

What Makes a Great Leader?

The Book of Genesis, Bereishit, ends with Joseph as the primary character. Exodus, Shemot, introduces us to Moses. Both are emblematic of the Jewish people. The greatness of our tradition is that it has survived conquests, tragedies, oppression, near extinction and yet somehow has managed to overcome them. Some see this as the result of Divine Intervention. But Divine Intervention does not work when we ourselves make the wrong decisions. There is another very interesting possibility that our survival also depends on our adaptability.

Joseph was cut off from his family. He found himself in exile under extremely unfavorable conditions. Using both his brain and his faith he managed to overcome all the difficulties and be the agent of saving his people.

Moses was the same. Brought up in two very different worlds, exiled from them both. Seemingly at the end of his career he becomes the agent of Jewish renewal and growth and to this day the symbol of how the connection between the people and God through Torah is the core of our way of life.

Neither was brought up in what we might call a ghetto or a protected world that was disconnected from everything around them or indeed other cultures. It was their individuality rather than their conformity that raised them above the rest.

The historicity of these two figures is less important than the message the Torah conveys through them. That we need to experience and participate in the society we find ourselves in. But to do this without losing one's soul one needs to retain and nurture that which makes us distinctive, our Jewish life and values. We need to be less concerned with conforming, losing or destroying and more with building.