

# Passover offers us the promise of freedom through duty and responsibility

Warren Goldstein

AT SUNSET today begins the ancient festival of Passover. Jews all around the world will gather in synagogues and in their homes to remember and celebrate, and to give praise and thanksgiving to G-d for the dramatic events of the Exodus.

It is a festival of freedom which marks the 3 323rd anniversary since G-d liberated a slave nation from the oppression of ancient Egypt. It is a time to appreciate what freedom is all about. Fortuitously, Passover usually occurs in April, which also marks the anniversary of the birth of the new South Africa.

Now is also an appropriate time to reflect on the meaning of freedom, as many nations across the world are struggling for their freedom.

Passover, as the great biblical festival of freedom, is the key to understanding the secret of freedom. As recorded in the Book of Exodus, the Jewish people were taken as soon as possible by G-d from Egypt to Mount Sinai. The message is clear.

The freedom from Egypt was only completed at Mount Sinai with the revelation of the Ten Commandments, and all of G-d's principles for a moral and just society.

The Hebrew Bible tells us that the words of the Ten Command-

ments were "engraved on the tablets" (Exodus 32:16). The Hebrew word for "engraved" is *charut*, which is linked to the Hebrew word *cheirut*, which means freedom.

The word linkage, says the Talmud, teaches us that the engraved letters of the Ten Commandments on the tablets of stone are the gateway to freedom. This is counter-intuitive. How can it be that the words of duty and obligation contained in the Ten Commandments, replete with the instruction "Thou shalt not", are our path to freedom?

Paradoxically, the gateway to freedom is duty and obligation.

We South Africans know this to

be true. We have a strong constitution with a Bill of Rights that offers legal protection to every member of our society.

But we also know that ultimately the courts alone cannot protect us.

When people clamour for their own individual rights without any notion of duty or responsibility, then we have the chaos and loneliness of a selfish society.

When people grab what they can without any concept of ethics or morality, then we have the suffering and fear of a lawless and violent society. We can only ensure our own freedom when we pursue the freedom of others. We can only be free when the

values of goodness, justice and morality pervade all that we do and are.

The greatest protection for freedom and human rights is when moral values are embraced as vital responsibilities. How can we make these lofty dreams of a society based on responsibility and freedom come true? The secret lies in another lesson of Passover: the power of strong families.

On the first nights of Passover, families and friends throughout the Jewish world gather around their tables to talk, to learn, to sing, to debate and to eat, but with the primary focus on the experiences and moral lessons of the Exodus from

Egypt. And that is the secret of a vibrant, sustained moral commitment for any society – families and homes coming alive with the energy and inspiration of values, ideals and moral principles.

The wicked apartheid system targeted and aimed to break up families. So, as we rebuild the new South Africa, we must reverse the evils of apartheid by focusing on the great strength of our nation, and that is our families. Whether they live in opulent mansions or in simple shacks, they have the power to make these values come alive.

When parents impart their wisdom and values to children, and

when children engage with and integrate these values, then we'll live in a better country and a better world.

Here in a practical suggestion: let each family across our nation dedicate one night a week which is their special family night dedicated to discuss the values that make a good person. Let us use the model of Passover and the great Exodus from Egypt as the gateway to truly liberate South Africa through the power of moral values and responsibility, and strong, vibrant and engaged families. For this is our guarantee of a great future.

● *Goldstein is South Africa's Chief Rabbi.*

## STEVE BIKO'S MESSAGE STILL APPLIES

# We need to learn how it is for others

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

A VIGOROUS debate has taken place in the media, in academic institutions, and among the general public since Sunday World reporter Kuli Roberts's insulting commentary about coloured identity, and Jimmy Manyi's remarks, from the corridors of power, on the "oversupply" of coloureds.

Some have invoked "freedom of speech" to defend the authors over statements that have caused pain among many coloured people. And on the other side of the debate, the protagonists of this national drama have been accused of racism.

Neither the human rights lens (freedom of expression) nor the race debate shine the light on what is at the heart of the problem: the continuing exclusion of people from groups that are different from one's own and treating them as the "Other".

The effect is a lack of recognition of the worth and dignity of those perceived as the "Other", and the ease with which they are denigrated and stripped of their identity as members of the human family. Thus, it becomes easy to use words that one normally applies to cattle and inanimate things like stock that may be in high or low supply.

