

Sharansky: Be wary of pro-Israel anti-Jewish groups

Jewish Agency chairman warns that extreme right-wing parties in Europe are returning to Nazi pasts

• By TAMARA ZIEVE

Far-right European political groups that profess to love Israel often hold antisemitic views, Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky warned on Tuesday.

In an address in Jerusalem to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Sharansky asserted that there is a growing phenomenon of political groups on the Right in Europe returning to their Nazi pasts, while supporting Israel for its stand against Islamic extremism. "But we should not fall into the trap," he said.

Sharansky noted that Jews have become accustomed to left-wing groups who were vocally anti-Israel emphasizing positive feelings toward Jews.

"For many years we have been used to dealing with organizations, countries and public figures who keep saying they love Jews, but hate Israel," he said.

Today, in addition to this, he explained, we are seeing the reverse phenomenon.

"Those who love Israel and hate Jews and those who hate Israel and love Jews are not our partners," he affirmed. "Actually, what should happen is that voices on the Right should fight antisemitism on the Right, and voices on the



CONFERENCE OF Presidents CEO Malcolm Hoenlein (from left) and chairman Stephen Greenberg, American Zionist Movement president Richard Heideman, Jewish Agency chairman Natan Sharansky and W. James Schiller, past National President of AZM and ZOA, meet in Jerusalem yesterday.

(Avi Hayun)

Left should fight antisemitism on the Left. It usually goes the other way, and it's not a successful strategy," he noted.

But assimilation, in Sharansky's eyes, is the biggest problem for the Jewish world.

"I'm told only 12% of American Jews go to Jewish schools," he said, expressing concern that not enough US Jewish children are attending such schools, learning Hebrew, learning about Zionism and learning about Israel.

"The number-one problem is the issue of assimilation in the American Jewish community. If we are not ready to defend and build our identity, no one will do it for us," he told the audience.

"My aim is to build bridges between Israel and the Jewish people," he said, and spoke of the unique history of the Jewish Agency, which developed a very "paternalistic approach" toward the Jewish people.

Sharansky said, however, that he believed there was a new relationship between Israel and the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, and that he did not want Jews to view Israel just as a place of shelter. "Israel is a unique country for Jews with quality and free Jewish life," he stressed. "Today, all over the world, you're all part of the same team. The fact that this roundtable of Jewish agencies is having a dialogue, this is a great achievement."

Sharansky is stepping down from the helm of the Jewish Agency in June.

"I'm finishing nine years in the Jewish Agency after nine years in a Soviet prison. They asked me to stay longer, and I said I can't add more time to the time I served in prison," quipped Sharansky, referring to the time he spent imprisoned as a Soviet refusenik in the 1970s and '80s.