



Natan Sharansky's Advice for Coronavirus Isolation

BY SARAH BREGER

Isolation, unfortunately, is nothing new to Natan Sharansky. The refusnik spent nine years in a Soviet prison and a significant portion of that time in solitary confinement where he famously played chess in his head to keep himself sane. While what the self-quarantined people are going through due to COVID-19 is clearly very different from his experience, Sharansky says that some wisdom he gained from his time in prison can be applied to today's situation. Over Skype from his home in Jerusalem, he shares with me three clear lessons drawn from his experiences.

Remind yourself again, again and again why you're there. Sharansky says it's vital to tell yourself you are in the midst of a very important struggle and everything depends on your behavior. People should remind themselves how important these restrictions are. "This is a kind of war in which each of us is a soldier," he says. "The results will depend on how we behave."

Don't plan or pin your hopes on things beyond your control. Sharansky says that if you focus on events or developments you cannot influence, when they don't come to pass you will become disappointed and even depressed. Instead, he says, "create your own world in which everything depends on you." For example, deciding to learn a language or read a set of books. These are things which you can plan and then put yourself on a timetable to try and achieve them. "Once you do, then you feel yourself stronger, you feel yourself capable."

Laugh. You have to be able to laugh at everything which is happening to you. In Israel, for example, there are currently thousands and thousands of jokes and cartoons and people making light of their situation. This helps keep everything in the right perspective. Sharansky says his other entertainment in prison was singing. "I could never sing in my life because people hated when I sang," he says. "So in my cell, I sang all the time in Hebrew. My prison guards thought I was crazy." He adds, "I don't propose people torture their relatives by singing if they don't know how to sing. Think about what it is you enjoyed before and now you have time to do."

In addition to these directives, Sharansky stresses that this is a time to remember the Jewish people's unique history and experience. We can be scattered all over the world and separated from one another but at the same time, we are one people connected to a larger history and purpose. "I got a lot of strength from this while I was in prison," he says. "but each of us can also continue doing in everyday life."

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