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The excavations of Masada have given rise to a host of controversies of both ideological and historical nature. In view of the unabated interest in the subject, which was first discussed in this journal by Dr. Bernard Hiller in our Winter 1968 issue, TRADITION presents here the positions of two distinguished scholars who approached the topic from different vantage points. The author of the first article, Dr. Sidney B. Hoenig, an eminent historian and recognized authority on the history of the *Sanhedrin*, is Professor of History at Yeshiva University and a member of TRADITION'S Editorial Board.

THE SICARII IN MASADA — GLORY OR INFAMY?

In accord with the present Israeli mood that "Masada shall not fall again," and that "Masada has become for us a symbol," many articles have recently appeared.¹ Most of them portray a glowing picture of an heroic Masada. Professor Yigael Yadin, who spearheaded the excavation of Masada, is one of the staunchest defenders of the warriors at Masada and chides Professor Solomon Zeitlin in *B'Machaneh* for "reviling the memory of the group of Judeans who fought for liberty, namely, the Zealots who died for the sanctification of God." Likewise, a Hebraist, Hayyim Orlan, in recent articles in the weekly *Hadoar*, also depicts with deep reverence the "warriors who established the event at Masada as one of the glorious episodes in Jewish history."

Taking a different approach, Mrs. Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, Editor of *The Jewish Spectator*, insists that history has been duped into believing that the Masada occupants committed suicide. She regards Josephus' account as "conscious fabrication," and that the historian invented the suicide tale to ease his own guilt after having lured his compatriots at Jotapata to death by a suicide pact. She concludes that in the absence of any substantial evidence showing suicide, the Jewish defenders died fighting or they escaped.

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On the basis of historic research, analyzing the background of Masada, the philosophy of life of its occupants and the principles of self-sacrifice for a cause, this elevating notion of "defense at Masada" can be questioned. This is not to disparage in the slightest the heroism of our modern Israeli youth, but to uncover the historic milieu and to determine whether Masada can truly be regarded as a criterion of heroism and as a paragon of national virtue. A myth may be inspiring, like that of William Tell or of Robin Hood and, at times, even more important to human conduct and thought than the actual event. The historian in his research, nevertheless, aims to establish the facts even if such may not be popular.

Archaeologists speak of Masada as the place where the Zealots of the Great War of 65-70 C.E. remained until their very end. It is incorrect, however, to assert that Masada was held by the Zealots. The occupants were only the Sicarii. A differentiation between the two factions must be recognized.

The Zealots emerged in the war only after the fall of Jotapata and the defection of Josephus in 67 C.E. Their leader was Eleazar son of Simon. They sought democratic rule, opposed the priestly aristocracy and did not maintain any "philosophic" approach, as did the Sicarii. They carried forth actively in the war, battling against the provisional government which had been established in January 66 C.E. after the defeat of Cestius in November 65. Ananus ben Ananus, the High Priest, Rabban Simon ben Gamaliel and Joshua b. Gamala served as the presidents of the new government. The Zealots suspected that these leaders would surrender Jerusalem, and hence they asked the Idumeans to aid them to capture the city. Josephus describes how they butchered the people² and instituted mock trials.³ Those killed included the high priests, Ananus b. Ananus and Joshua b. Gamala. Aiming to set up their own priesthood, they chose one, Phineas, by casting lots. Josephus tells how the leaders of the government "incited the people against the Zealots for so these miscreants called themselves, as though they were *zealous* in the cause of virtue and not for vice in its basest and most extravagant form."⁴

With the end of the war and the defeat by the Romans, the

Zealots disappeared from the scene. Their hope had been completely lost. We hear no more about them in rabbinic or non-rabbinic literature of that period. They were not in Masada in 72 C.E.

The Sicarii, on the other hand, were already an old established faction. They came into being when Judah the Galilean, the son of Hezekiah, after the death of Herod in 4 C.E., incited the Jews not to accept the new rule of Rome. This Hezekiah had been one of the patriots killed by Herod in 47 B.C.E. As a young man Herod had sought despotically to repress insurgency and, as a result, was brought to trial before the Sanhedrin. Herod was then openly accused of high-handedness in the court by Sameas (Shemaiah) but was acquitted by Hyrcanus II at the instigation of Sextus Caesar, the governor of Syria. Thus, the basic patrimony and also the zeal of the heirs of Hezekiah — the Sicarii — played a most important role in the last 120 years of the Second Temple era.

Josephus speaks of the son of Hezekiah, Judah the Galilean, as being "zealous of the honor of ruledom,"⁵ and that he "upbraided the Jews for recognizing the Romans as masters when they already had God."⁶ The philosophy of the Sicarii was one of "no lordship of man over man; God is the only ruler." Josephus called them the *Fourth Philosophy*, after the three sects — Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes. He wrote:⁷

As for the fourth of the philosophies, Judas the Galilean set himself up as leader of it. This school agrees in all other respects with the opinions of the Pharisees, except that they have a passion for liberty that is almost unconquerable, since they are convinced that God alone is their leader and master. They think little of submitting to death in unusual forms and permitting vengeance to fall on kinsmen and friends if only they may avoid calling any man master.

Their willingness to "submit to death" to carry out their "philosophy" is most significant and indicative of their future suicidal conduct. But the Sicarii also strongly believed in the use of force upon others to implement this philosophy of liberty and non-subservience to any human. To them liberty and life were synonymous.

One recognizes judiciously that the philosophy of loyalty only to the Divine being, as held by the Sicarii, was superb. It enhanced the concept that there is none beside Him." The mode of implementation of this philosophy and concept by the Sicarii, however, was most drastic. It was effected by means of violent methods, revealing a determination of bringing about anarchy, or a revolution for revolution's sake. In this, the Sicarii faction exemplified those who preach ideals but utilize only terror and force to gain their end.

Respect for government and authority was always taught by the Rabbis. This is evidenced in the statement of Haninah, the deputy of the priests: "Pray for the peace of the government for, except for the fear of that, we should have swallowed each other alive."²⁸ The Rabbis, in presenting this concept, recognized the overwhelming power of Rome but, even as Assyria of old, Rome was regarded by many as an instrument of God. The priestly maxim was especially aimed to restrain strife and to preserve Israel from destruction. Violence and rampage were not to be the instruments to be utilized in gaining any changes in society. It is this policy, as will be noted below, that Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai and others also pursued in this critical period of 65-70 C.E.

