

This week's movie quiz is *The Shawshank Redemption*, one of my favorite films. Who remembers that one?



For those of you who don't, it is an incredibly powerful story of a man who is wrongly convicted of murdering his wife and her lover.

While the narrative has numerous twists and turns, in the end, the innocent man escapes from prison, evading his life sentences and experiences freedom – it is a wonderful story of redemption. When I try to explain the Jewish concept of *geulah* – redemption, I use it as a powerful metaphor.

*Parashat Vayiggash*, our Torah reading for this Shabbat, opens with the threat of wrongful imprisonment. While we know that Joseph planted the silver goblet in Benjamin's bag, it seems that Benjamin will be sent to prison, creating a clear injustice.

But that seemingly unavoidable ending is averted through the powerful soliloquy that opens our *parashah*. In it Judah assumes the mantle of moral leadership by narrating the events from his perspective and volunteering to be incarcerated instead of Benjamin. In addition, he appeals to Joseph, begging him to have compassion toward the family.

At this, Joseph breaks down. Sending out his guards, he cries bitterly and tells his brothers: “*Ani Yosef* – I am Joseph.”

It is the most powerful scene of reconciliation in the Torah.

The enormity of the moment comes not merely from the intensity of the feeling of reconciliation, the extent of the wrong that had been done to Joseph by his brothers, but also from the many years that Joseph has been separated from his brothers.

They initially conspire to kill him, settling for selling him into slavery instead. In addition, he is thrown into prison in Egypt for crimes he did not commit.

Imagine his desolation, his loneliness during those years. Alone in a foreign country, removed from his family, from his people, he sits in a state of darkness – contemplating the wrongs that had been done to him.

But somehow, he never gives up hope.

This reminded me of the same feeling in *The Shawshank Redemption* and given the death of Nelson Mandela, may his memory be for a blessing, it reminded me of him.

While Mandela's relationship with the Jewish people and Israel was complex, he was an inspiring leader – from whom he can learn much and there are striking parallels to Joseph's life.



Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for a lifetime sentence for his actions in the 1960s when he worked to overthrow the unjust apartheid regime in South Africa where a minority of whites ruled over a majority of blacks, subjecting them to an organized system of subjugation and second-class status.

Ultimately, Mandela spent 27 years in prison. Did he despair? Did he lose hope?

No.

He was a remarkable figure.

Finally, when the tide of change came and world pressure freed him – he negotiated with the white rulers of South Africa. Not only was he freed from prison and was the entire system of government changed in South Africa so that blacks could vote, but he reconciled with his former oppressors. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought a measure of healing to both blacks and whites in South Africa.

These are powerful traits of leadership.

Looking back on Mandela's life, we can learn valuable lessons. First, he did not lose hope. I thought of our own Jewish dissident of about the same time: Anatoly Sharansky, who was also wrongfully imprisoned in Siberia by the former Soviet Union. He did not despair. These leaders had an inner well of strength and faith that sustained them during years of wrongful imprisonment.

Since his death, I have read a number of articles about Mandela. In one, I learned that apparently there was a proposed prisoner exchange in 1984 which would have freed both Mandela and Sharansky. In

the end, the South African government rejected that proposal, while Sharansky was freed in 1986 due to intense pressure from the United States government. Mandela was freed in 1990.

Mandela said: “I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one’s head pointed toward the sun, one’s feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.” (— Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*)

The Torah shares that Joseph also never gave up hope. After he was jailed, we learn “*Vayehi Adonai et Yosef* – and God was with Joseph.”

It’s an unusual formulation – normally, the text would use a different preposition. What does this mean for God to be “*et Yosef* – to Joseph?” To me, this speaks to attitude. God was with Joseph and Joseph was with God. Joseph kept a positive outlook even in the face of his desperate situation. Faith is about feeling God’s presence, sensing positive energy even in the face of darkness, fear and difficulty. But the similarity between Mandela and Joseph runs deeper than the years of isolation. They are profoundly similar because of the powerful moments of reconciliation.

In our *parashah*, the reunion with his brothers is intense – we can feel the raw emotional built up over years of separation and the ability to finally free himself of all that anger. For Mandela, somehow he did not hold onto all the anger of his almost three decades in prison. He reconciled with the white rulers who had hurt him and his people so badly.

Building a new nation – one where blacks and whites would live together, Mandela sought to recreate South Africa in the vision of what he felt and believed.

He said: “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.” [...] Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”

“You will achieve more in this world through acts of mercy than you will through acts of retribution.”

That was a remarkable trait of Mandela; he was willing to forgive and build bridges. When he became president, he went out of his way to reach out the white South African community. He did this on many levels, but perhaps one of the most powerful was through rugby. Embraced by whites, rugby was a large part of white South African culture. When South Africa hosted the 1995 Rugby World Cup, the first major sporting event after the end of apartheid, he was a part of it.

South Africa was the Cinderella story of that World Cup. Following South Africa’s victory, [Mandela](#), wearing the South African team’s rugby shirt and cap, presented the championship trophy to the South African captain – it was a moment when the entire country – blacks and whites – came together as one.



Of course, Mandela demonstrated deep moral leadership throughout his life. Joseph demonstrated this during his interactions with Potiphar's wife, where his moral character became clear. He resisted her sexual overtures, proving his ethical orientation.

When Mandela was on trial in 1961, he gave an incredible speech about why he was committed to his cause of freedom for blacks in South Africa. "During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Similarly, he understood that a life lived only for one's self is not enough.

"For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

But the key place of similarity between Joseph and Nelson Mandela is not only that once they were freed did they become strong leaders, but that they understood that it starts with one's self.

I understand that Joseph's years in prison were transformative. He learned humility and matured. I have often wondered why Joseph, during all his years as the Egyptian Vizier, did not contact his family, his father back in Canaan. My father, Rabbi Stephen Lerner, once pointed out to me that perhaps the reason is because we should understand Joseph's incarceration continuing beyond his actual time in prison. Even after he becomes second-in-command to Pharaoh, he was still not himself; he had to pass himself off as an Egyptian, even taking on an Egyptian name – *Tzafnat Panei'ah*. He was not really himself, nor could he reveal his true self.

When he finally reveals himself to his brothers, he breaks free of that mask, using his name *Yosef*/Joseph. He had changed himself, reconnecting with his core self, but as a more moral and mature person.

Mandela himself moved away from violence towards peaceful resistance which led him to negotiate with his captors.

As he said, “One of the things I learned when I was negotiating was that until I changed myself, I could not change others.”

In order to grow, one must begin with one’s self. As Plato taught: “know thyself.” Mandela was someone who began with himself – he exhibited humble leadership – reaching out and reconciling with his enemies.

In that way, he follows the best of the Joseph story.

May there be more leaders like him in the world and may his memory be for a blessing.