

MADIBA'S RABBONIM

BY STEVEN GRUZD

NELSON MANDELA CAME into contact with many Jewish people over his long career – as a lawyer, activist, politician, president and the world’s greatest fundraiser. A beautifully-produced new book, entitled *Jewish Memories of Mandela* – with over 200 photographs, some never previously published – tells the ganse megillah, combining historical narrative with personal reflections. The anecdotes below give a flavour of some of Mandela’s more amusing run-ins with our rabbonim.

Mandela formed a warm personal bond with the avuncular late Chief Rabbi Harris, whom he affectionately called “the chief” and “my rabbi”. But his wife, Ann Harris, almost got the chief into some serious shtoch. In 1989, she was in a delegation organised by Jews for Social Justice that met the still-banned ANC in Lusaka, and the recently-appointed Chief Rabbi was summoned to explain this to the anxious machers on the Union of Orthodox Synagogues’ management committee. He’d just heard that Mandela himself was on his way from Victor Verster Prison to meet with then president PW Botha, so he told them: “I don’t know why you’re getting so excited. At the moment the president is having tea with Nelson Mandela!”

In July 1998, the Chief Rabbi and Rebbetzen had to keep shtum about one of SA’s biggest secrets – the imminent wedding of Nelson Mandela to Graça Machel. Two days before, they were invited to give a special blessing at Mandela’s Houghton home, because they would not be able to attend the ceremony itself on Shabbat. Rabbi Harris wrote: “At

16h00 precisely, the car braved the media army and passed through the gates to be met by the press secretary. A short statement told the media that the President was receiving two eastern European diplomats. It did not seem odd to them that one was bearded and wore a kippah.”

Rabbi Yossy Goldman of the Sydenham-Highlands North Hebrew Congregation had a close encounter of the Madiba kind in June



Former chief Rabbi Cyril Harris z'l shared a close bond with Madiba.

1994. Walking home from shul, he bumped into the president who was taking a relaxing stroll around Oaklands near the rabbi’s home. The Goldman clan quickly assembled – the children held his hand and joined him on his walk, while the rov schmoozed with the prez to gather enough stuff for a superb Shabbes droshe.

When Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in 1995, President Mandela personally attended the memorial service in Johannesburg’s Oxford Synagogue, along with other senior ANC officials, including Walter Sisulu and Tokyo Sexwale (then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki had represented South Africa at the funeral in Jerusalem). Mandela’s remarks

highlighted Rabin’s courage and the hope that the search for peace would not be derailed by his tragic death.

Chief Rabbi Harris recalled a conversation Mandela had with an earnest young Torah Academy pupil as he left the Rabin memorial service (as overheard by Rabbi Ivan Lerner of Claremont Shul). The young man, aged about 13, had jumped the queue to shake Mandela’s hand, and that vintage Madiba charm and menschedikheid shone through:

“Tell me, young man, what’s your name?” the President asked. The boy told him. “And which school do you go to?”

“Torah Academy,” the boy answered with pride. The President had never heard of this Lubavitch school, but nodded as if he had.

“Very good,” he continued. “Tell me, do you study hard?” The boy’s face shone.

“Oh sir,” he replied, “I study really hard, morning, afternoon and evening.”

“That’s fine,” said the President, encouragingly. “I want you to know that if you continue studying really hard, one day you may become the president of South Africa.”

There was a pause. “What? Me? Become president?” the startled boy uttered, looking up from beneath his big black hat. “I can’t become president. I’m not black.” The President looked down at him.

“Young man,” he declared with great seriousness, “this is a democracy.”

To pre-order *Jewish Memories of Mandela*, jointly published by the SA Jewish Board of Deputies and the Umoja Foundation, at a special limited-offer price of R400 (recommended retail price is R450), please email beagle@beyachad.co.za. **IL**



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