The Sicarii, however, insisted on use of force, and their founder's family pursued this policy. Judah ben Hezekiah had two sons, James and Simon, who were crucified by the procurator Tiberius Alexander in 47 C.E. for arousing the people to revolt. Yet the family persisted in continuing the conduct of the Sicarii and in 65 C.E. Menahem, another son of Judah, became the leader. To implement their philosophy of anarchy, persons who submitted to or sided with the Romans or even were suspected of complicity as well as those who accepted the democratic rule of the Zealots or even acknowledged the political rule of the High Priest, were killed by these "freedom-lovers" by means of their *sica* — a short dagger. Thus came their name, which meant "assassins." Apparently, this name was given to them by their opponents, not unlike the titles obtained by the *Perushim* (separatists), *Mithnagdim* (opponents) or *Protestants*, in different periods of history.

The Rabbis did not seek a political revolution. Their aim was to maintain the harmonization of law and life in the State by peace and by legal enactments, by interpretation of the law and a conformity to the traditional values in Judaism.

It was the Sicarii then who, above all, passionately utilized every means of violence to implement their philosophy of life. They were opposed by the Judaean populace in general, and by the Judaean authorities, in particular. It was they and no other faction who used Masada as their lair. One must here examine other descriptions of the Sicarii by Josephus. Prior to the actual breaking of relations with Rome by persuasion of Eleazar, son of Ananius, the High Priest in the summer of 65 C.E., these most ardent promoters of hostility were able to secure possession of Masada by stratagem, slaying the Roman guards, gaining arms for themselves, and putting a garrison of their own there.²⁹ This was not part of the official Judaean war strategy, which sought at the outset some reconciliation with Rome. The prime purpose of the Sicarii was to obtain weapons to be able to effect their own revolutionary schemes.

Josephus himself, like the presidium of the provisional government, fundamentally opposed the revolt; he was pro-Roman, seeking peace. He describes with antipathy both the Zealots who hated him for his defection and the Sicarii who opposed all and any rule. He called all his opponents brigands, *lestes*, while they called him *traitor*.

The people-at-large at first upheld the Sicarii policy of opposition to Rome but they soon learned that these "lovers of liberty" were committing atrocities and that their battle was only falsehood and pretext. The Sicarii killed Ananius, the incumbent High Priest at the outset of the War (September 65), because to them even the authority of the high priesthood was repugnant.

Ananius was the father of the moderate leader Eleazar who, as already noted, was the first to initiate that all relationships with Rome be severed and that the usual Temple sacrifice on behalf of the peace of Rome be offered no more. Eleazar sought full independence of Judaea and this action was the beginning of hostilities, but it was not with a desire of creating factional struggle in the land. However, in time, an interneccine class

struggle developed. This is the "internal, useless hatred" (מחל ומתנחל) that the Talmud speaks of as being the cause of the Temple destruction.

When Ananias the High Priest was slain by the Sicarii the moderates led by Eleazar, his son, in turn killed the Sicarii leader, Menahem. Realizing now that the moderates were dominant, by having "liquidated" Menahem in reprisal, the Sicarii fled to Masada for their own refuge. Menahem's relative, Eleazar, son of Yair, now became leader of the Sicarii and he controlled Masada. From this vantage point during the vicissitudes of war, while the Zealots and Pharisees were engaged in battling for survival, the Sicarii pursued personal maneuvers of anarchy — strangely not against the Romans but against their own countrymen — the Judaeans. From the very beginning of the war, the Sicarii engaged in such predatory acts. It is recorded that coming to Jerusalem on the day of the Feast of wood-carrying (15 Ab), the Sicarii were able to enter the Temple and they set fire to the house of Ananias, the High Priest, and to the palaces of Agrippa II and Berenice. They also burned the public archives in their effort to destroy the money-lenders' bonds to prevent the recovering of debts. Their purpose was to win over a host of grateful debtors and thereby cause a rising of the poor against the rich.

All this is a picturization of the anarchy perpetrated in Judea by the Sicarii. They deliberately harassed the Judeans in pursuing their philosophy, always returning to their "refuge" in Masada.

At that time there was still another protagonist for war, Simon ben Giora, who had been driven out by the High Priest Ananias. He aimed to join the Sicarii but they mistrusted him because of his despotic nature. Josephus notes that "later he was allowed to accompany them on their marauding expeditions and he took part in their raids upon the surrounding district. His efforts to tempt them to greater enterprises were, however, unsuccessful, for they had grown accustomed to the fortress and were afraid to venture far, so to speak, from their lair."¹⁰ Simon withdrew to the hills, seeking absolute power and he fought the Zealots. The Sicarii remained singularly quiescent, for their own needs

and purposes. In fact, when Simon ben Giora sallied forth in battle, the Sicarii did not join. Josephus notes: The Edomites who had come at the behest of the Zealots to save Jerusalem, "left the mass of their population to protect their own property against the incursions of the Sicarii of Masada."¹¹ Thus we recognize that when the Sicarii came to Jerusalem it was not to protect but to harass the city, and likewise they aimed to despoil the Edomites who resolved to save Jerusalem.

The Sicarii stayed in Masada till the Spring of 72 C.E., when attacked by General Flavius Silva, who was "mopping up" after the war that had ended officially in 70 with the Temple destruction. His desire was to wipe out any and all insurgence or disloyalty to Roman imperial power, as exemplified now especially by the Sicarii. Silva brought up his local troops, realizing that the occupants were preaching a wide-spread non-acceptance of Roman rule and power, not merely in Judea but also in other areas in the Roman empire, particularly in Alexandria, where many Jews lived. The curbing of the anarchists in their own land, it was felt, would certainly detract any revolutionary attempts elsewhere. Later Jewish insurrections that sprung up in Cyrene may have been the fruit of the seditious seed sown by the Sicarii.

