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Story Includes Video:

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Nelson Mandela's death evoked a worldwide outpouring of respect and love. Jewish leaders, from Netanyahu (Israel), to Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein (South Africa) to America, praised his greatness. Netanyahu called him "a freedom fighter who rejected any violence" and "a moral leader of the highest order."

Yet there is an undercurrent of unease about Mandela in the Jewish community. After all, he embraced Yasser Arafat, variously calling him a "brother" and a "comrade in arms." In 1990, he declared, "We do not reject the PLO as a terrorist organization." In 2000, in a show trial, Iran falsely convicted 13 Iranian Jews of espionage for Israel. When Mandela defended the trial as "free and fair," the American Jewish Committee cancelled its planned dinner honoring him for humanitarianism and statesmanship. We can learn a lot from exploring this checkered history.

In the 19th century, the Boer nation – mostly transplanted Dutch whites – created South Africa within the framework of the British Empire. They took advantage of Western technological superiority and the weakness of the African tribes to subdue a large population of indigenous blacks. In the breakup of the British and other colonialist Empires – Israel and India led the way in that worldwide movement – South Africa became independent. Then the nation was caught in the undertow of the anti-colonialist revolt by which Third World peoples of black, brown and yellow skin color asserted their dignity and eventually gained their independence. To keep their power, the whites created an oppressive, racist system and tightened it until it became the morally despicable system of apartheid. Blacks were denied civil rights. They could not go anywhere without identity papers and special passes. They were forced to live in black townships with deteriorated living conditions and grossly inferior public services and education. They had no vote for national elections. Marriages and sexual intercourse between blacks and whites were prohibited.

In those days, racism was not self-evidently immoral and beyond the pale. Many Westerners felt sympathy for the 'embattled' whites, adrift in a sea of 'inferior' races that threatened to expel them. In South Africa, the African National Congress was established to fight for black rights – but it was exclusively open to blacks. Nelson Mandela and his friends stood up for Africans' dignity and human rights. They created the ANC's Spear of the Nation wing and revitalized the Congress. He started as a person committed to non-violence. However, in the face of tightening repression and especially after the

Sharpsville incident in which 57 Africans peacefully demonstrating for their rights were shot to death by the police, Mandela and his circle shifted. They initiated violent resistance to bring down the government. This gave the government the excuse to arrest and try him. He was imprisoned for 27 years.

This period was the start of the Western liberal tendency to justify anti-colonial violence – no matter if the revolutionaries attacked civilians, bystanders or even other indigenous populations. Many of the liberation movement leaders were attracted to Marxism – seeing it as a way to overthrow the oppressive capitalists/exploiters and offering the promise of ending the poverty of the masses. This tendency was strengthened by the Cold War in which Communist Russia supported these movements (and their governments when they won out) in order to undermine the Western [capitalist] powers' presence in the Third World. Western countries were correspondingly more open to cooperate with conservative, status quo governments and slow to support liberation movements. The United States tried to advance democratization but cooperated with a range of dictatorships to block Russian expansionism.

This polarization increased the tendency, on the Western left, to give moral absolution to violent, repressive, even murderous behaviors in the name of liberation. Tragically many revolutionaries – Mao in China, Qaddafi, Nasser, Assad in the Middle East, Nkrumah, Mugabe, Touré in Africa, etc. set up tyrannical governments, which denied or violated the human rights of the locals as well as of the foreigners whom they often expelled. Their 'Socialist' systems frequently ruined the economy and impoverished the population – while they enriched themselves corruptly. Sadly, the liberal tendency to whitewash their behaviors materially encouraged their substitution of new tyrannies for old.

During this period, Mandela and the ANC received support primarily from Arab and third world dictators. Mandela's allies denied Israel's right to exist, portrayed their own struggle as one of human rights against colonialism, and practiced terrorism in the name of liberation. In the 1960's, Israel [then led by the Socialist Mapai party] reached out to Africa and Asia – offering aid to strengthen their economies and training for their nascent unions and civil rights movements. However after 1967 the Communist bloc/Arab joint economic and ideological pressures led most African and Asian nations to break relations with Israel. The Jewish state, having shifted to a Western orientation, also cooperated with the South African government (as did the United States). This reached an apex in Israel's dash to attain nuclear power-where the South African government supplied needed sources of uranium and technical support.

Nevertheless, thanks to the spread of democratic values – such as the triumph of the civil rights movement in the United States – and a massive shift in public opinion, South Africa was deservedly labeled racist and apartheid. It was isolated, sanctioned, boycotted and investment divested – until the white government yielded and released Mandela. He renounced violence and negotiated the establishment of a democratic system. Buoyed by the prestige of winning the struggle, the ANC won total political dominance and Mandela was elected president.

