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Grapevine February 22, 2023: A matter of timing

By GREER FAY CASHMAN **Published:** FEBRUARY 22, 2023 00:02



Irwin Cotler, Canada's new Special Envoy for Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism. (photo credit: MARC ISRAEL SELLEM)

Movers and shakers in Israeli society.

The timing was purely coincidental but it could not have been more appropriate, given the state of affairs in Israel today. International human

of justice”, was the subject of a superb documentary First to Stand: The Cases and Causes of Irwin Cotler.

A former Canadian Minister of Justice and Attorney General believes that freedom and democracy are synonymous and that loss of either is a violation of human rights. Not only was there a film about him but following the screening, Cotler and his equally eloquent daughter Michal, who is a former MK, answered questions put to them by Times of Israel editor David Horovitz and members of the audience at the Jerusalem Cinematheque.

Cotler’s father taught him that the pursuit of justice was equal to all other commandments combined. His mother said that in order to pursue justice, you have to feel injustice.

Some of Cotler’s remarks both in the film and in person include:

- There is a resurgent global authoritarianism and a retreat of democracy.



Prof. Irwin Cotler (credit: MARC ISRAEL SELLEM)

- One person is able to confront evil and transform history.
- Every political prisoner who was released was because of his wife's advocacy on his behalf.
- Women have emerged as transformative leaders in global human rights movements.
- With regard to freedom of the press: The media draws attention to the pain and plight of political prisoners.

- Violators of human rights have been put in charge of United Nations human rights organizations.
- What makes genocide unspeakable is that so many genocides were preventable but the world was indifferent.
- Cotler credits the Anatoly Sharansky case with bringing about change in Russia's attitudes to human rights and with providing a model for the release of political prisoners in other countries.

Several years after Sharansky's release from prison, Cotler met with [Mikhail Gorbachev](#), who as president of Russia had authorized and signed for Sharansky's release. When Cotler asked Gorbachev about his role in granting Sharansky his freedom, Gorbachev replied that he had never heard of Sharansky in Russia but when he traveled abroad, he heard Sharansky's name wherever he went and was subjected to demonstrations on Sharansky's behalf. After he became president, Gorbachev asked to see Sharansky's file and realized that it was in Russia's best interests to release him.

Speaking in Jerusalem, Cotler emphasized the importance that securing the release of political prisoners is in the best interests of the countries that hold them captive.

dared to criticize the Kremlin following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Kara-Murza has been charged with treason and is languishing in prison. His wife Evgenia is using all the means at her disposal to secure his release. Cotler sees her as a latter-day Avital Sharansky.

Cotler is also involved in trying to cancel a 10-year travel ban on Saudi dissident and human rights defender [Raif Badawi](#), who in March last year was released from prison after serving a 10-year sentence but is still under a 10-year travel ban, which prevents him from being reunited with his wife Einsat Haidar and their children who are living in Canada. Einsat Haidar is also a human rights activist who tirelessly campaigned for her husband's freedom and has joined forces with Iranian women who are campaigning for freedom of choice in their life-styles.

There was, of course, the inevitable question of how Cotler, who was among the legal experts invited to the President's Residence by President Isaac Herzog, views Israel's judicial reform. Acknowledging that reforms are needed in every democracy, Cotler expressed that the package of reforms as they stand now undermines the independence of the judiciary. "What we need is a process to arrive at substance – a people's process that will end with the people's constitution for the State of Israel."