One may question Josephus' account of the Sicarii because of his antipathy towards them. Yet, his knowledge of what occurred in Masada undoubtedly was obtained from the official Roman records, i.e., from the documents of General Silva, or from Jewish reports which were being circulated. These bear the stamp of authenticity. Interestingly, none of these mentions the Sicarii as a force battling Roman legions or making a last stand at Masada.

Josephus in his portrayal of the Roman siege in Masada does not describe any losses on both sides. Were there any displays of heroism on the part of the Sicarii in Masada, he would have pointed this out, as in the case of other battles, like that of near-by Fortress Machaerus, which was also by the Asphalt (Dead) Sea. The fact that the occupants of Masada were fewer in number than the Roman forces stationed below does not delineate their weakness and fears. In history even a few

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partisans and underground fighters have often brought havoc to great armies. Such action is not at all recorded about Masada and its occupants.

Is Josephus' sketch of the last moments in Masada, as transmitted by the old women — the "so-called" survivors — to be recognized as authentic? Or, is this account a fabrication?

That the suicidal act was performed is historical fact; Josephus obtained this information from the Roman reports. The soldiers entered upon Masada and found the corpses, and so indicated in their reports. Josephus recalls:

Here encountering the mass of the slain instead of exulting as over enemies, they admired the nobility of their resolve and the contempt of death displayed by so many in carrying it unwavering into execution.¹²

The Roman military naturally admired the determination of their opponents not to fall into the hands of the enemy, for this is the credo of soldiers. But the manner of the implementation of the suicide, as transmitted by the women, is definitely a product only of Josephus' vivid, imaginative mind. He wrote it in Rome, designed to impress his readers with sympathy and drama. Josephus himself notes: "But it was with difficulty that they (the Romans) listened to her (who told the story), incredulous of such amazing fortitude."

The following excerpt describing the Sicarii activity of Masada in the years 65-70 C.E. especially demonstrates that the "Masada glory" has been exaggerated by modern historians. Josephus writes:¹³

While the ship of state was thus labouring under the three greatest of calamities — war, tyranny, and faction — to the populace the war was comparatively the mildest; in fact they fled from their country-men to take refuge with aliens and obtained at Roman hands the security which they despaired of finding among their own people.

But yet a fourth misfortune was on foot to consummate the nation's ruin. The Sicarii had taken possession of Masada. So far they had confined themselves to raids upon the neighbouring districts, merely with the object of procuring supplies, fear restraining them from further ravages; but now when they learnt that the Roman army was inactive and that in Jerusalem the Jews were distracted by sedition

and domestic tyranny, they embarked on more ambitious enterprises. Thus, during the feast of unleavened bread — a feast which has been kept by the Jews in thanksgiving for deliverance ever since their return to their native land on their release from bondage in Egypt — these assassins, eluding under cover of night those who might have obstructed them, made a raiding descent upon a small town called En-gaddi. Those of the inhabitants who were capable of resistance were, before they could seize their arms and assemble, dispersed and driven out of the town; those unable to flee, women and children numbering upwards of seven hundred, were massacred. They then rifled the houses, seized the ripest of the crops, and carried off their spoil to Masada. They made similar raids on all the villages around the fortress, and laid waste the whole district, being joined daily by numerous dissolute recruits from every quarter.

Josephus' description of the Sicarii massacre of seven hundred women and children during Passover week is not one which adds distinction to their memory. They emerged from their refuge and lair only when they learned that the Romans were inactive, but they did not vigorously engage in battle nor did they even disturb the Romans with underground tactics. In this entire period of the war they only remained on Masada.

Josephus, describing the Sicarii attack on the villages near Masada, stresses that they even "fell upon holy places" and "their unfortunate victims of their attacks suffered the miseries of captives of war but were deprived of the chances of retaliation." There is no record of the Masada occupants sending any aid to Jerusalem, whereas the Zealots (and Idumeans) did. Neither should it be claimed that the forays by the Sicarii on En-gaddi were because the villagers and collaborators were pro-Roman. Such assaults would not be an excuse for destroying "holy places" [apparently these were the locations of the *amador* or "the assembly places" (*synagogue*) for study of Torah] and "rifling the houses." These aggressions surely would not be befitting "for orthodox leaders," as the Masada occupants are designated by some scholars. Moreover, there is no proof, for those years (except for the Bar Kochba period) that Roman forces were in En-gaddi, to assume therefrom that the Sicarii assailed Romans or pro-Romans there.

In sum, the Sicarii did not battle with the Romans. They only

made piratical invasions into the neighboring territory to obtain food for themselves and to harass the Judean inhabitants — their own countrymen. There is no record of their actually battling on behalf of Judaea during the years of the war or of their aiding in any fashion to obtain independence. We know only of their activity in the years 65 and 72, i.e., at the beginning and the end of the period, but nothing about any attacks on the enemy in the interval of the war itself. To the Sicarii the War of 65-70 C.E. was of minor import as compared to their particularistic “philosophy” and their general agitation throughout the years of the Second Temple era.

One can best understand the Sicarii perspective by reviewing a similar action in carrying out the philosophic ideal of liberty. During Herod's reign, we read of patriots “who concealed themselves in caves in Galilee and one old man slew his wife and seven children and himself after them and so underwent death rather than slavery; but before he did this, he greatly reproached Herod . . .”¹⁴ This was the philosophy of the Sicarii, one that they implemented unrelentingly and repeated throughout, even in Masada.

