

# ERAS

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

I have often been asked by friends my opinion on what comparable era in Jewish history we are now living through. I feel that it would be most presumptuous for me to give any definitive answer to that question. That really is much more of a question for a prophet than for someone who is an interested bystander to Jewish history.

But since that question has been posed to me so often, I admit that I have given it some thought and consideration. So, with a strong caveat that I really am not certain about any of this being really an accurate assessment of our times, I am venturing to share my opinions with you.

I think that our time closely resembles the period of the Shoftim - the judges and leaders of Israel after the death of Yehoshua and before the rising of the strong monarchies of Shaul and David. The Tanach describes that time as being one of disunity amongst the Jewish people.

A large portion of the people had strayed from Torah observances, beliefs and values and had aped the culture of surrounding nations. Everyone saw fit to do whatever they thought to be valid behavior in their own eyes, ignoring tradition and the warnings that the Torah had issued against such deviances from the Jewish mission and way of life.

The Judges themselves were harshly judged and criticized, even ridiculed by the people, and the false prophets abounded with their clarion seductive call to be "like all of the other nations." The leadership was weak, the external and internal enemies were numerous and powerful, the Jews were quarrelling and even fighting with one another and the dangers to the existence of the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel were ominous. Sounds pretty familiar doesn't it? Is this not the daily fare of our newspapers and media? Yes, I think the era of the Shoftim/Judges repeats itself in general terms in our period of existence as well.

The similarities of that era to our current Jewish society here in Israel are striking. There is a

determined group here that despises religion and Torah and demonizes those of their fellow Jews who do not subscribe to their agenda and "progressive" world outlook.

The Charedim are termed "parasites" at best and "vermin" (in the words of a noted media reporter here.). The Religious Zionists are "settlers" - a term of vilification and derision. The extremists on the Left are "heroic" and "peace loving" while all others are really only "undermining Israeli security." And, there are no moral strictures or social inhibitions to any sort of behavior.

Having children and living a traditional family life is derided while promiscuity and unlimited experimentation with body and soul is exalted. Everyone can see fit to do whatever one wishes and there are no limits placed on behavior, speech and debate. Coalition governments, by their very nature, are weak and the politicians in the country are not held in high regard, especially in the wake of the sordid scandals that have dogged so many of them. Much of the values systems taught in our schools has little if any Jewish content to it, with emphasis on facts - bagrut - and little on spirit and loyalty.

But, the Book of Shoftim/Judges, in spite of all of its gloom, provides flashes of optimism and hope. There are military victories - Gideon, Devorah and Barak, Shimshon, etc. - and there are also relative periods of peace and calm in the country that are decades long.

There is an obvious longing within the people to somehow return to a status and level of Torah observance - to at least a minimum level of piety, social justice and comportment. And there are great people waiting in the wings that will reverse all of the negative trends of the people.

The prophet Shmuel and the kings Shaul and David are about to appear on the scene and fight the battles of Israel, both spiritual and physical. They will triumph and insure the continuity of the Jews and the land of Israel. The true test of Israel is its ability to pass through such a period of crisis and despair.

The power of belief and resilience has been the greatest asset of the Jewish people over all of its ages and trials. The Book of Shoftim/Judges is but a prelude to the book of Shmuel and its story of Jewish greatness in the Land of Israel thousands of years ago. Our time of Shoftim/Judges will also somehow lead to an eventual strengthening of Torah and wisdom amongst all of us.

Shabat shalom.  
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