18th century as a coherent doctrine by arguing that every human community has 'its own unique shape and pattern.' Herder's thinking, according to Berlin, is dominated by a conviction that 'among the basic needs of men, as elemental as that for food or procreation or communication, is the need to belong to a group.' [1]

Nationalism would be challenged by 19th century doctrines of liberal rationalism propagated by those Berlin described as 'unswerving champions of reason, who rejected faith in tradition, intuition, transcendent sources of authority as mere smokescreens to justify irrationality, ignorance, bias, fear of the truth.' [2] Today, nationalism and close relatives such as ethnic and cultural solidarity are frequently associated with bigotry, violence, and even genocide. And not without foundation; in the past two decades alone, the world has witnessed the horrors of Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, and Chechnya, not to mention 9/11, the violent tribal warfare last year in Kenya, the ongoing genocide in Darfur, and episodes of sectarian violence in parts of Africa and Asia. Those who seek to establish international standards of human rights argue that we must first break down the barriers that separate ethnic, religious, and even national groupings.

This point of view has had particular resonance among political and intellectual elites. As Samuel Huntington wrote in 2004, 'The moralistic approach [to international relations] decries patriotism and nationalism as evil forces and argues that international law, institutions, regimes, and norms are morally superior to those of individual nations.' [3]

That the values of freedom and identity are directly, and not inversely, related, is the thesis of a new book by Natan Sharansky, the former Soviet dissident and Israeli politician. In fact, he argues, the two 'stand on the same side of a great moral divide and nothing I have seen or experienced since has convinced me otherwise.' [4]

Sharansky has always been a contrarian, from his days as a Soviet dissident who would later upset many of his compatriots by becoming a refusenik seeking to emigrate to Israel, to his 2005 book *The Case for Democracy* which, although promoted by the Bush White House, was greeted with scepticism in his adopted country. In arguing that a hostile democracy in the Middle East is preferable to a less antagonistic dictatorship, Sharansky was once again slicing against the grain of accepted opinion, leading him to complain that his fellow countrymen 'see me as a lunatic from a Soviet prison, disconnected from the harsh realities of the [region].' [5]

To promote the virtue of ethnic, national, and religious identity in the year 2008 will strike many as similarly perverse. In fact, political scientists who address the subject of ethnic nationalism almost always do so with an eye toward creating structures and political arrangements that will mitigate its negative impact, which is simply assumed. Still, there are important exceptions.

Asserting that 'democracy never exists without nationalism,' the Georgian political philosopher Ghia Nodia points out that:

> Democracy has always emerged in distinct communities; there is no record anywhere of free, unconnected, and calculating individuals coming together spontaneously to form a democratic social contract *ex nihilo*. Whether we like it or not, nationalism is the historical force that has provided the political units for democratic government. [6]

In a July 2008 article in the *Journal of Democracy* that looks at the evolution of post-Soviet states, Mark R. Beissenger links ethno-nationalism to the rise of democratisation movements that have the capability to mobilise large numbers of followers to spark democratic change or to help weather regime repression. 'A democracy movement that is all flag and no army,' he contends, 'is unlikely to win. Nationalism can do much to provide the army.' [7]

Sharansky is not simply concerned with the dilution of identity; he is even more troubled by its replacement in the West with the post-modern values of post-nationalism and multi-culturalism, a particularly dangerous trend in a world where democratic values are under siege. Maintaining a strong national identity, Sharansky argues, is the only serious way to protect a democratic culture.

Sharansky recalls his earliest encounter with the conflict between universal human rights and the particularistic claims of national and religious identity. His close identification with the 'refusenik' movement of Soviet Jews and their right to immigrate to Israel during the 1970s, an identification that would eventually land him in the Gulag for nine years, was met with suspicion by his colleagues in the Helsinki Watch group, which had been established to monitor Soviet violations of the Helsinki accords on human rights. For their part, many of the refuseniks as well as Israeli officials involved in delicate negotiations to allow Jews to emigrate were concerned that Sharansky's dissident activities would jeopardise their cause in 'the naïve belief that the KGB was ready to tolerate the struggle for immigration but not ready to tolerate the struggle to fundamentally change the regime.' [8]

Sharansky was convinced that the values of universal human rights, grounded in his role as a dissident, and identity, rooted in his Jewish affiliation, were allies in the struggle against totalitarianism. But the suspicions he encountered from both human rights advocates on the one hand and pro-immigration activists on the other foreshadowed a mutual antagonism between 'universalists' and 'particularists' that would only become exacerbated following the Soviet period. And, though not unmindful of its potential dangers, it is Sharansky's objective to convince the advocates of freedom that they should welcome the single force in the world (i.e., identity) that can strengthen their cause by imbuing it with a higher purpose.