What is frightening about this notion of the "oversupply" of coloureds is that it conjures up images of slavery and a time when human life was measured not in terms of its value in social relationships, but rather as mere instruments for fulfilling the demands of production.

Considering that slavery is part of the history of the Western Cape, it is not inconceivable that slave masters in this province may have pondered the question of the "oversupply" of slaves, and considered moving them around to "balance" the numbers.

The apartheid government deliberated on these very same issues, and perfected the plan of controlling black numbers in the cities through influx control policies.

Many of us feel sad and disillusioned that language that harkens back to the days of slavery and apartheid is being re-established to frame debates about legislation today.

What is missing in the discourse that has been introduced by Manyi is reflective engagement with the past, and an understanding of the strategy of "preferential treatment"

of coloureds in the Western Cape as a policy that was rooted in the apartheid government's divide and rule policy.

This is why I believe invoking Steve Biko and the days of Black Consciousness, as some have done, brings this historical past of the apartheid government's social engineering into sharp focus.

During the days of the Black Consciousness movement, the designation "black" was embraced by many black people in all their diversity, because it represented the shared identity and aspirations of people who were marginalised and oppressed under apartheid.

The inclusive language was an important cornerstone for the Black Consciousness movement. It eschewed the apartheid government's lines of division among blacks in the interest of higher ideals: black solidarity and a unified resistance movement against apartheid.

It was an act of defiance among many coloured people who led or joined the struggle for liberation that they refused to be co-opted into the apartheid government's grand scheme of divide and conquer. The result was a more unified front of black activism that transcended the apartheid government's racial and ethnic divisions.

Thus, there is some truth in the rallying cry that we have seen in some of the articles and letters to newspaper editors in response to Manyi and Roberts, that their statements about coloured people disrupt the unified narrative of blackness from the Black Consciousness days. (Interestingly, Biko, in affirming this unity among blacks, pointed out that black people "have had enough experience as objects of racism not to wish to turn the tables".)

There is, however, a part of the history of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) that has far greater significance for our country today than this story of unity among the oppressed groups under apartheid.

Important as it is for getting a perspective in the current debate, the focus on the black unity dimension of the BCM moves us further away from conversations about the humanising principles espoused by Biko and his comrades in the leadership of the BCM throughout the 1970s, principles that lay a foundation for the non-racial



PAST SHADOWS: The language of slavery and apartheid is being used in today's debates, says the writer.

Picture: MICHAEL WALKER

politics of the 1980s.

The centrality of compassion and care in Biko's message is captured in his vision of a shared humanity, what he called "the quest for true humanity".

This message of shared humanity in our new South Africa was part of the discourse of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It has been quickly abandoned by our leaders in government today, and it is almost non-existent in their public statements.

Biko's profoundly simple yet powerful message calls us to return to the very essence of what it means to be human, to embrace a new consciousness, one based on an ethics of care and compassion for our fellow South Africans.

We saw how this wave of true humanity carried the liberation struggle from the 1970s in its focus on a range of programmes designed to build a sense of responsibility among its members for the broader communities within which they lived and beyond.

This spirit of humanity was carried into the 1980s, and it shaped the non-racialism of political struggle throughout the '80s.

## Who are we? Race & Identity!

In the darkest moments in Cape Town, when the fires were burning in KTC and Crossroads, and the South African Defence Force was destroying lives and homes in black townships, the only healing light was in the coloured suburbs.

By "light" I do not mean street lights; I am referring to hundreds of candle lights that lined the streets of coloured suburbs, and collection centres created in these suburbs for clothes and food.

It was an expression of solidarity with fellow human beings across the "geographic" divides created by apartheid.

The resurgence of the human spirit was seen in other parts of Cape Town, too. It is a story, along with the suffering and destruction witnessed in Cape Town in recent apartheid history, that is memorialised in the permanent memorial at the St George's Cathedral's Crypt Memory and Witness Centre.

It is testimony not only to the

human destruction of the apartheid era, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to the human moments that give us hope in the face of despair.

There has been much despair in recent years because of the apparent impunity with which some in positions of leadership in the ANC have made public statements. Sometimes the utter lack of care for the human dignity of others in these utterances has caused one to cringe with shame.

It is worth noting, for a little perspective, that beginning with the period around ANC campaigns to have charges against President Zuma dropped, there have been troubling, inappropriate, or tasteless statements made in public by people in positions of leadership within the ANC or its alliance partners.

