

A Tribute to Nelson Mandela
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Temple Aliyah
December 6, 2013

This morning we read yet another episode in the life of a fascinating figure in our history: **Joseph**. On the one hand, Joseph experienced one frightening and humiliating degradation after another: he was thrown into a pit by his brothers and left for dead; he was sold into slavery; he was falsely accused and thrown into prison. On the other hand, seemingly miraculously and swiftly, Joseph rose in power and was appointed viceroy, second only to Pharaoh, and received the adulation of all of Egypt, with Egyptians shouting his special title, “Avrech,” as he was driven through the streets.

Who could ever have imagined it? Certainly not Joseph’s family: they were convinced he was either dead or subjugated. And certainly not the Egyptians, who had contempt for Canaanites like him. If anyone had ever suggested that he would one day make that transition from degradation and impotence to influence and power, he would have been thought mad. There really was only one person in the world, perhaps, who was confident that Joseph would ultimately triumph, and that was Joseph himself. For, after all, since his youth Joseph had known that he was destined for greatness. Others may have dismissed his grandiose dreams, but Joseph remained confident that they would one day come true—as indeed they did.

The story of Joseph reminds us that even extraordinary, unthinkable degradation and suffering shouldn’t stop one from reaching for greatness.

We were reminded of that lesson on Thursday when we learned of the death of the great Nelson Mandela.

For the past twenty-some years, Nelson Mandela has been an elder statesman, and a highly revered one at that. He was the first democratically elected president of South Africa. And he then voluntarily left office after one term. How common is that in Africa? He

was a Nobel Peace Prize winner, a man with a mellifluous tongue, a man who 250,000 people came out to hear speak on the Esplanade when he visited Boston in 1990.¹ Young people, who have only experienced the most recent and relatively tranquil phase of Mandela's life, could be forgiven for wondering why there's so much fuss about Mandela's death.

The reason, of course, is that preceding these last twenty-three years was a period of degradation even longer: Twenty-seven years of prison. *Twenty-seven years of prison!* Over twice the age of our bat mitzvah girl and her friends!

When I was a teenager I really didn't follow closely what was going on in South Africa. I first recall following what was happening there with any serious amount of attention in 1977, when I was in Israel for the year. One of my missions was to learn Hebrew, and so every day that year, I would buy the paper and sit down with a dictionary and try to read it. I remember one day reading in Hebrew about the killing, in police custody, of a South African anti-apartheid activist named Steve Biko. Steve Biko had been medical student whom the regime put under a ban; that is, the regime forbade him to speak in public. In fact, they forbade him to speak with more than one person at a time. His words could not legally be recorded or transcribed or quoted. After several years of these restrictions, in the wake of a popular uprising in Soweto, a black township in the area of Johannesburg, the police picked Biko up for questioning, brought him to a police station, beat him severely, and then threw him into the back of a truck. They drove him 1,100 kilometers, supposedly to get him to a prison with hospital facilities. He died there of massive injuries to his head, the result of the beatings. The police officers in whose custody Biko was killed were never held responsible for his death.

That was the regime under which Nelson Mandela was imprisoned.

(Incidentally, at the time of Steve Biko's death, Mandela had already been in prison for over thirteen some years; another thirteen years awaited him.) Mandela could easily have been killed during his captivity. Yes, his death might have produced some disturbances, but for many years the regime seemed oblivious to the consequences of its outrageous behavior. Mandela's life was never assured.

This was the regime that targeted Nelson Mandela—the regime that he and his compatriots eventually defeated through a revolution that, though not entirely bloodless, was certainly much more peaceful than many would have thought possible.

There are many lessons that can be drawn from Nelson Mandela's life. I would like to focus on three:

First, injustice is ultimately, inevitably, overcome by justice. I really do believe that. Oppression—particularly state-sponsored oppression—may seem insurmountable, but it weakens in the presence of the voice of justice, particularly an eloquent, humane voice. So long as people are permitted to listen to that voice, so long as they are open to discerning the difference between justice and injustice, and willing to fight for justice, justice will ultimately triumph.

Of course, that seems an awfully unreasonable statement. After all, injustice can be found all over the world! Yet I truly believe it. Eventually, injustice disintegrates. (Of course, justice can also disintegrate, which is why the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.)

But, second, it may take a long time. After all, apartheid was established in South Africa in 1948. It took forty-six years for it to collapse in 1994.

The Communist regime under which many people in the former Soviet Union, including many Jews, suffered, endured from the October Revolution in 1917 until 1991.

The Nazi dictatorship in Germany lasted from 1933 until 1945. Evil people can do a lot of damage in 12 years. And yet, eventually, Nazism collapsed. It was defeated. Who would have thought seventy years ago, in 1944, that Germany would one day be an ally of the United States, that it would be an ally of a Jewish state, that it would be a country with a thriving Jewish community?

And so, although change is possible, it can take a long time, and so patience is necessary. How else could Mandela have endured twenty-seven years of incarceration?