It is erroneous, even in the spirit of chauvinism, to assert that the Sicarii in Masada “continued to fight on.” To the contrary, even the sympathetic record of Josephus describing their suicidal act reveals that they did not battle in those last days. When the Romans breached the walls of Masada the occupants only reinforced their refuge for further protection. They did not attack the Romans; theirs was only a watchful waiting, and a constant reinforcement of their haven. It was not truly an active battle on behalf of their people. Josephus' own words best substantiate this evaluation of the Sicarii:

In Judaea, meanwhile, Bassus had died and been succeeded in the governorship by Flavius Silva, who, seeing the whole country now subjugated by the Roman arms, with the exception of one fortress still in revolt, concentrated all forces in the district and marched against it. This fortress was called Masada; and the Sicarii who had occupied it had at their head a man of influence named Eleazar. He was a descendant of the Judas who, as we have previously stated, induced multitudes of Jews to refuse to enroll themselves, when

Quirinus was sent as censor to Judaea. For in those days the Sicarii clubbed together against those who consented to submit to Rome and in every way treated them as enemies, plundering their property, rounding up their cattle, and setting fire to their habitations; protesting that such persons were no other than aliens, who so ignobly sacrificed the hard-won liberty of the Jews and admitted their preference for the Roman yoke. Yet, after all, this was but a pretext, put forward by them as a cloak for their cruelty and avarice, as was made plain by their actions. For the people did join with them in the revolt and take their part in the war with Rome, only, however, to suffer at their hands still worse atrocities; and when they were again convicted for falsehood in this pretext, they only oppressed the more those who in righteous self-defense reproached them with their villainy.

Indeed, that period had, somehow, become so prolific of crime of every description amongst the Jews. The Sicarii were the first to set the example of this lawlessness and cruelty to their kinsmen, leaving no word unspoken to insult, no deed untried to ruin, the victims of their conspiracy.

Masada was basically a place of retreat and a repository. This can be traced back to the early days of David when he fled thereto from Saul. The Hasmoneans likewise had come there for refuge from the Syrian Greeks. Later Herod kept it as a retreat from Cleopatra and for storing food and arms. Before the Great War the Romans also used it as an arsenal and retained a garrison there. This the Sicarii captured. Here too, then, the Sicarii found refuge in the period of internecine warfare. Masada is about ten miles from En-gaddi. It was unlike the near-by fortress of Machaerus which was used as a military outpost and a point of attack. The records show that the inhabitants of Machaerus fought valiantly against the Romans until forced to surrender and were given permission to leave. In Masada, however, the fanaticism of the Sicarii brought not only final collapse of the place without battle, but with it the death of men, women and children, all imbued by the fanatical philosophy of “death being greater than life.”

Though Josephus does at a point describe Masada as “one fortress still in revolt,” he gives a more accurate description of its features when he writes: “Not far from Jerusalem was a fortress of redoubtable strength, built by the kings of old as a repository for their property and a refuge for their persons

during the vicissitudes of war; it was called Masada." This is the accurate description, above all others. The Sicarii took over Masada knowing that it contained arms and food and would be a haven for them. It was for them an area for inactive defense; it was never a base for offensive warfare. Were the Sicarii truly to have come to Masada to battle, they would not have brought their wives and children with them. Since however this place was primarily a refuge for them, rather than a spearhead for battle, i.e., designed as a base of attack, their conduct of retrenchment is understandable.

We recognize that Josephus' report about the last moments in Masada and the speech of Eleazar are not from "steno-graphic" notes. This fact does not, however, support a notion, held by some, that the Masada occupants did not commit suicide; namely, that Josephus' report is only fabricated and that the residents of Masada did indeed fight back. It is asserted that the narrative of Masada is from Josephus' imagination and a concoction of what, in his mind, the occupants should have done, and that he was simply re-living his own earlier experiences in Jotapata. True, he may have expressed remorse at his own betrayal of Judea, when others had committed suicide while he saved himself. Josephus' description of the suicide at Masada therefore may be only a vicarious personal "compensation" for Jotapata.

To believe, however, that Josephus had fabricated his report about Masada is not acceptable because of the circumstances of his writing. Not only did he have access to Roman archives and Jewish information, but the Roman officers of the war were still alive and his writings in Masada were circulated in the imperial circles. Josephus may have exaggerated about the number of the dead or improvised a verbal speech for Eleazar, but he would not have dared to lie about the actual facts of the war. The Roman soldiers themselves reported that they saw the corpses — those slain — not by Roman hands, but by their own.

Josephus fundamentally held the accepted Jewish revulsion against suicide. He stressed in Jotapata:

All of us have mortal bodies composed of perishable matter but the soul lives forever immortal; it is a portion of God housed in our

bodies. If then one who makes away with or misapplies a deposit entrusted to him by a fellow man is reckoned a perjured villain, how can he who casts out from his own body the deposit which God has placed there hope to elude Him whom he had thus wronged . . . That is why this crime, so hateful to God is punished also by the sagest of legislation.¹⁵

It is probable then that Josephus, in describing the Masada suicide, actually decried the act. In his antipathy towards the Sicarii he stressed their "suicidal act" at Masada to give further proof that the Sicarii "left no deed of iniquity unperpetrated." They preached the sovereignty of God; yet they ignored his divine gift. According to Josephus, they committed "a crime, so hateful to God," by their suicide.

The question often posed is why there is total silence in the Talmud of any record of these "defenders" of Masada.¹⁶ The answer is simple:—they were *not* defenders. To the contrary, the Sicarii are described in the Talmud in a despicable manner as *Biryani* (terrorists). Particularly, we have mention of *Abba Sira*, leader of the Sicarii, which is the same as *Rosh Biryani*.¹⁶ A comparison to the Bethar heroes of Bar Kochba, of which Tacitus speaks, therefore cannot be made. In historic perspective, the Zealots of 67-70 were *defenders*, the Sicarii—*defeatists*, and the Bethar soldiers of 132 C.E.—*heroes*. Hence the latter are alluded to, according to the Talmud, even in the recital of the Grace. It is not so with the Sicarii.

It has been asserted that since the Rabbis do not mention Masada specifically or refer to the event it "indicates *the Rabbis'* revulsion at the proposal of Eleazar ben Yair . . . to the gruesomeness of the resolve and deed," i.e., an opposition to their suicide, and the slaying of their own families. It cannot be argued that the Rabbis disregarded Masada because it was contrary to "Thou shalt not murder." The records of the Crusades and other catastrophes show that suicide was often implemented when there was no other way. True, the Rabbis opposed suicide, as evidenced, in the death of Rabbi Hananiah B. Teradyon.¹⁷ His pupils said to him "open thy mouth so that the fire enter into thee (to end thy agony)." He replied, "let Him who gave me [my life] take it away, but no one should

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injure oneself."

