

How a Rugby World Cup Echoes a War of the Ages

By Ilan Herrmann



The Springboks did not mince their words when announcing their intention to ‘take it all the way’ at the Rugby World Cup 2023. But then again, neither did the other top-rated contenders from around the globe. The rugby world was treated to superlative play as the group-rounds progressed to the knockouts, with all the expected heavy-weights qualifying (save for a surprisingly poor performance by Australia).

The South African Jewish community is permeated by Bok-crazy fans — some of whom were lucky enough to be able to attend the magnificent event in France, personally and not virtually!

David Berman, an ex-pat Durbanite, who now operates as a successful hedge fund manager based in NY, is one such fan.

Berman had also been in Japan 2019, celebrating as the final whistle blew and SA were crowned the World Champions. He was there too in France 2023 for a few of the mighty clashes. But Berman will tell you categorically that ‘this one’ was different. Of any of the many previous Bok Tests or World Cups that Berman had attended, France 2023 will stand out as the most emotional experience of them all. But before we unravel why – let’s take a step back ...

The build-up to every Rugby World Cup is under constant microscopic scrutiny by pundits across the globe. Berman is a highly respected analyst of the game, particularly with regard to the Springboks. His insights are appreciated by a wide audience: rugby career veterans, current players, rugby experts and general followers of the game. His commentary is featured in magazine op-eds, newspapers and on social-media platforms.

So, after examining, analysing and evaluating the France 2023 World Cup, Berman shared his measured thoughts across the spectrum of readers and viewers, and then held his breath as the ultimate rugby tournament began.

The Boks’ qualification through the pool stages was generally assured. Aside from the one pool stage clash between Ireland and South Africa, the Bokke cruised through. Berman attended the pivotal RSA vs Ireland test match, which validated his opinion as to why both teams were favourites to lift the trophy. The Irish were super-energised, clinical and quick in their play.

Yes, the Irish were formidable — they defeated the Boks 13-11, but the Boks still showed much promise. Berman lamented that the Irish did not go all the way as, “their spirit was spectacular and stood out in their exciting play.”

From France, Berman flew back to the USA via Israel, in order to spend Yom Kippur and Sukkot with close family. He imbibed the spiritual and emotional intensity of the Day of Atonement



From the heart of a committed Jew and in the heart of a diehard Springbok supporter



(Yom Kippur) and the Festival of Tabernacles (Sukkot) that is unique to the Holy Land.

It was but one day before the savage and murderous October 7th Shabbat massacre, perpetrated by Hamas terrorists in southern Israel, that Berman returned to NY. This proximity in time and space brought the catastrophe very close to home for him. Being in Israel just the day before the terror attack and the launch of a multitude of missiles across central Israel became somewhat incomprehensible to a shell-shocked David. The heartbreak and panic of the massacre and the barbarous cruelty of the hostage-taking gutted him. Watching it unfold on Cable and receiving details from his family in Israel, meant that David spent his days on-edge and sleepless nights – not knowing what was to come next.

Reeling from the incessant barrage of media coverage of the Hamas-Israeli war, Berman was attending a family Bar-Mitzvah around the time of the next Bok Test - the quarter-final game in Paris between SA and host nation France. The Boks would be playing ‘Les Bleus’ in their own back yard. A stream of blue-clad fans packed the Stade de France in Saint-Denis. The SA national anthem ‘Nkosi Sikelele’ was sung by a fraction of the stadium, while the rendering of ‘La Marseille’ boomed out from the crowd of spectators.

How the heightened arousal of the French supporting crowd might influence the game was a definite concern. The Boks, playing without Malcolm Marx, hooker and a key player, was an even bigger concern.

The fixture turned out to be a tight contest that might have gone either way. The Boks prevailed in a pulsating and titanic struggle, winning 29-28 and progressing to the final four. A Pollard penalty followed by an Etzebeth try and conversion put the SA team four points to the good. The French closed-in to one point through a penalty, but SA held firm for the win.

The semi-finals against mighty England beckoned. Berman decided he could not miss this tantalising contest. The Boks were outplayed in the first half, but rallied in the second. Pinned back, but gallant in their steely resilience, the Boks turned the screw. In a match in which they were constantly under pressure, the Boks edged out England, 16-15, in a truly historic win.

However, for David Berman, all these packed-out test matches were played under the ever-looming, ominous shadow of the ongoing Israeli-Gazan war. Following the Sabbath of Slaughter on October 7, when Hamas terrorists launched a pre-meditated and calculated rampage on resting and unsuspecting Israeli settlements; the global rise in anti-semitism and the vitriolic outpouring of hatred aimed at Israel and Jews worldwide; the violent protest marches in support of Hamas and their atrocities



– was alarming. A surreal and startling new reality was felt for all Jews and Israelis everywhere.

As David reflected on the enduring resilience and resolute nature of Israel in its counter-struggle, he recognised in the people of Israel a stalwartness reminiscent of, and akin to, the sheer grit of the ‘Green and Gold’ rugby squad. Both comprised forces of field-soldiers able to absorb extreme pressure under attack; to rally from the attack with scintillating forward-power. This image resonated in David’s pondering. If a metaphor could be borrowed from sport to glean an insight into the marvel that is Israel, its indomitable Defence Force and its people, perhaps something of it could be seen in the microcosm of the recent Rugby World Cup he’d been watching. Perhaps there is a likeness in the Springboks’ intensity and determination to gain supremacy, and the demonstrated military genius of the IDF — being caught on the back foot — and then turning a gravely challenging situation around and ultimately prevailing.

It all felt very different now for David as his mind began to anticipate the ‘big one’ to come — the Boks in the Final against their nemesis — the formidable All Blacks, now in top form and fired up.

Berman had the pleasure of having two of his older sons, Josh and Jacob (he has six children) join him, as well his friend, Philip.

On the day of the Final, while the spectators stood as the national anthems were being played, somewhere in Berman’s psyche, he heard echoes of the beautiful nuances of the Hatikvah. Again that subtle cross-over nudged him as Berman watched the Boks huddle and brace their shoulders. A strength in unity was palpably emanating from the Bok team. They would go on either to victory or to defeat, as a single unified squad ...

The green and gold Bokke were victorious that night. As he watched them play — every maul, line-out, scrum and blistering tackle — David couldn’t help but see, in his mind’s eye, shadows of the blue and white flags of the IDF soldiers. For every minute of the 80 minutes of play, the spirit of the IDF infused the game for Berman. He watched, with double vision, the herculean valiance, heroism, stoicism and resolve of the Springboks, and of the IDF, as they galvanised themselves to outmanoeuvre a massive opponent.

David returned to New York with his nerve-ends twitching and his emotions soaring. His beloved Bokke had triumphed yet again. The men in the green and gold had gained a magnificent victory on the battlefield of the Stade de France in Saint-Denis, France.

Yet, Berman’s euphoria was tempered by another, altogether different challenge, one which was still underway; a critical battle, a supremely existential and historical challenge; that is, the IDF’s continuing efforts to overcome its own current nemesis, Hamas. Every scrum, tackle and ruck against the



barbaric opposition would move the heroic blue and whites, the united IDF team, one step closer to its imminent victory; every long-range throw or powerful and paced forward charge would bring triumph to the citizens of the State of Israel.

With the certainty and firm belief that our ‘Captain’, the Guardian of Israel, neither slumbers nor sleeps; from the unity of the Jewish nation who stands together as ‘one person with one heart’ though they walk through the Valley of Death - our triumph is assured. We, the Eternal People, too will come home carrying the golden trophy and once again the Jewish nation will be adorned with the golden medals of the victors.

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