Here, Mandela showed further moral greatness. He chose not to revenge decades of oppression and exploitation. He rejected the calls to drive out the whites. He protected minority rights and insisted on building a new South Africa together. He checked some of his comrades in arms, including his wife, Winnie, who wanted to impose radical economic policies that would also have driven out many whites. In truth, he did not solve the problem of poverty. However, he allowed a capitalist system to evolve, which hopefully can solve the problem eventually. Some of his comrades turned to self-enrichment. Others continue to push for radical economic policies. He remained moderate in policy and personally honest.

Mandela's model of democracy and reconciliation is a shining example that deserves the love and respect shown to him on his death. Jews, too, should treasure and honor such a moral role model – all too rare in the annals of liberation. (It should be noted that the majority of South African Jews left after apartheid was dismantled because they expected that the policies of revenge, violence and social unrest that took over most of the newly liberated African nations would occur there.)

Despite his personal policy at home, Mandela did not challenge or critique the policies and behavior of his comrades in arms abroad. He embraced Kaddafi and accepted Mugabe – even as he ruined Zimbabwe's economy and crushed its democratic opposition. He did not employ or accept the Arabs' genocidal language vis á vis Israel, but he did not rebuke or publicly condemn the Arafat/Palestinian continuing search for revenge. Obviously his sources of information and judgment on the Palestinian cause came from people, like his comrade Desmond Tutu, who were rabidly anti-Israel. Nevertheless he spoke to the Jewish Board of Deputies in London and asserted that Israel should give over the West Bank to a Palestinian state – but not unless the Arabs first recognized the Jewish state. A year earlier, he said: "I cannot conceive of Israel withdrawing if the Arab states do not recognize Israel under secure borders." (Associated Press, October 19, 1999).

In short, Mandela is a moral icon of the highest order with real flaws and limitations – as with any real-life person. This is just as Israel is a real-life democracy with flaws and limitations, including limited cooperation with the nondemocratic government when there was no other choice for survival.

In recent decades the left that whitewashed the crimes of the Third World rulers has 'koshered' any policy that presents as being anti-colonialist. It has turned against Israel and sought to define it as an apartheid regime. The hope was to label it, and then bring it down through boycotts, divestments and sanctions – all the while studiously concealing that such a 'victory' would enable mass destruction of the Israeli Jews. They ignore the critical differences: that Israel's Jewish population represents the return of a people to its homeland; that its Jewish land was bought and reclaimed, not seized; that that Arabs were offered a nation of their own but chose to try to destroy the Jewish state; that much of the Palestinian Nakba was self-inflicted; and that Israel is a vital functioning democracy despite living under constant siege.

The key to the delegitimation strategy is to so exaggerate normal faults and inescapable errors in self-defense, and to invent evils and thus define Israel as an apartheid society. The bald-faced lie of this claim is blatant because in Israel itself, the opposite of apartheid is true. Despite the Arab states' unrelenting assaults from without, the internal Arab minority was granted full voting rights and all civil rights. Starting as a disadvantaged community, Israeli Arabs have steadily improved their levels of public health, education, and economic well-being – beyond any of the Arabs in neighboring states. They are still behind the Jewish curve but – like blacks in America – they have the full range of democratic mechanisms available to improve their status. Their fate is significantly in their own hands.

The left that airbrushes the evils of 'underdogs' or ex-colonial peoples and demonizes the Jewish state, has seized upon the West Bank situation to give the color of validity to its apartheid caricature. In so doing they ignore the fact that overwhelmingly the restrictions on the Palestinians were instituted to protect against terrorism. They omit that successive governments of Israel have offered to give 90% plus of the West Bank to a Palestinian state in return for a credible secure peace agreement. They cover up the continuing Palestinian rhetoric of revenge and genocide. They falsely equate the systematic use of terror and hatred with highly marginalized violent actions or expressions of bigotry. They treat as equivalent official Arab glorification of genocide with a minority desire for conquest on the Israeli side. This 'neutral' mendacity encourages Palestinian revanchist policies. Thus, they betray the moral greatness of Mandela in his insistence on giving revenge no place and genocide no favor.

Jews should not be thrown off by the tension between Mandela's universal stature and his flaws on Jewish issues. Jews should proclaim his greatness and urge – nay, challenge – the Arab nations to walk in his footsteps. The main hope for a true Arab Spring is that they come up with a Mandela of their own who can lead them beyond tribalism and sectarianism, beyond the politics of resentment and revenge, to a society that offers democracy and peace to all.

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Center for Jewish Learning and Leadership), and of the Steinhardt Center for Jewish Life.

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