Rabbinic instances reveal that Jewish martyrs suffered death at the hands of their tormentors but did not take their own lives. The episodes of Rabbi Akiba, Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradyon or Rabbi Judah b. Baba, or of other martyrs, evidence that they suffered death, but that they themselves *did not give up* their lives. Similarly, in apocryphal literature, in the story in *Macca-bees*, Eleazar would not eat of the swine's flesh; as he was about to die under heavy blows inflicted upon him, he cried out: "I suffer these gladly because of my reverence for Him."

Josephus held a similar view: "It is honorable to die for liberty . . . on condition that one dies fighting, *by the hands of who would rob us of it.*"

In this preview, the Sicarii who committed suicide cannot be portrayed as "guerilla fighters" armed to the teeth who fought to the last breath, having a strategic, superior advantage on the top of Masada.

One can best comprehend the Sicarii sense of values by noting the expressions used by Eleazar at Masada: "It is by God's will," "This is of God's sending," and "in keeping with our initial resolve we preferred death to slavery."

For not even the impregnable nature of this fortress has availed to save us; nay, though ample provisions are ours, piles of arms, and a superabundance of every other requisite, yet, we have been deprived, manifestly by God Himself, of all hope of deliverance.

The penalty for those crimes let us pay not to our bitterest foes, the Romans, but to God through the act of our own hands.

Our provisions only let us spare; for they will testify, when we are dead, that it was not want which subdued us, but that, in keeping with our initial resolve, we preferred death to slavery.

For from of old, since the first dawn of intelligence, we have been continually taught by those precepts ancestral and divine — confirmed by the deeds and noble spirit of our forefathers — that life, not death, is man's misfortune. For it is death which gives liberty to the soul and permits it to depart to its own pure abode, there to be free from all calamity; but so long as it is imprisoned in a mortal body and tainted with all its miseries, it, in sober truth, is dead, for association with what is mortal ill befits that which is divine.

. . . It is by God's will and of necessity that we are to die. For long since, so it seems, God passed this decree against the whole Jewish

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race in common, that we must quit this life if we would not use it aright. Do not attach the blame to yourselves, nor the credit to the Romans, that this war with them has been the ruin of us all; for it was not their might that brought these things to pass, but the intervention of some more powerful cause has afforded them the semblance of victory.

Unenslaved by the foe let us die, as free men with our children and wives, let us quit this life together! This our laws enjoin, this our wives and children implore us. The need for this is of God's sending, the reverse of this is the Romans' desire, and their fear is lest a single one of us should die before capture.

In every phrase the stress at Masada was *not* to make a last stand, for the Sicarii maintained that such was God's will. The Rabbis disdained such an attitude of full resignation, albeit, stoic, when the situations did not involve the negation of the basic creeds of Judaism by acts of immorality, apostasy or shedding the blood of others. Thereby the Rabbis themselves set up a breakwater against any stoic doctrine that legitimized suicide.

As seen, the Sicarii had adopted the stoic principle of suicide and coupled this with their stress on the philosophy of the immortality of the soul. It is this approach that prompted the Masada occupants to commit their act of resignation; it emphasized for them that the soul is eternal and the body only ephemeral. They submitted without battle because they believed "that the need for this was of God's sending." Life to them was a misfortune.

Josephus puts in the mouth of Eleazar the following thoughts:

What [tortures] the Romans, if victorious would inflict on them, their children and their wives; (therefore) he deliberated on the death of all.¹⁸

Let us not now along with slavery deliberately accept the cognable penalties awaiting us if we are to fall alive into Roman hands. All this betokens wrath at the many wrongs which we madly dared to inflict upon our country. The penalty for those crimes let us pay not to our batterish foes, the Romans, but to God through the act of our own hands.¹⁹

We thus see that the Sicarii themselves admitted at the very end that they had inflicted many wrongs "upon our country."

No doubt they feared both their own countrymen and the Romans, once there was the cessation of hostilities. This may be the immediate cause of their suicide—complete frustration. This is not heroism. They only sought a justification of their own conduct and crimes by regarding that they were paying the penalty for these, in the moral and religious sense, to God, the Supreme Judge.

We perceive in the Sicarii enunciations a self-justification of the deed of self-destruction—righteous remorse but coupled with despair. The first speech of Eleazar had no effect upon his followers until he spoke of "death which gives liberty to the soul." Thereby Eleazar continued boldly the Sicarii philosophy of liberty. He pointed out that Jews perished "because they were on alien soil."²⁰ Therefore even in their own country, because Jerusalem had already fallen, then "unenslaved by the foe let us die . . . the seed for *this is of God's sending*."²¹ They realized that in captivity they would surely suffer, and therefore must give up their own lives now. This was their fanatical display of liberty justifying for them their act of suicide, without retaining the traditional Jewish perspective of "Live and hope."

The Rabbis, on the other hand, basically disdained such manifestation of suicide. There are instances of martyrdom recorded in rabbinic literature,²² but in no manner can the Masada incident be compared to these. Particularly, the suicidal act of the Sicarii hardly falls into a moral or religious category. Their conduct was only a display of unbridled fanaticism; their only justification was submission to what they piously called "God's sending."

An example from the Second Book of Maccabees²³ is often cited to justify suicide. It is the story of Razis, called "father of the Jews," a devoted patriot in the period of the Hasmoneans who "with all zeal risked body and life in behalf of Judaism." The Syrian general Nicanor sought to arrest him and to humiliate him, but when the soldiers surrounded him "he fell upon his sword preferring to die nobly rather than fall into their hands and be outraged." This reason, lest he "be outraged," is explained as being similar to the later conduct of the Sicarii. The reason is compared to the act of King Saul. The usual

traditional Jewish view, however, cannot be drawn from these sources. The Rabbis²⁴ interpreted Genesis 9:5 which prohibits one's taking his own life to exclude King Saul's act because he would be tormented with mockery by the Philistines²⁵ but they steadfastly disavowed the act. Neither can proof be brought from II Maccabees which was written with Hellenistic perspective in Antioch, indicating stoic influences. It does not reflect distinct Judaean values, as even presented by Josephus, despite all of his non-Judaean allegiances or spiritual deficiencies.

