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Finding Mandela

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Finding Mandela

Several years ago, a high-level Israeli official asked me to tell him everything I could about how the Israelis might find their Palestinian Mandela. His question was interesting and appropriate but also troubling because the Afrikaners didn't really "find" Mandela. It took several months before the answer came to me. Show me the Palestinian to whom you Israelis are willing to *lose*, and I will to show you your Palestinian Mandela.

My friend had overlooked the fact that Mandela and the African National Congress had *won* in South Africa. The decisive element in the so-called miracle was that white South Africans had, in one way or another and to varying degrees, accepted this outcome and had made it, if not their victory, then certainly something other than their defeat.

Much has been written about the many factors that drove the process forward, but no one would deny that leadership—Mandela's leadership—played a decisive role. Although he was offered his freedom numerous times if he would just give up the struggle against apartheid, it was a deal that only a quisling would make. Mandela was made of sterner stuff and refused to make the fundamental concession that the Afrikaners sought.

De Klerk's decision to release Mandela unconditionally came in response to the unrest that had rendered the country ungovernable. De Klerk hoped to engage Mandela in a lengthy process of negotiation in which he could be coaxed into making critical compromises. Nevertheless, after many ups and downs, it was de Klerk, not Mandela, who made the fundamental compromises.

How did this unbelievable turn of events come about? The standard political science answer is that de Klerk found himself on a slippery slope where he thought that every concession was the last needed to get Mandela to comply. Still, this account cannot explain why, in the end, de Klerk conceded power to the ANC especially when the South African state was not on the verge of collapse.

It is always difficult to look into the mind of a political leader at a crucial moment. Nevertheless, I think that a fundamental shift took place in the way de Klerk saw Mandela. De Klerk came to power thinking that Mandela was the only African who could make the concessions needed to keep Afrikaner South Africa afloat. Slowly, he came to see Mandela instead as the African who could give Afrikaners a future they could live with.

Mandela let no opportunity pass to talk about the place of white South Africans in the new South Africa. He emphasized time and again that majority rule did not mean the domination of the white minority by a black majority. Seeking a "middle ground between white fears and black hopes," Mandela laid the very foundation for peace—"We do not want to drive you into the sea"—because there would be no peace unless white South Africans heard and believed his words.

In virtually every statement, Mandela presented a vision of the future in which white South Africans would be appreciated and respected. Those who heard him felt that they, their family, and their community could have a satisfying and secure life in what he was describing. Rather than offering concessions that would prop up the old, Mandela was offering a future to many who had begun to doubt that they had one.

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Israelis need to find a Palestinian Mandela, and Palestinians need to find an Israeli Mandela. However, the Mandela they need to find is not the leader who will make the concessions they seek but the *one* to whom they can *make* the concessions they say they cannot offer. Mandela was this kind of leader because

his repeated actions and unequivocal words gave witness to a future that Afrikaners could embrace without fear.

Mandela presents leaders today with a twin challenge. First, how do we find the person on the other side to whom we can make the concessions that we feel we cannot afford to make? Second and much more important, how can we become the persons to whom the other side can make the concessions they say they cannot make? Both are important, but the second is critical in a time when each, standing back, looks to the other to perform the difficult actions needed to move the peace process forward.

Progress toward peace between the Israelis and Palestinians is not stalled because no one can envision the final settlement. Every thoughtful observer knows that some rough approximation of the Clinton formula is the only deal possible. The question is not so much *what* is needed—this much is known. The real question is *who* will lead us there.