Today, throughout Europe and in many quarters in the United States, national identity is on the defensive. In reaction to centuries of war and bloody ethnic conflict, a culture has developed that questions the value of nationhood. Sharansky offers the example of John Lennon's vision in his song *Imagine*, in which he longs for a world without religions or nations, a 'brotherhood of man' in which there will be 'nothing to kill or die for.' (Barack Obama echoed this sentiment in his July speech in Berlin in which he exhorted, 'The walls between the races and tribes, natives and immigrants, Christian and Muslim and Jew cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down.')

While Lennon's vision gains support among western elites, it is rejected and even ridiculed by freedom's enemies. In contrast to ambiguous ideals of transnational brotherhood, authoritarian regimes successfully mobilise nationalist chauvinism while jihadist and other extremist movements provide their adherents precisely the sense of purpose that makes them such a formidable threat to the values of freedom and democracy. 'Without a similar strength of purpose and identity,' Sharansky argues, 'the free world will not long be able to repel the assault against it.' [9]

What makes identity such a formidable force? For one thing, as Edmund Burke pointed out, being part of a community connects the generations to one another, provides a greater appreciation of one's own values and therefore the wherewithal to defend them. By connecting with others In a more profound way, as Sharansky first learned during his time in the Gulag, bonds of solidarity develop that can enlarge an individual's vision beyond a selfish commitment to his immediate needs.

By contrast, democracy without identity can become superficial and meaningless:

> Whatever its form, identity offers a sense of life beyond the physical and material, beyond mere personal existence. It is this sense of a common world that stretches before and beyond the self, of belonging to something greater than the self, that gives strength not only to community but to the individual as well. [10]

In totalitarian regimes such as the Soviet Union, the state strives to destroy all forms of associational life to force the individual to face the state alone. During his time in prison, Sharansky was deeply attracted to classical tales of heroism with whose characters he began to feel a kinship even though they were from groups different from his own. Similarly, with fellow prisoners, 'the ones you could count on to be your allies in resisting the KGB were those who possessed strong identities, who shared this fear of not being worthy of the values of their communities, the histories they were born to, what I came to call the desire to be true to the divine image.' [11]

Although Sharansky's observations on identity are interesting and compelling, it is not the purpose of his extended essay to pursue its many ramifications. While his argument often lacks intellectual clarity – he never, for example, distinguishes between ethnicity and nationalism, or ethnic and civic nationalism, or, for that matter, acknowledges the problems that can arise when strong identities clash *within* nations – Sharansky is a man of action, not of philosophy, and as such, his

purpose is to address with a sense of urgency an audience that he believes has so taken its freedom for granted that it has divested itself of the most effective means of defending it.

He is relentless in his condemnation of those forces he regards as identity's inferior successors: post-nationalism, which advocates for a global society; post-modernism, which regards all cultural forms as morally equivalent; and multi-culturalism, which argues that society has no central focus, each group within it having an equal claim to authority. The appeal of these doctrines is their employment in the service of breaking down the barriers that different groups of people erect to separate themselves from one another.

The central problem, according to Sharansky, is that in denying the dominant culture within Western societies the right to sustain itself, the ideology of post-identity denies the very supremacy of democratic culture. The ideal society is thus reduced to a conglomeration of groups and individuals with no one's values having a claim to superiority. In the end, democracy is the loser. As Marc Plattner points out in *Democracy Without Borders*, the process of breaking down barriers between countries poses threats not only to authoritarian regimes but to democratic ones as well, adding, 'a borderless world is most unlikely to be a democratic one.' [12]