And so the third lesson—maybe the most important of them all, particularly for the young people here today—is that **one must never lose hope**. One must never assume that just because evil holds sway in a particular society or nation that it has the right to do that, and it always will.

The apartheid government of South Africa took away twenty-seven years of Nelson Mandela's freedom. But it never took away his dignity. It didn't take away his sense that his cause was just and he would one day prevail. In the Joseph story, it says that "the Lord was with Joseph." Nelson Mandela too was sustained by his faith. He certainly believed that, whatever happened to him, right would ultimately triumph over might. This confidence was undoubtedly reinforced by the sense he felt that he was destined for greatness. As a youth, he had been considered a prince within his tribe. Long before his anti-apartheid activity, long before his imprisonment, long before he was hailed by South Africans as "Madiba," Mandela told people that he would one day become the first president of a democratic South Africa.

Of course, no one is perfect.

Joseph wasn't perfect. As a youth, he was self-centered. Commentators have noted that during the entire time he was living in Egypt as viceroy to the Pharaoh, he didn't once send word back to his father that he was still alive. And when his brothers came down to Egypt to buy grain, he certainly put them through a terrible ordeal, until finally admitting who he was.

And Mandela was also not beyond criticism. No one would question his commitment to universal justice and freedom—but some would wish that he had dissociated himself from some of his less fair-minded supporters. For example, in 2001, the Durban World Conference Against Racism was held. Instead of being a forum for investigating and addressing racism throughout the world, it degenerated into an orgy of bigotry and anti-Semitism.² The fact that Mandela had lent his name

and support to the conference and had even addressed it via video didn't sit well with many Jews and supporters of Israel.³

None of this, in my mind, diminishes my own appreciation of Nelson Mandela's remarkable achievements or his legacy. Remaining humane after enduring twenty-seven years of prison would be enough of an accomplishment. But Mandela did much more than that. Like Joseph, who in today's *parasha* opened his arms up to his brothers who had treated him so badly, so too did Mandela understand the power of reconciliation. After his release from prison, Mandela sought to build bridges between the oppressors and the oppressed. He helped establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, a commission that elicited testimony of human rights abuses and that sought to provide compensation to victims and amnesty to perpetrators who came forward. This commission is widely credited with preventing the bloodbath that many assumed would follow the disintegration of the apartheid regime.

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At the end of the Book of Genesis, as Joseph is about to die, he makes his brothers swear that, when God eventually brings them out of Egypt, they will bring his bones with them on their journey to the Promised Land. They duly swear, and indeed, when Joseph dies, the brothers had his body embalmed and placed into a coffin.⁴

In the book of Exodus, we're told that as the Children of Israel hurriedly left Egypt, they nonetheless took the time to retrieve Joseph's bones and bring them with them on their journey to freedom.⁵ And the people carried those bones with them throughout their forty years of wandering in the Wilderness, and they brought them with them when they entered into the Promised Land.⁶

Joseph didn't live to see the liberation of his people. And yet, as they went off on their journey toward liberation, he and his memory were key to the people's faith that they would one day get to the Promised Land.

So too, in South Africa today. In this beautiful land—which sadly, has not yet fully become the Promised Land for its people—the memory and the legacy of Nelson Mandela will be critical. May the memory of this great man, of the man they called Madeba, remain a blessing, and may he rest in peace.

Amen.

¹ See: <http://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/blog/2013/12/05/remembering-mandelas-trip-to-boston/>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Conference_against_Racism_2001

³ It is worth noting that many individual Jews were heroes of the fight against apartheid. Of those who were arrested at Liliesleaf, Rivonia, in July 1963, five were whites and all of them were Jews. (See: Geoff Sifrin, “Mandela’s Complex Jewish Ties,” at: <http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/international-news/mandelas-complex-jewish-ties> .) However, as Rabbi Cyril Harris, the former Chief Rabbi of South Africa declared at the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, the Jewish community’s hallmark in those years was “inactivity and silence.” Moreover, although the State of Israel did not support the South African regime’s use of violence against its own people, it did cooperate in military matters with the government. (Ibid.)

Mandela’s reputation among Jews and other supporters of Israel was unfairly tarnished in 2006 by an open letter purporting to be from Mandela to the *New York Times* journalist, Tom Friedman. This letter was highly critical of Israel, and it was subsequently, repeatedly, quoted all over the world. President Jimmy Carter referred to it in his book. The letter also surfaced in a divestment resolution offered at a gathering of Presbyterian Church officials. The letter was in fact a satirical piece written by someone other than Mandela, but nonetheless, the letter eroded support for Mandela among Jews and other supporters of Israel.

⁴ See Genesis 50:24-26.

⁵ See Exodus 13:19: “And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying, ‘God will be sure to take notice of you: then you shall carry up my bones from here with you.’”

⁶ See Joshua 24:32: “And Joseph’s bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob had bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the Father of Shechem.”