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“Every nation has the government it deserves” – Joseph de Maistre, 1851

Here is a fun parlor game: Take a famous leader and conjecture whether he or she became prominent because of the times in which they lived, or because of their personal attributes. In other words, do the needs of the time call up great leaders, or would the same people always emerge as great, regardless of the times? If we take the examples of Pharaoh and Moses, say, in this week’s parsha, does this Pharaoh arise because of the general tenor of evil of his time, or does he cause that evil? Does God choose Moses to lead the people out of bondage because Moses is the only person with the qualities required to face Pharaoh, or would it always have been Moses, regardless of the circumstances?

The underlying question is how individuals influence, and are influenced by, the times in which they live. When we consider the American Civil War, it is unimaginable without Abraham Lincoln; but what if Lincoln had not been elected in 1860, had not sought public office, or had never been born at all? Would another ‘Lincoln’ have arisen at that time to fight for the preservation of the union? Scholars have concluded that Lincoln himself changed and reacted to events in ways that could not have been predicted before the war; it seems that even when the ‘perfect person’ is in place, it is their reaction in the moment that will shape events. Nothing, it seems, is pre-ordained.

The Torah, of course, has a different spin on things. Moses is depicted as having been born to his role, to be shaped by events in his life to be a righteous man who feels a kinship with the Hebrews despite not sharing their life of hardships. He is forced to flee to Midian, where he has a vision of God that directs him back to Egypt to lead his people out of slavery. God is not depicted as considering any other candidates for the job. There is a sense of inevitability about the whole thing. However, if God had chosen someone else to lead the people out, we would now have the Five Books of Shloimi, or whomever. Things only seem inevitable after they have happened. Our blessing is that we got the leader, and the God, whom we deserved, when we needed them.

Shabbat shalom