In 2003, a poll of citizens in fifteen European countries revealed that Israel was Public Enemy Number One. Fully 59% of those questioned considered Israel the greatest threat to peace and security in the world. The United Nations Humans Rights Commission agreed, condemning Israel for violating human rights more often than all existing authoritarian regimes put together.

Natan Sharansky thinks he knows why. Staking "everything on cosmopolitanism," he claims, Europeans and other relativistic "post-nationalists" condemn ethnic and religious identity as a "poison that endangers our world." Their hostility to identity in general translates into antipathy for the Jew, the archetypal "other," who insists on being different, and for Israel, a Jewish State in a world that is moving - or should move—"beyond identity into a utopia" of individual rights, open frontiers, international law, and multi-ethnic, multi-cultural states.

In Defending Identity, Sharansky, a dissident, human rights activist, and political prisoner in the Soviet Union, who has served in the Cabinet in four governments since emigrating to Israel in 1986, argues that it is neither possible nor desirable to remove “exclusive and unitary ties to place, tradition, and customs." More than the "abstractions of universal brotherhood," identity infuses life with purpose and meaning. The suppression of identity, not identity itself, causes conflict and war.

When customs (such as honor killings, genital mutilation, and underage marriage) conflict with democratic norms, Sharansky acknowledges, "customs must give way." But far more often, identity and democracy reinforce one another. The best defenders of
freedom are those "who cherish a unique way of life, for they will always have a life truly worth defending."

Defending Identity is suffused with moral outrage. Sharansky condemns the French law prohibiting students from wearing head scarves or other "conspicuous" religious symbols, including kippahs and crosses, in public schools—and the Dutch ban on burqas and face veils "to ensure the security and protection of fellow citizens."

Proponents of these laws, he proclaims, passionately and persuasively, believe that democracy does not include "the freedom to identify deeply with some particular culture or history or religion." The measures force Muslims to betray their own beliefs, breeding resentment and alienation against their own country.

Unfortunately, Sharansky's line-in-the-sand, black and white defense of identity is also suffused with omissions, errors, and exaggerations. The Founding Fathers of the United States, for example, did not view identity as a positive good. Nor did they "refuse requests to establish states according to language or ethnic or religious type." The American Constitution, in fact, permitted establishments of religion in the states—and Massachusetts and Connecticut retained theirs until the 1830s.

More than his history, Sharansky's consideration of contemporary politics is compromised by rhetorical excess. Post-identity relativism has not "created a world in which there is no right." Nor has post-nationalism made it impossible to enforce human rights standards. Sharansky deserves credit for challenging Europeans to justify the double standard they apply to Israel and the free pass they give to the "identity politics" of Palestinians "as compensation for the injustices of the past." But Europeans have not
"disowned their own cultural norms" in the name of global citizenship. Nor is it fair to say that their leaders "will pay any price to avoid bloodshed."

Sharansky's characterizations of Israeli politics are also polemical and problematic. Were Israeli Jews really in danger of losing their identity before the massive waves of immigrants from the Soviet Union dealt Ben-Gurion's paternalistic, socialistic, melting pot ideology "a final blow"? Were the Oslo Accords "predicated on a rejection of Israeli identity" and the post-nationalist idea that "border and territories are not important for defense, peace, and prosperity"? At Camp David in 2000, did Prime Minister Ehud Barak, "wanting peace at any price," offer to relinquish "everything we were fighting for—our existence as a culture and people, religion, and history"?

Most importantly, Sharansky's claim that the suppression of identity, not identity itself, is the principal cause of conflict, begs the question. Throughout history, the ethnic cleansers have tended to be ethno-centric, ethnic nationalists. Though difficult to define—and even more difficult to achieve—a "rooted cosmopolitanism" aims at preserving ethnic identity, while effacing its tendencies to intolerance.

This aspiration deserves more respect than Sharansky accords it. He dismisses the Ottoman Empire as "imperialism disguised as post-nationalism," offering non-Muslims "not equality but toleration as second-class citizens." Fair enough. But although he agrees that "the central question" is whether equality is the standard that should be applied to Arab citizens in Israel, Sharansky seems uncharacteristically elusive in providing an answer. Israel, he writes, "is a state for all its citizens, minorities as well as the majority." Its non-Jews have the highest standard of living, the highest level of education, and the lowest death rate and mortality rate for children "of any comparable
population in the Arab world." But shouldn't he be comparing Arab citizens in Israel with Jewish citizens? And can there be equality for Arabs in a Jewish state if the majority decides "what form society should take" and the minority is forced to choose between becoming "integrated into the culture and history" of that state or being left behind?

These are difficult questions. Just the kind of questions a straight-talker like Sharansky ought to engage. He has already provided a provocative and at times penetrating examination of the relationship between democracy and identity. But he’s still got some home work to do.

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