

# Nelson Mandela

I first became aware of Nelson Mandela in 1956. I was fourteen and a very disruptive teenager. My father was going on a fundraising tour of South Africa in support of Jewish education and he decided to take me with him in the hope of mitigating my rebelliousness. For much of the time, while my father was busy, I was entrusted to a group of communal ladies who it turned out were seriously involved not only in trying to mitigate the awful conditions in the black townships but also in actively opposing Apartheid. They took me round to Alexandra Township and Soweto to see firsthand what life for the black majority was like.

One day we went on a trip to Pretoria where the famous Rivonia trial was taking place, in which Black and Jewish defendants were on trial accused of trying to overthrow the government. The prosecutor, a prominent Jew named Percy Yutar, was much reviled by my newly found friends, but supported by many in the Jewish establishment. The Chief Rabbi of the time, on the other hand, the late and outstanding Louis Rabinowitz, heroically denounced the Afrikaner regime and its policies. Amongst the black defendants, Nelson Mandela stood out for his bearing, dignity, and natural leadership. I was too young to be allowed in to the court, and so my ladies deposited me with some demonstrators they knew outside while they went in. The trial proved a farce, but it was the start of what would send Mandela for over 27 years to the infamous Robben Island, which made Alcatraz look like paradise.

This was the beginning of my modest career as a campaigner against Apartheid, which eventually took me to the position of vice president of the Scottish branch of the anti-Apartheid movement and friendship with one of its heroes, Rev. Trevor Huddleston.

Thirty-four years later I was invited by the then retiring Chief Rabbi Bernard Casper to come to Johannesburg to discuss succeeding him. Before I went out there, some friends who were heavily involved in the struggle gave me the names and numbers of prominent underground activists so that I could get a different angle on the possibilities. During the six weeks I spent in Johannesburg, I had several secret meetings, all very cloak and dagger, with various black and colored activists who all warned me in the strongest terms against coming out there. They all asserted that there was going to be a revolution, a bloodbath, sooner than expected, in which the white population would be decimated.

They also told me that although Israel had always voted against Apartheid at the UN, its military and security agencies were on close terms with their South African counterparts. There was ill feeling towards Israel because of Israeli advisors in the detention centers, jails, and interrogation rooms. And if I thought that speaking out against the regime was a possibility, I should know that it would be pointless because I would be deported on the spot. I didn't go to South Africa in the end, for personal reasons.

Towards the end of the 1980s, Mandela, alone amongst the detainees, agreed to

start negotiating with the Apartheid regime. Despite internal opposition within the ANC, he believed there had to be a peaceful way of winning. Eventually he was released and became the standard bearer of reconciliation that led to the peaceful demolition of Apartheid and the establishment of majority rule. He became the first President of a racially free South Africa. That he was able to avoid a bloodbath in the process was entirely the result of his vision and friendship with the more moderate and farsighted white Prime Minister de Klerk. It ensured that both sides went out of their way to achieve reconciliation. Although flawed, the "Truth and Reconciliation Committee" went a long way towards facing up to and atoning for the evils committed in the struggle, on both sides. If South Africa today is an unhappy country with a massive gulf between the rich and the poor, it is the fault of its black leadership, not a white elite.

Mandela was surrounded by and succeeded by small men who lacked his stature and moral authority. But he too made mistakes. I regret he did not stand for a second term to be able to exert his moral influence for longer. I regret he did nothing about that evil African tyrant, Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, a primitive tribal gangster despite his LSE degrees and the polar opposite of Mandela. I regret he was unable to rein in the corruption of the ANC. But Mandela was human. He was not a saint.

There are Jews who believe he was an opponent of Israel. That is simply not true. But like the current President of Israel himself, he regretted the sorry state of the Palestinians, the occupation and its inevitable consequences. He thought Israel was better placed than anyone else to find a remedy and expressed regret that Israel was not doing more. But he also knew and said that the Arab world and the Palestinians, themselves, were parties to their own tragedy. He never, ever compared Palestine to Apartheid. He knew what real Apartheid was.

Yes, he was a politician. He did embrace Arafat (as did other friends of Israel), and he was aware and sensitive to the very strong resentment within parts of the ANC and its allies towards Israel. But he always repeated his friendship and gratitude to Israel and those Jews who supported his struggle. He never expressed any of the bitter enmity towards Israel of Desmond Tutu, or indeed many of the senior South African politicians of today. The memoir of the late chief rabbi of South Africa, Cyril Harris, amply recalls the friend that Mandela was.

We Jews like to give titles like "the pious, or the saintly of the non-Jewish world", misused and misapplied from our traditional sources. There is a difference between "The Pious of the Nations of the World", which implies saintliness, and "The Great of the Nations of the World", which implies achievement. I do not know how pious he was. But there is no doubt in my mind that he was great. I would argue that Nelson Mandela was the greatest African in recorded history.