In general, the Rabbinic view was that one who committed suicide would not gain a portion in the world to come. Nonetheless Jews were taught to die for the sanctification of God's Name; death was preferable to transgression of the basic precepts of Judaism. Were we even to grant that the Sicarii at Masada committed suicide to avoid torture and hence, in accord with Jewish tradition, deserved immortality of the soul, as expressed in Eleazar ben Yair's speech, there is still no evidence of special spiritual heroism or religious martyrdom on their part. Their suicide was not fundamentally to sanctify God's Name, though they believed in "no lordship of man over man." This suggestion is upheld primarily because there was no problem of religious persecution or of transgression of Torah precepts involved in the Masada episode, to be considered the cause of the suicide of the Sicarii. Their action was basically political. They cannot therefore be classified in any manner as religious martyrs.

Interestingly, the entire story of Masada is also found in Yossipon, a work which was written before the redaction of the Talmud. The attack by General Silva, the repair of the wall, the speech of Eleazar and the stress on immortality of the soul are all mentioned. But herein the act of self-killing is not at all recorded. This account tells of one called Eleazar ben Anani (not ben Yair), in a fortress Mezira (not Masada.) After his speech the men killed the women and children so that they would not fall into the hands of the Romans. The men buried them in pits in the fortress, covering them with earth. Then Eleazar, the priest, with all the men, warriors, fought against the Roman camp, "dying for God and His sanctuary."

Yossipon thus does not mention any "self immolation" of the

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men. He only records that the women and children were killed by their men folk so that they would not be enslaved and suffer at the hands of the Romans. The men, however, sallied forth to battle till the very end. This is Yossipon's story (contrary to that of Josephus) and naturally it carries forth the Jewish traditional perspective:

For what shall our life avail us, after that our land is desolate, our sanctuary razed, the Romans will ravish our wives and daughters before our eyes and oppress our sons with a most grievous and hard yoke? Now therefore it is better for us all to kill our wives and children whose blood God shall accept thankfully as the blood of burnt offerings and after we will issue out upon the Romans, fight till we be all destroyed, and die for the glory of the Lord our God. These men therefore went and gathered their wives and daughters, embraced them and killed them saying: Is it not better for you to die in your holy country honorably than be led away into bondage with great ignominy and shame into the land of your enemies and be compelled to die before the idols of the gentiles?

This narrative of Yossipon²⁶ is more poignant to Jewish tradition than the philosophic discourse recorded in Josephus. Which is correct: The suicide recorded in Josephus or the battle by the men, mentioned in Yossipon? It is probable that the later Yossipon disdained the fruitless action of suicide as described by Josephus, and in true Jewish manner sought to whitewash the occupants and to bestow upon them glory. If Yossipon, rather than Josephus, is basically correct, then and only then, is the story of Masada one of glory and should be retold in its true aspects. But Josephus' narrative of Masada depicts only infamy.

Scholars who have participated in the Masada debate wish to point out that the Roman soldiers had thrown the bodies of the 960 martyrs into the desert below; hence there is no trace of them. This is not in conformity with Yossipon's portrayal that there was a decent burial and careful encasing within pits in the fortress. The recent burial of the Masada "heroes" is therefore very strange. The present religious controversy over the "place" and mode of burial certainly was unnecessary, even to publicize Masada.

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To answer the puzzle that only few skeletons were found, it is maintained that the bodies were burned outside of the walls of Masada, and that this was of religious necessity. Only when excavations in the nearby surroundings will reveal mass graves could this be authenticated. However, it has been already pointed out that it is far fetched to consider the walls of Masada as a prohibition of burial within—e.g.—on the mount itself. To the contrary, the traditional Yossipon notes that the burial was "in the fortress proper."

What is very disconcerting is that pronouncements are made about the Masada "heroes" when one does not even know whether the skeletons were of the Masada "occupants" in 72 C.E. Perhaps they were of Roman soldiers—non-Jews—or even of later occupants—monks of the Byzantine period or others who inhabited the casemates in the wall. Can a "scientific test" — carbon 14 or some other means — determine the exact age of the skeletons without a variation of at least 300 years? Will it also reveal their Jewish origin?

Apparently there are no "tests." Professor Yigael Yadin's explanation is that it was unnecessary since they were found on the level together with coins of the Revolt. In reply to this assertion one can only repeat Professor G. R. Driver's statement in his recent volume, *The Judaean Scrolls*: "The truth is that a deposit of coins is largely a matter of chance and what it can prove is strictly limited . . . It cannot be accepted as fixing an absolute date in default of supporting evidence." Professor Yadin has indicated that at Masada he also found Byzantine coins and that the Scrolls were in the casemates in the wall build later. Perhaps these casemates are of Byzantine times as is the nearby Byzantine structure? There is hence no proof that the skeletons or Scrolls of Masada are of the period of the Revolt, or of 72 C.E.

Much also has been made about the Synagogue and *Mikveh* of Masada, indicating thereby the "religiosity" or "orthodoxy" of the Masada "heroes." It is a fact, that the laws of *Mikveh* were not finalized till the middle of the Tannaic period, and not earlier or before the Destruction era. Herod's Masada pools were thus only bathing pools in the Roman style, though they

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may have contained 40 seats of water; the term *Mikveh* in a religious sense apparently is anachronistic here. Moreover, one cannot prove that a certain room was a Synagogue, even if there are stone benches or because scrolls of Deuteronomy and Ezekiel were discovered there. It is too bold to assert "this is the oldest synagogue found so far in Israel or in fact anywhere in the world, and the only one which was contemporary with the Temple." During the Second Temple era there were no synagogues for prayer in Judaea. There are no archaeological finds of Second Commonwealth Synagogues in Judaea proper. There existed only assembly places (*Synagoge*) for study or for reading the Torah. A room with benches does not "prove" a Synagogue even if Scrolls were found there.

The Masada archaeological discoveries may indeed corroborate occupation at the time of and also in periods after the Revolt; but they do not establish any evidence for heroism or disprove that Masada was not occupied also later in the Byzantine period when the Scrolls may have been deposited.

