

THE JERUSALEM POST

The Road to Sovereignty was Paved with Clarity

Daniel Gordis

May 1, 2014

Yuli Kosharovsky died on the first day of Passover, the “season of our freedom.”

The man who had been *therefusenik* trapped behind the Iron Curtain for longer than anyone else, one of the most inspirational pillars of the former *refusenik* movement, died at the age of 72 when he fell from a tree he was trimming near his home in Beit Aryeh.

I first learned of Yuli Kosharovsky in 1982, when my wife and I were preparing to head to Russia to meet *withrefuseniks*. Kosharovsky was on the list of those we were to meet. His apartment, we were told, was a hotbed of “illegal” activity. Hebrew classes were conducted there, contacts were made, spirits were lifted. And his apartment was a veritable distribution center; we were told to leave the educational and religious materials we brought into the USSR with him, and he would get them wherever they needed to go.

Kosharovksy was arrested periodically, beaten occasionally. But he was also unstoppable; his life was the model of what happens when someone actually believes in something. He withstood the relentless pressure of the Soviets for a full 18 years, and when he was finally allowed to leave in 1989, immediately made Israel his home.

Shortly before we were to head to Kosharovsky’s apartment, we stopped at the first family on our list. We huddled in their tiny, freezing apartment; they offered us some fruit compote – they didn’t have anything else. We passed along the books we’d brought for them, keeping most for Kosharovsky, and then, ill-equipped as we were, tried to encourage them and to bolster their morale. That, after all, was our assignment.

We got to talking.

“When are you going to leave America and go to live in Israel?” they asked us.

Uh-oh. That wasn’t one of the questions for which we’d prepared. It would have been easy to lie and to say something like “in two more years, when we finish graduate school,” but somehow, lying to people in their condition – out of work, hungry, spied on, harassed, all because they had applied to leave the Soviet Union – felt unthinkable. But honesty didn’t work much better.

“We’re still thinking about it.”

“Thinking about what?” “About whether we’re going to move to Israel.”

It’s was bald-faced lie, and it failed miserably. Israel was nowhere in our plans. Elisheva would have gone in a second, but I’d been there for two interminable years as a kid, and as far as I was concerned, when my parents returned to the US it was as if my sentence had been commuted for good behavior. Were I stuck in that Moscow hell-hole, I’d go to Israel. But leave America for the Israel I’d narrowly escaped? No thanks.

And they could tell.

Now it was their turn to be incredulous. They didn’t say much, but we could both tell what they were thinking. “You, who have the option to go at any minute, just don’t want to? What does that mean? How could you not want to be there?” There was nothing I wanted to do less than talk about that; there was nothing I wanted more than to leave that apartment. After all, they’d written us off as phonies, it was clear, and even the freezing Moscow night air would be better than that. Not long thereafter, we were out of their apartment and back in the street.

Kosharovsky, like those *co-refuseniks* of his, had little patience for hypocrisy. When asked why he never became religious, he was said to have replied that nothing turned him off to religion more than watching observant American Jews pray three times daily for God to restore Jews to Zion – while they stayed right where they were in the United States. People either mean things, or they shouldn’t say them, he believed.

But it was more than simply meaning what one said. Kosharovsky’s life, and those of his fellow *refuseniks*, were also a reminder that there is, even in our complex world of infinite grays, an ongoing battle between genuine good and absolute evil. There were movements that were about freedom – of movement, of expression, of aspiration – and there were countries that sought to snuff that out. There were traditions that encouraged open thinking and transformative personal journeys, and there were cultures that feared intellectual rigor more than almost anything else. Soviet Jews had no need to pretend that totalitarianism was not evil, or to wonder for even a moment if their quest was utterly just. It was that clarity of moral thought that sustained them, that got them out, that got them home.

Theirs was a clearer world than the one that many today pretend to inhabit.

They did not deny the existence of grays, but grays did not mean that clarity could not be obtained. I wonder what Kosharovsky thought when he read about American Jews who believed that Israel ought to negotiate with Hamas.

I wonder what he made of Jews who focus their venom on the Jewish State for imperfections that pale in comparison with the horrors perpetrated by the Jews’ enemies; what did he make of their moral calculus? Would he even have dignified their position by calling it a moral calculus? Yom Ha’atzmaut is just days away. Kosharovsky was undoubtedly not blind to Israel’s many shortcomings, but I imagine that he would have celebrated unabashedly. Because he understood, I allow myself to think, that the depressingly intractable conflict with the Palestinians continues, bottom line, because as [Ari Shavit just put it this week](#), the Palestinian Godot is not about to come. He would have celebrated because it is precisely because we have a free press that we can focus on our shortcomings and that we have the hope of getting better; of those around us, that cannot be said.

He would have been overjoyed because the mere existence of the State of Israel and the presence in it of so many former Soviet Jews is a reminder to us that with belief coupled with courage, the weak can and will triumph, and justice can and eventually will overwhelm the power of evil.

Absent that sort of clarity, would we have the country whose (re)birth we will celebrate this week? I doubt it. Because clarity, when it is possible – and it is possible much more than many want to think – enables us to do what Jews have always done. It enables us to wait, because we know what we’re waiting for. Moral clarity enables us to hope, because we know that in our past, as well, the few have triumphed over the many, and the just have survived the wicked.

Moral clarity enables us to face the grim reality of the world around us, without pretense that things are not what they are, because we know that the only way to persevere is to do what Yuli Kosharovsky and many of his fellow Zionists did – to couple courage to a clear distinction between right and wrong, and to insist that it is evil, not justice, that in the end will have to fold.