

Our Madiba moment of reconciliation

ON MANDELA Day, sandwiches were made and handed out, blankets knitted and distributed and speeches given by impressive and inspiring world leaders.

It is fitting then that on that auspicious day, I experienced what I believe was a profound "Mandela moment", one that exemplified the Madiba values and spirit.

Following some highly abusive and anti-semitic comments posted on a Whatsapp group recently, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies and the 16-year-old administrator of the group laid criminal charges against two young men.

Soon afterwards, the offenders approached us with an apology.

It was agreed that the board and the administrator would meet them on July 18. I was privileged to be a part of this meaningful process.

The two young men and their fathers expressed true remorse and regret for the hateful words posted on that site. There was no attempt at justification on their part, no wish to abdicate responsibility, just a full and unequivocal expression of contrition.

After the official apologies, each of them spontaneously and with clear sincerity offered personal apologies.

Many people voiced concern at the board's readiness to accept the apology. Some suggested we had too readily allowed the offenders to get "off the hook".

They also questioned the genuine nature of the apology, wondering whether the young men were simply avoiding having to answer in court for their actions.

In my responses, I try to convey the emotion and remorse expressed by the offenders and their families, who accompanied them for support.

They could have simply handed over their formal written apologies and been on their way. But they didn't do that. They shared with us some very personal experiences and went beyond the formalities, expressing their regret at these posts. This was not an easy process for all present, but it was truly moving.

The young pupil on whose Whatsapp group the anti-semitic comments were made was also deeply affected by the apologies. They were not the mean people he expected them to be. Rather, he realised, they were youngsters just like him.

No longer were they hiding behind the anonymity of their cellphones. Rather, they were sharing some painful and difficult issues and, most importantly, they were able to connect and break down the stereotypes.

For the board, dealing with anti-semitic incidents is never in the first instance about simple retribution.

Rather, we try to change attitudes and explain why the

behaviour is so hurtful and potentially dangerous.

In this regard the two young men involved will attend a sensitivity programme at the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre, where they will be exposed to understanding the Holocaust and how it came about.

It did not start with killing, but with words.

As we all know, apologising is never easy. It should never be underestimated how hard it can be to take responsibility for your actions and to face those you might have harmed.

It is even harder in that this matter is so public.

The animosity that regrettably exists between sections of the Jewish and Muslim communities complicates the situation even further.

Sadly, in the majority of the cases that the board is currently pursuing, the perpetrators vehemently refuse to acknowledge any wrongdoing, leaving us with extended litigation.

Cosatu international relations spokesperson Bongani Masuku, who threatened Jewish South Africans in February 2008, was found guilty of hate speech first by the SA Human Rights Commission and then in the Johannesburg High Court's Equality Court last year.

Eight years later, still resolute in his refusal to apologise to the Jewish community, he will now be taking the judgment to the Appeal Court.

Similarly, former ANC Western Cape leader Marius Fransman has refused to apologise for a series of inflammatory and insulting comments made in 2013, snubbing the SA Human Rights Commission's attempts to mediate.

We expect the final commission ruling shortly.

In July 2014 Tony Ehrenreich, Cosatu's then Western Cape chairman, posted comments calling for "an eye for an eye" retaliation against the Jewish leadership whenever a Palestinian woman or child was killed in Gaza. He, too, has stubbornly refused to express any form of regret for what amounted to incitement to kill fellow South Africans.

These are genuine, implacable haters that we will meet in court, however long it might take.

And that is why we were happy to accept the apology of the two young men who approached us in a spirit of true contrition and readiness to acknowledge that they had done wrong.

For all of us present, it was a Mandela moment – one when an encounter born in anger and outrage turned into an opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation.

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