Professor Yadin is right that those at Masada "chose death rather than slavery and submission." But one still cannot regard Masada therewith as a "symbol . . . as the last fight of those who gave their life for political, religious and spiritual freedom," for, as emphasized, they did not actually fight. The truer picture of the situation is presented indeed later in the words of Yadin's own booklet: "*Masada was never in the front of the fighting . . . It always remained on the sidelines and became a refuge.*"

It should be reiterated that Masada continued as a haven even during the Parthian wars of the sixth century. Byzantine structures of the 5th-6th century C.E. — a church, cells and cave dwellings were discovered there. Here it should be noted that the Scroll casemate on the Masada mound is next to the Byzantine Church area. This again may bring doubt as to the actual age of the Scrolls found there.

In this historic analysis of Judaean heroism and glory of the period of the Destruction one must also especially differentiate between the political approaches of Josephus and that of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai. The same story is told of both concerning the "prophecy" to Vespasian: In Josephus we read:

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Josephus expressed a desire for a private interview with Vespasian. Having ordered all to withdraw except his son Tims and two of his friends, the prisoner thus addressed him: "You imagine, Vespasian, that in the person of Josephus you have taken a mere captive; but I come to you as a messenger of greater destinies. Had I not been sent on this errand by God, I knew the law of the Jews and how it becomes a general to die. To Nero do you send me? Why then? Think you that [Nero and] those who before your accession succeed him will continue? You will be Caesar, Vespasian, you will be emperor, you and your son here. Bind me then yet more securely in chains and keep me for yourself; for you, Caesar, are master not of me only, but of land and sea and the whole human race. For myself, I ask to be punished by stricter custody, if I have dared to trifle with the words of God." To this speech Vespasian, at the moment, seemed to attach little credit, supposing it to be a trick of Josephus to save his life. Gradually, however, he was led to believe it, for God was already rousing in him thoughts of empire and by other tokens foreshadowing the throne.

Compare this with the Talmudic account of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai's appearance before Vespasian. This occurred about July 69 C.E. before Vespasian was hailed as emperor in Judaea and in the Orient. Gittin 56 A-B, relates:

When he [Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai] reached the Romans he said, Peace to you. O king, peace to you, O king. Vespasian said: "Your life is forfeit on two counts, one because I am not a king and you call me king, and again, if I am a king, why did you not come to me before now?" He answered: "As for your saying that you are not a king, in truth you are a king, since if you were not a king Jerusalem would not be delivered into your hand, as it is written, 'And Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one.' 'Mighty one' applies only to a king. Lebanon refers to Sanctuary. As for your question, why if you are a king, I did not come to you till now, the answer is that the *biryani* (the Sicarii) among us did not let me." He said to him: "If there is a jar of honey round which a serpent is wound, would they not break the jar to get rid of the serpent?" He could give no answer. At this point a messenger came to him from Rome saying, "Up, for the Emperor is dead, and the notables of Rome have decided to make you head [of the State]."

The difference between the Sage and the historian is that Josephus sought appeasement because he believed in the *might* of Rome; he held that since Jews were given privileges they

should continue their loyalty, and *submit* to Rome on account of its power. Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai's philosophy was one of submission because he felt that this approach would serve best the principles of Judaism and the dignity of the Torah. In similar manner the records of Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah speak of succumbing to Rome only to preserve the Torah. It is this principle, rather than political strategy, that has guided Judaism.

The "heroic" philosophy of the Sicarii is often presented as a lesson of fortitude in history. It is true that in some circles their philosophy of "no lordship of man over man" inspired apocalyptic notions of the coming of the Messiah; thus the very names of their leaders *Menahem* and *Hezekiah* are identified with the Messiah. Yet, at times, such messianism even led to the disastrous eruption of false messiahs or "hastening the end." These events too are inglorious chapters in Jewish history and one cannot record the Sicarii as paragons or teachers in this ideal.

When Masada was abandoned, other Sicarii who had been able to escape Judaea during the war continued their activity in Egypt. They attempted to carry forth their philosophy of anarchy and revolutionary schemes. Josephus notes:

Morcover, at Alexandria in Egypt, after this date many Jews met with destruction. For certain of the faction of the Sicarii who had succeeded in fleeing to that country, not content with their escape, again embarked on revolutionary schemes, and sought to induce many of their hosts to assert their independence, to look upon the Romans as no better than themselves and to esteem God alone as their lord. Meeting with opposition from certain Jews of rank, they murdered these; the rest they continued to press with solicitations to revolt. Observing their infatuation, the leaders of the council of elders, thinking it no longer safe for them to overlook their proceedings, convened a general assembly of the Jews and exposed the madness of the Sicarii, proving them to have been responsible for all their troubles. "And now," they said, "these men, finding that even their flight has brought them no sure hope of safety — for if recognized by the Romans they would instantly be put to death — are seeking to involve in the calamity which is their due persons wholly innocent of their crimes." They, accordingly, advised the assembly to beware of the ruin with which they were menaced by these men and, by delivering them up,

to make their peace with the Romans. Realizing the gravity of the danger, the people complied with this advice, and rushed furiously upon the Sicarii to seize them. Six hundred of them were caught on the spot and all who escaped into Egypt and the Egyptian Thebes were ere long arrested and brought back. Nor was there a person who was not amazed at the endurance and — call it which you will — desperation or strength of purpose, displayed by the victims. For under every form of torture and laceration of body, devised for the sole object of making them acknowledge Caesar as lord, not one submitted nor was brought to the verge of utterance; but all kept their resolve, triumphant over constraint, meeting the tortures and the fire with bodies that seemed insensible of pain and souls that wellnigh exulted in it. But most of all were the spectators struck by the children of tender age, not one of whom could be prevailed upon to call Caesar lord. So far did the strength of courage rise superior to the weakness of their frames.