Some of these statements, such as "killing" for Zuma, and calling opponents "cockroaches" or "snakes", were given legitimacy by the ANC leadership in different ways, the most common being that the statements were supposedly only used "euphemistically".

But I digress – let me return to the statements that motivated me to

write this article. Our country prides itself on having a constitution that is one of the most comprehensive of its kind. Given our political history, and the dehumanising aspects of the apartheid past, respect for human dignity is a core principle of our constitution.

The comments by Manyi as a state representative – the very state that is supposed to "respect, protect, and promote" the rights in the Bill of Rights – and his flagrant indifference to the hurt he has caused, remind us that we cannot talk about respect for human dignity without a profound understanding of what the essence of human values are.

The dignity and worth of all individuals and groups impose an obligation on all of us to practise care and compassion towards others.

This requires that we "see" ourselves in the other; that is, a reciprocal mutual recognition – recognising the humanity of the Other as much as we would like them to recognise ours. This, I believe, is the orientation we need to build a spirit of concern for the dignity of others, and a shared humanity into the

future of our country.

When Manyi says that coloureds are in "oversupply" – whatever the context – those words inflict a wound in many of us. In my case, he is talking about my brother Luyanda's two boys, my sister Nombeko's daughter, my son's friend, Mikhail, my friends Bev and Al, and many others.

Manyi should consider that he may have to answer for his statements to his grandchildren. In our plural society, his son or daughter may one day announce that they are marrying a partner from a different racial group to his own.

If our face is reflected in the face of the Other, and we are focused on connecting with the Other as a fellow human being rather than as irredeemably Other (coloured, Indian, white, or black African) then we have a better chance of transcending ourselves in order to reach out to others with compassion.

In this context, the idea of one's child being of a different race is an evocative one because it invites us to seriously consider the possibility that we might respond to the suffering of the Other as if the Other were our own flesh and blood. This possibility of shared humanity with others is captured in the words of Biko:

"We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination, drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible – a more human face."

The guiding principles of Biko's vision are based on a morality that is Other-directed, concerned with promoting the ethical vision of compassion and care for others.

By locating the responsibility for a more caring and humane society in ourselves, Biko seems to be calling us to respond not with the force of righteous entitlement to "freedom of speech" but with the moral force of compassion and care for others. Biko's words point us toward understanding the debate that has erupted about coloured fellow South Africans as a site for ethical engagement, a site for forging human links across time and space with the Other.

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## Whispering v wisdom in ANC

THE book of Ecclesiastes, said to have been written by King Solomon during a difficult period in his life, says in 1:9: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." History does repeat itself. Especially so in the ANC.

Mail & Guardian editor Nic Dawes on Friday detailed the similarities of what happened in the ANC under Thabo Mbeki in 2001, when then-minister of safety and security Steve Tshwete went on national TV saying there was a plot to unseat Mbeki, compelling Tokyo Sexwale, Cyril Ramaphosa and Jacob Zuma to say they did not have any designs on the presidency. National intelligence agencies were also involved in the debacle.

Ten years later, it's the same scenario involving security agencies and senior ANC members. Some of the cast members are different, although Sexwale and Zuma still play major roles. It's a sequel, except that we've seen it before.

Zuma is believed to have accused Sexwale of being behind the revelations about his love child with Irvin Khoza's daughter to create grounds for him to be recalled as president.

These are the rumours going around in politics, a soapie that is far more entertaining than anything

### In My Arrogant Opinion khaya dlanga



Generations could come up with. We have been hearing, as they say in Xhosa, *amahemhem* that Sexwale is trying to position himself for the presidency of the ANC, and by extension, of the country. An obvious move considering that the country post-apartheid has not had a democratically elected president who was not also president of the ANC. Kgalema Motlanthe was appointed president, not elected.

Three scenarios could play out for Zuma. He could stand as president unopposed after laying his foes to waste with his powers while he is president. The other possibility is that he could go to Mangaung believing he would win against Sexwale, or Kgalema Motlanthe, although Motlanthe may be too much of a gentleman to want to go head to head with Zuma. He would most likely strike a deal to remain his deputy and guarantee himself the presidency in 2017.

The third is that Zuma could be outmanoeuvred before the conference and "graciously" bow out by saying he'll be a one-term president,

not acknowledging the back door wheeling and dealing. The victors would then praise him publicly as a great man while knowing what happened behind scenes.