America's traditions of pluralism, Sharansky argues, in which a fundamental commitment to democracy forms the lynch pin among a diverse set of identity groups, has by and large avoided these pitfalls. Because European history, by contrast, has been characterised by an antagonism between democracy and identity, 'the choice presented in this struggle is seen as clear: one can embrace the particular or the universal; be a citizen of a nation-state or a citizen of the world; be a member of a particular faith devoted to his co-religionists or a humanist devoted to all mankind.' It is little wonder, therefore, that the weakening of national identity in Europe has led to a weakening of democratic institutions. [13]

Sharansky uses the example of the veil worn by devout Muslim women and its banning in the public square in many parts of Europe to contrast American and European approaches to identity. He is critical of the suppression of religious differences in the name of promoting a cosmopolitanism that values all cultures equally, while at the same time granting citizenship 'without requiring language skills, civic education, or even conformity to laws against polygamy.' [14] Sharansky favors the American perspective of encouraging diversity while linking those

individuals and groups committed to specific histories, traditions, and ways of life through 'a common commitment to democracy.' [15]

Sharansky may be right about the differences between American and European political culture, but the philosophy of post-nationalism is by no means confined to Europe. As Huntington has pointed out, national identity in the United States has taken a back seat among 'the more cosmopolitan elites' that elevate global economic and political concerns. [16] And in Sharansky's own country, Israel, those who accept the Zionist dream of creating and maintaining a Jewish state that recognises the rights of minorities have been put on the defensive by 'post-Zionists' who question the very legitimacy of a nation that has a distinctive Jewish identity.

Sharansky devotes two full chapters to the origins and current debates surrounding the Jewish state, which he believes provides a 'fascinating laboratory to test the tension between democracy and identity.' [17] While Zionism, the movement that gave rise to the modern state of Israel, was steeped in history, religion and culture, Israel's Eastern European (Ashkenazi) founders sought, through a socialist vision, to liberate the Jewish people from centuries of oppression. Sharansky believes that Israel has been strengthened by the addition of strong identities through the subsequent influxes of, first, the Sephardic Jews from Arab lands and later, the Jews who were ultimately allowed to emigrate from the Soviet Union. These (and other) identity groups were able, through a democratic political process, to challenge the universalist vision of Israel's founders.

By clouding the differences between democracy and tyranny, the cultural relativism of post-identity doctrines have had the poisonous effect of making human rights standards more difficult to apply universally. Sharansky exposes the double standards and hypocrisy of those who argue that while nationalism must be eliminated in the West, it is perfectly justified in weaker societies. He is particularly critical of international human rights groups that fail to distinguish between rights violations in open and closed societies, as if the abuses characteristic of authoritarian regimes are indistinguishable from deviations from democratic practices in democracies that are brought to light precisely because of their transparency. And he is scathing in his condemnation of post-Zionists who argue that Israel must be transformed into a secular state while at the same time preaching a self-determination for the Palestinians that would preserve their Arab identity 'as part of the surrounding Arab and Islamic world.' [18]

From their struggles against fascism in World War II to their triumph over totalitarianism in the Cold War, Western democracies have weathered systematic efforts to weaken and destroy them. Today they face new, but in many ways similar, challenges. Whether they can muster the strength of purpose to confront these challenges may well depend upon the extent to which they are willing to defend their core values in the face of those who would weaken them in the name of vague notions of peace and the 'brotherhood of man.' Natan Sharansky has made an eloquent argument on how best to defend and strengthen these values. We ignore it at our peril.

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Notes

[1] Berlin 1972, p. 16.

[2] Berlin, 1972, p. 25.

[3] Huntington 2004, p. 6.

[4] Sharansky 2008, p. xii.

[5] Benn 2005, p. 46.

[6] Nodia 1994, p. 6.

[7] Beissenger 2008, p. 94.

[8] Sharansky 2008, pp. xvi-xvii.

[9] Sharansky 2008, p. 3.

[10] Sharansky 2008, p. 5.

[11] Sharansky 2008, pp. 34-5.

[12] Plattner 2008, p. 80.

[13] Sharansky 2008, p. 109.

[14] Sharansky 2008, p.115.

[15] Sharansky 2008, p. 108.

[16] Huntington 2004, p. 5.

[17] Sharansky 2008, p. 145.

[18] Sharansky 2008, pp. 175-188.