The Sicarii also created sedition in Cyrene. This historic record of Sicarii activity in the Diaspora, after the relinquishing of Masada, illustrates a fanaticism that is impressive but not enduring, a sacrifice that may elicit praise but brought only disaster. The statement "they think little of submitting to death" is therefore basically the distinct clue to the identification of the "desperation" of the Sicarii and is explanatory of their suicide. Another of their characteristics "was permitting vengeance to fall on kinsmen and friends alike." These two attributes of conduct — "self immolation and murder" — evidence a definite lack of regard for human life in general. Such persons are not nationalists, only individualistic defeatists—who coupled it with a philosophy and idealism of avoiding 'calling to any man master.' The Sicarii, in all, reveal not staunch loyalty but an aspect of total anarchy. It was one contrary to the notion of "praying for the peace of the country," enunciated by Haninah, the Segan and also to the principles of peace that Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai or Rabbi Joshua b. Hananiah taught. It was inconsistent with even the general policy of loyalty to mortal rulers, displayed by both the Essenes and by Hillel, the Pharisee, to Herod. In all, the Sicarii are not models of Jewish traditional heroes nor do they portray fundamental Jewish concepts.

Edmund Wilson, the noted literary critic and essayist, who

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in his revised volume, *The Dead Sea Scrolls 1947-1969*, devotes a most fascinating chapter describing the Masada Rock, Herod's occupancy, Josephus' narrative, early archaeological findings and Yadin's sensational excavations there, notes "it was occupied by the militant Jewish group variously known as the Zealots and the Sicarii (Daggermen)." . . . He reveals thereby that he too erroneously confused both factions. On the other hand, his analysis of Eleazar ben Yair's appeal recommending suicide is well taken and justifiable: "his appeal . . . seems closer to Greek philosophy than to the traditional Jewish teaching." Thus it cannot be denied that "the account of Josephus who follows the practice of the ancient historians, made them speeches of an eloquence and length which can only be the products of his own invention" (p. 201). Indeed, the speech may be Josephus' invention but his description of the Sicarii as "brigands" is basic fact, not distortion.

Professor Joseph Klausner sought to place the death of the Masada occupants in the category of a "paschal-sacrifice," believing that the event took place on the first day of Passover 73. Josephus records (*B.J.* 7:401) that the tragedy occurred on the 15th of the month Xanthicus. Though Xanthicus may be generally identified with Nisan it does not mean that the tragedy occurred on the 15th of Nisan, the first day of Passover. The scholar, Niese, correctly dated it May 2, 72 C.E. (Schuerer mistakenly set the fall of Masada in 73 C.E.) Klausner's attempt to give the event theological overtones is merely an expression of fantasy and chauvinism.

One cannot use the story of Masada as an example of "the need of the exemplary fortitude and zeal of the defenders of Masada by the Israelis . . . to confront forty million Arabs." Masada is not a paragon of defense for Israel. It is only a portrayal of extremists—of men who regarded life as man's misfortune. So as not to have the soul enslaved, they preferred death above any battle of the body to gain freedom.

Masada should not serve as a pattern for modern Israel. The Israelis showed their own fortitude in 1948, 1956, even before the present Masada excavations. The bravery of June 1967 was not inspired by the events in ancient Masada. The

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present conduct of Israeli youth is deserving of the world's admiration and acclaim without need of invoking Masada.

NOTES

1. Yadin, Yigael, *MASADA: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots Last Stand*, (Random House, New York: 1966), and the booklet sponsored by the Jewish Museum (Jewish Theological Seminary, New York: 1967), containing his article "The Excavations at Masada" and "Masada and its Heroes" by Louis Flukestein. See also other articles by Yadin in various Anglo-Jewish and Israeli periodicals such as *Hadarah*, June 1969 and *B'Machaneh*, 29 Adar 1969. Also Moshe Pearlman, *The Zealots of Masada*, N. Y., 1967 and the recent discussions by J. Rosenthal, R. Gordis, H. Orlan and S. B. Hoenig in *Hadoor* (1969-69), Bernard Heller in *TRADITION*, Trade Weiss Romarin in *The Jewish Spectator*, Solomon Zeitlin in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* and *Bisaron*, G. R. Driver "Myth of Qumran," *The Annual of Leeds University Oriental Society Volume VI*, 1966-68: Dead Sea Scrolls Studies, 1969, and Edmund Wilson, *The Dead Sea Scrolls, 1947-1969*, (Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 12.
2. *B. J.*, IV, 338.
3. *Ibid.*, 335.
4. *Ibid.*, 161.
5. *Antiquities*, 17:272.
6. *B. J.*, 2:433.
7. *Antiquities*, 18:2, 3.
8. *Avot*, 3:2.
9. *B. J.*, 2:408.
10. *B. J.*, IV, 504.
11. *Ibid.*, IV, 516.
12. *Ibid.*, 7:403.
13. *Ibid.*, IV, 402.
14. *Antiquities*, 14:429.
15. *B. J.*, III, 372.

15a. It can not be said that the Talmud makes no mention of Masada because the occupants were ideologically close to the sect of Qumran who certainly were heterodox Jews and far from normative Judaism" (See *TRADITION*, Fall 1969, p. 98). This view is based on the common notion that the members of the Qumran sect were the peaceful Essenes. Surely, as such, they cannot be identified as "ideologically close" to the war-like men of Masada. Moreover, it is far-fetched to bring proof for the Talmud's opposition to "the Masada patriots" from Professor Saul Lieberman's notion that *Midrash Shif-Ha-Shirim* makes reference in part to Menahem, the original leader of

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the Masada group. A careful study of this medieval Midrash reveals that the text is a conglomeration. It is based on the story of Menahem, the colleague of Hillel, as given in Jerusalem Hagigah 77d and is completely corrupt. Whereas Mishnah Hagigah 2:2 notes that Hillel and Menahem did not disagree, this faulty Midrash states that they did. Surely the Mishnah text is superior to this Midrash for any historic evidence. (A full analysis of this may be found in my Hebrew article *אגודת הירושלמי — בתורה* in *Bitzeron*, May-June 1965, p. 95).

16. *Gittin*, 56A.

17. *A. Z.*, 18A.

18. *B. J.*, 7:221.

19. *Ibid.*, 7:225.

20. *Ibid.*, 7:269.

21. *Ibid.*, 7:287.

22. *Gittin*, 56b.

23. *Sec 2 Macc.* 14:37.

24. *Bereshit Rabbah*, 34:15.

25. Kimhi on I Sam. 30:4.

26. See the English edition (1662), p. 255.