

Nelson Mandela

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As the accolades pour in from around the world mourning the death of Nelson Mandela, we should realize how fortunate we are to have lived during a time when we witnessed first-hand the power of such an extraordinary leader.

Imprisoned for 27 years in South Africa for protesting its apartheid system, he was released in February of 1990. His struggle and courage ultimately helped bring down a racist system that imposed racial segregation on all aspects of South African life, doing so without the blood bath so many had predicted and feared.

One article about his death recalled his release from prison by noting, "The world was spellbound. We wondered what we would do if we were in his shoes. We all waited for an indescribable rage, a call for retribution that any reasonable mind would have understood. Twenty-seven years of his life, gone. Day after day of hard labor in a limestone quarry, chipping away at white rock under a bright and merciless sun - without benefit of protective eyewear - had virtually destroyed his tear ducts and, for years, robbed Mandela even of his ability to cry."

Mandela went on to become South Africa's first president to be democratically elected by all of its citizens. In 1993 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize which he shared with the apartheid era's last white president, F. W. de Klerk, who had ordered an end to Mr. Mandela's 27-year imprisonment and negotiated with him the terms of the political transition.

The peaceful transition he facilitated was made possible by the tone he set. His magnanimity and lack of vindictiveness was evidenced when he invited one of his white jailers, who had helped imprison him for 27 years to his inauguration. When asked in an interview in 2007 how he managed to not be hateful or resentful he told the NY Times interviewer almost dismissively that hating clouds the mind and gets in the way of strategy, adding that leaders cannot afford to hate.

Noted Canadian Jewish lawyer and former Canadian Minister of Justice Irwin Cutler who fought for his release wrote, "Mandela was the embodiment of the three great struggles of the 20th century: the long march toward freedom, the march for democracy, and the march for equality. In a word, he was the metaphor and message for the struggle for human rights and human dignity in our time."

South African Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein referred to him as a revered leader and exceptional and outstanding human being and declared: "Today we are all mourners for we have lost a great leader. Our world is a sadder and emptier place without Nelson Mandela."

Mandela attributed his special affinity and connection with the Jewish community to the Jewish law firm who gave him his first job, an apprenticeship in the early days of his law career at a time when such a thing was unheard of.

He wrote in his 1994 autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, about the significance of what Lazer Sidelsky did. "It was a Jewish firm, and in my experience I have found Jews to be more broadminded than most whites on issues of race and politics, perhaps because they themselves have historically been victims of prejudice." He became close to the Jewish lawyer who defended him during the treason trial which led to his imprisonment in the 1950s.

Mandela's relationship with Israel and the Jewish community was complex and complicated. While many Jews were leaders in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, some were complicit in their participation in the system. He also was upset by the relations and commerce, especially the military aid given by Israel to the apartheid regime in the 1980's.

While expressing sympathy for Zionism he also expressed strong support for Palestinian independence and of Yasser Arafat. He did not disassociate himself from the infamous Durban Conference Against Racism in 2001, which was a coordinated and premeditated anti-Israel and anti-Jewish hate fest.

Nevertheless, President Shimon Peres echoed sentiments expressed by Prime Minister Netanyahu and others when he called Mandela "a leader of immense stature who changed the course of history. On behalf of the citizens of Israel we mourn alongside the nations of the world and the people of South Africa, who lost an exceptional leader. Nelson Mandela was a fighter for human rights who left an indelible mark on the struggle against racism and discrimination."

Mandela's actions upon his release from prison and his efforts to put aside hatred or resentment, and to work for reconciliation among brothers brings to mind the words and actions of another person freed from a prison in Africa - Joseph. Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers, and eventually rose to become vizier over all of Egypt. When his brothers come to him and realize the power that Joseph now wields over them, they are afraid he will take actions against them to retaliate for what they had done to him. Instead Joseph reassured them and said, "I am your brother Joseph who you sold into Egypt. Do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me here....It was not you who sent me here, but God."

We can all learn from the example of these two great leaders the power of moving forward without rancor and of the importance of being a force for healing rather than divisiveness.

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