



Mandela from a Jewish perspective

OPINION

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NELSON Mandela is not merely a man of greatness whose life has ended; he embodies an idea, an ethos, a principle. He survived one of the 20th century's worst regimes barring Nazi Germany. He outlived it and became, in so many ways, the Christ figure of the century.

There can be no argument about the inhumanity and brutality of South Africa from 1948 to 1994. But the historic truth is that for black Africans, all the years before the so-called "invention" of apartheid in 1948 were filled with rigid racial stratification and gross suppression of human dignity and rights.

Mandela was three when General Jan Christian Smuts used the air force at Bullhoek in the Cape to bomb a group of blacks who identified strongly with Jewish history and ritual. All they wanted was to stay on some land until Passover ended. He grew up with the black vote at the Cape being abolished in 1936, with blacks forbidden to buy land outside designated reserves, with blacks unable to join most trade unions, banned from drinking alcohol, interracial sex, selling their labour on the open market, earning more than the designated wage for "uncivilised people", having their movement curtailed, their spouses forbidden to live with them while in domestic service.

Mandela studied law and in the forties was one of the first black Africans to be given a place as an articled clerk in a white

law firm, Witkin, Sidelsky and Edelman. Later, he was to say that in his experience he "found Jews to be more broad-minded than most whites on issues of race and politics, perhaps because they themselves have historically been victims of prejudice".

The Nationalist Party came to office in 1948 under Daniel Francois Malan, an antisemitic, racist ideologue who openly flirted with a variety of neo-Nazi Black-shirt, Grey Shirt and like-minded movements. He didn't invent apartheid, but "revitalised" the traditional "South African way of life" — introducing more stringent versions of petty and grand apartheid. Stringency led to more draconian punishments, to a paranoia about people "subverting" what was no longer a traditional way of life but an official state ideology.

The African National Congress, founded in 1912, now had a youth league and it was in this domain that Mandela began his lifelong walk to freedom.

Mandela was one of 156 people indicted at the infamous Treason Trial in 1956, held at the Old Synagogue in Pretoria. By 1961, the charges against most had been withdrawn and the remainder were acquitted. The year 1963 was more significant. At the equally infamous Rivonia Trial, six whites (all Jews) and eight "non-whites", including Mandela and Walter Sisulu, were charged with sabotage. There is a very Jewish context to this. Jews were singled out for this trial, allowing Justice Minister Balthazar Vorster to declare that Jews were only about three percent of the white population, but 100% of the country's "saboteurs". The prosecutor was the notorious

Dr Percy Yutar, a devout Jew. The government sat back and watched the Jew vigorously prosecuting the Jews. For reasons many never fathomed, Yutar chose to indict for sabotage rather than treason, but the outcome was still life imprisonment.

Jewish connections were strong: ophthalmologist Dr Percy Amoils cured Mandela's serious eye problem and lawyers Issy Maisels, Arthur Chaskalson, Joel Joffe and Stanley Kentridge defended him in major trials.

Mandela could not have done what he did without the foresight and pragmatism of the man who engineered the peaceful transfer to black power, President F.W. de Klerk. That Mandela had the personality to get along with De Klerk was another factor. These two men achieved something that all historians of South African race relations, including me, did not foresee — a non-violent, non-Armageddon solution. We could see only an apocalypse.

In office, Mandela embraced his enemies, forgiving them, declaring their animus, their racial hatred and, significantly, offering them a different interpretation of their vengeful Dutch Reformed Church fundamentalism, the one that said blacks could never achieve true spirituality with whites. That makes him the Christ figure that he is and will remain. What South Africa now trembles at is the prospect that there is no one in sight with such courage, endurance, vision, humanity, and humane spirit.

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