Zuma's only saving grace in Mangaung would be if the ANC's alliance partners do not agree on whom they want as their next president. If his potential troublemakers do not unite, he gets the majority.

If Sexwale has eyes on the presidency, his biggest stumbling block is not Zuma. It's the deputy president.

Motlanthe is highly respected in the ANC. Some see him as the last true ANC man. He is not seen as someone who is trying to be president, whereas Sexwale is perceived that way, therefore some wonder if he can be trusted, particularly the unionists who will most likely play on his health by saying he can no longer relate to the masses.

A Sexwale presidency might not be so bad. He might open the way for the modernisation of the ANC. Before Polokwane, he spoke about the ANC adopting the primaries system favoured by the US Democrats and Republicans, which allows ordinary members of the party to vote for a preferred candidate, instead of the back room wheeling and dealing.

I don't think modernising the ANC would be a bad thing at all.

## SA breaks its silence over Swazi crisis

THE Swaziland "uprising" last week ended, as had previous opposition demonstrations, with much less of a bang than a whimper. It was called off a day early. To be fair to the opposition, there were many, indeed, bangs, on the heads of protestors dealt by sometimes brutal police – and those are what stopped the protests.

But even the Joburg-based Swaziland Solidarity Network berated its own compatriots for failing to muster the revolutionary fervour to really confront and rattle the government.

Swaziland is a peculiar country. There is evidently considerable popular support for King Mswati III and the monarchy. But exactly how much, no one can say for certain, because it has never been tested.

Lacking such evidence, most commentators square the differences by guessing that most Swazis probably support a constitutional monarchy. The Swazi government likes to claim Swazis already have a constitutional monarchy, citing the 2006 constitution that guarantees freedom of expression, association, assembly and so on.

But that constitution also makes clear that such freedoms are enjoyed only at the pleasure of the monarch. And they have not led to

### Window on Africa peter fabricius



the unbanning of opposition political parties. The constitution also allows the monarch to continue to exercise ultimate power in other ways, such as appointing the prime minister or dissolving parliament.

So Swaziland is not a constitutional monarchy, even if some observers believe it is also not quite an absolute monarchy. They note that unions are allowed to operate and to strike and that even if freedom of expression stops short of allowing the king to be criticised, it does not and has not prevented sharp criticism of his government.

It is perhaps this ambiguity about the monarchy which has prevented opposition really taking off. But that may be changing. Last week's protests were different for two reasons. First, the real democratic uprisings in North Africa provided some contagion effect.

And second, the dire state of the Swazi economy made the government feel more vulnerable and also gave an added cutting edge to the protests, much of which were directed at the 5 percent cut in pub-

lic servants' salaries to try to balance the budget. These two new ingredients attracted greater international attention, including media focus, than usual. And they also made the government more jumpy.

So the government cracked down more forcibly than usual on protestors. It also cracked down on foreign journalists, aggravating the public relations problem which became a disaster.

Which made the normally indifferent southern African region at last sit up and take note. Especially South Africa. Cosatu has been lending strong vocal support to the Swazi opposition for about a decade and has gone further to try to impose economic sanctions, such as blockading border posts.

But the government has remained silent, drawing unfavourable comparisons with its relatively active Zimbabwe policy.

Last week, though, the government called for calm and restraint by all parties. It also urged the Swazis "to begin a political dialogue with a view to seek a speedy and peaceful solution".

Some Swaziland watchers, like Dimpho Motsamai of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in Pretoria, hoped that the government would have gone further, perhaps

threatening to flex its economic leverage over its tiny landlocked neighbour.

But against the backdrop of the prevailing quiet (or absent?) diplomacy, the statement gained significance, perhaps signalling, as one official suggested, that Swaziland was now on South Africa's agenda.

Let us remember that this followed closely on the Southern African Development Community (SADC) security troika summit in Livingstone, where President Jacob Zuma and his regional peers gave President Robert Mugabe a stern lecture.

And Swaziland certainly needs South Africa's intervention. The immediate issue of the present crisis will probably be resolved by the unions agreeing to the 5 percent salary cut in exchange for the government rescinding a recent hike in politicians' perks. But the salary hikes alone will not stave off looming bankruptcy. With other reforms, they will bring loans from the International Monetary Fund. But the Swazi government needs much more money. Commercial banks are not lending it nearly enough.

To gain credibility, Swaziland needs a real democracy, and perhaps South Africa is now going to start trying to help it get one.