

RECOGNIZING GREATNESS IN NON-JEWS;

THE PASSING OF NELSON MANDELA

By Rabbi Yosef Blau

The Tifferet Yisrael on the mishna in Avot (3;14) discusses the category of Hasidei Umot Haolam who have a share in the world to come. Amongst the names he lists are Jenner for discovering the vaccine against smallpox and Gutenberg for inventing the printing-press. Both earned their status for work that benefitted humankind either by saving or enhancing life. Nelson Mandela through his extraordinary capacity to forgive those who oppressed his fellow black Africans and jailed him for twenty-seven years, saved many lives while making a rainbow nation for all South Africans possible.

His leadership which promoted human dignity and rights while rejecting revenge is a rare phenomenon.. Successful revolutionaries normally become harsh rulers simply shifting suffering from one segment of the population to another. Setting up a commission of truth and reconciliation was a stroke of genius that allowed South Africa to truly become a country for all its citizens. The Torah reminds the Israelites that having suffered in Egypt as strangers they have to be particularly sensitive to strangers in their midst.

History has demonstrated the inability of most groups to properly treat the "other."

Mandela's strength of character and generous nature prevented a racial war that seemed inevitable.

As religious Jews, who believe that humans are created in the image of G-d, we should acknowledge and show proper respect for an individual whose life balanced commitment to the struggle for freedom with recognizing the humanity of his opponents. It is not

necessary to agree with all his positions to acknowledge Mandela's greatness. His humanity was part of his charm and helped endear him to most of the world. Nelson Mandela's death leaves a void.