

Vayigash Mandela – December, 2013

By Lauren Schwartz Garlick

Since Thursday, when we heard of the death of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, it seems as if the whole world has come together in respect and admiration for the man who helped change South Africa. Mandela succeeded in what seemed impossible - uniting a country, which, for so many years, had been segregated. It also felt miraculous that when he died he was beloved, not only by the blacks of South Africa, but also by the whites, including so many who'd feared him in the past.

I wept on Thursday and felt the immense loss of his embrace, wisdom and protection. Our Tata, Madiba.

He was a man who wasn't afraid to evolve over his lifetime. In the 1950s and 1960s, particularly after the Sharpeville massacre and, as the leader of the African National Congress, Mandela recognized that he had to match might for might. In 1960, after Sharpeville, he regretfully came to believe that the struggle for equality could no longer be one of non-violence.

And fiercely violent it was. I grew up in Port Elizabeth, on the very beautiful Indian Ocean. In the 60s and 70s the fear was palpable. The contrast of the magnificence of our natural surroundings to the awful treatment of the black majority was stark. The walls surrounding our comfortable homes in the white neighborhoods grew higher and higher, and alarm systems became more and more sophisticated. The Bloodbath, a constant fear, seemed inevitable.

After Soweto in 1976 the violence was overwhelming and I was one of many white Jews who left South Africa and moved to Israel. From then on, and into the 1980s, the pro-apartheid Nationalist government dug in its heels and brutally suppressed the more than 20 million blacks. There was no dialogue and no possible way out as protestors were killed or jailed for "subversive activities." This continued relentlessly until the late 1980s, when President De Klerk recognized that Mandela was crucial to any change. He knew that the two of them had to start speaking to one another.

This made me think of the Torah portion, Vayigash, that we read the week of Mandela's death. Vayigash opens with Judah bravely approaching Joseph. Judah can't bear the accusations leveled against his brother Benjamin and reacts to the injustice. Benjamin had been blamed for stealing the goblet found in his bag. Judah is confident that his brother did not steal it and shows remarkable courage and a great sense of responsibility as he confronts the powerful Joseph, whom he compares to a Pharaoh. Judah who, at that point does not know that Joseph is his brother, pleads with Joseph to be patient and save his father the loss of another

favorite son. In his approach he takes control and stops the situation from devolving into something far more dangerous.

Mandela and de Klerk, who started talking in December 1989, didn't necessarily approach each other with trust, but, like Judah approaching Joseph (*Vayigash Elav Yehudah – Genesis 44,*), De Klerk knew he had to, at least allow the conversation to begin.

De Klerk later admitted how much he came to admire Mandela. When they first started talking in 1989, De Klerk was impressed and surprised by Mandela's dignity and intelligence. Those crucial conversations eventually led to the dismantling of apartheid and to the emergence of the New Democratic South Africa in 1994, led by President Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.

It was because Mandela always remained open to being approached in justice, and because two men met face to face and started talking, that change could take place.

His was a long and very brave walk to freedom.
His life was a blessing.

- Lauren Schwartz Garlick