

# WHO CAN WE BE?

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

The count of the people of Israel and the recording of the names of the leaders of its tribes, which forms the major part of this week's Torah reading, is especially poignant and bittersweet. We, the listeners to the parsha, know in advance that all those counted and named, with few exceptions, are doomed to die in the desert, never to reach the Land of Israel. The Torah also knows that. So why did the Torah bother to take up so much space in recording for us in detail all of these matters and names when at the end of the day they apparently serve no purpose in the development of the Jewish people and the conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel?

As far as I am able to see, the major commentators to the Torah deal with this problem only in an oblique and indirect fashion. I am not presumptuous enough to tread here on ground that the greats of Israel in the past have apparently avoided. Yet, I think that there is here a great and important relevant message to us and to all generations of Jews. And that is that one should realize the tragedy of opportunity and inherent greatness squandered and brought to naught. Wasted potential is a tragic thing and in national affairs it is often the deciding weakness that dooms a people. The careful detailing of the numbers and names of the generation that died in the desert emphasizes to us the tragedy of what could have been and the failure to achieve that goal.

Implicit in Judaism's idea of free will and free choice for human beings is the fact that the Lord presents us with opportunities. In His omniscience, He is aware of what use man will make of those opportunities. But as Maimonides explains, God's foreknowledge of the results of our choices in no way influences or guides our abilities to make those choices as we wish. The generation of the desert did not have to destroy itself with its wrong behavior and mistaken attitudes. It had the opportunity, because it was the *dor deah* - the generation of intellect and great potential - to build the Jewish state and people in a most positive fashion.

Its tragedy therefore lies not only in its behavior of folly but rather in its failure to exercise its potential in a positive manner. Heaven apparently measures us not only by who and what we are but also by who or what we could be. Opportunities squandered are much more painful and damaging than having no opportunities present at all. Our current State of Israel is a miraculous opportunity that has been extended to our generation. What we will make of this opportunity is the central question of current Jewish life and society. Hearing the names and numbers of the generation of the desert read to us this Shabat should sober us and make us realize that such an opportunity should not be frittered away because of lack of vision, faith and will. We can ill afford another generation of

the desert.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

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