

THE MAKINGS OF A JEWISH LEADER

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In this week's parsha we are introduced to the most central figure in all of Jewish history - even in all civilized history, our teacher Moshe. The Torah, as is its wont, does not tell us many details about the life of Moshe from the time he was just past twenty years of age, fleeing from Pharaoh's wrath at his killing of an Egyptian taskmaster, until his reemergence as the leader of the enslaved Jewish people when he is already eighty years of age.

Legend has Moshe serving as a king of an African nation during this period of time. The Torah only relates to us how he chanced across the daughters of Yitro, saved them from the persecution of their fellow - but male - shepherds, eventually married one of them, Zipporah, and remained in the employ of his father-in-law, Yitro.

On the surface, at least, this is not much of a resume' for the greatest prophet, leader and lawgiver in all of human history. Yet strangely enough this is a template that repeats itself in Jewish history. We are taught: "Man sees only superficially with one's eyes while the Lord sees to the true heart and abilities of the person."

The great King David, the messianic forbearer of Jewish and human destiny, was overlooked even by the prophet Samuel as being worthy of founding the house of Jewish royalty. All of Jewish history, in fact all of human history, is nothing more than a collection of ironies, seeming coincidences and unexpected choices and events. All human history is truly a province of God's inscrutable will.

The Torah apparently does not desire leaders of Israel who had perfect backgrounds. The Talmud pithily teaches us that no one should be appointed as a public official unless he carries with him on his shoulders "a box of crawling reptiles."

In our raucous world of Israeli politics, this adage is many times to an extreme of observance. Nevertheless it is obvious that great leaders may emerge from strange places and backgrounds. In our own times great leaders and teachers of the Torah community gained prominence and influence even though they did not come from the normal yeshiva world track. Some were literally anonymous figures until their greatness in Torah and leadership somehow emerged in public view.

Background, yichus, family pedigree, education and previous experience are all certainly to be taken into account when choosing a mate, an employee, a leader and anyone to whom great responsibilities are to be assigned. But one should always be prepared for the unexpected in Jewish

life and especially in leadership in Jewish society.

Moshe, David, the Gaon of Vilna and many others became the unlikely leaders of Israel through God's grace and their own diligence, talents, charisma and devotion to the God and the people of Israel. The rabbis again stated correctly "The people of Israel are never bereft and widowed without leadership." That leadership may arise from a surprising source but it always does arise to guide and strengthen us.

Shabat shalom

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com