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## MASADA AND THE TALMUD

Masada, a fortress built on a precipitous mount, overlooking the Dead Sea, was considered a bastion of strength as far back as the time of Hyrcanus circa B.C. 42. During the invasion of Palestine by the Parthians it served as a safe retreat for the members of the family of Herod. Earlier, Herod had built palaces, fortifications and storerooms on Masada turning it into a unique fortress.

In the Judean revolt against Rome, Masada served as the citadel for the zealots and as a base for raiding operations in which they harried the enemy. When the odds for victory diminished, the zealots nonetheless spurned surrender. Instead they were determined, according to Josephus, to leave this world free men, accompanied by their wives and children and unenslaved by their Roman enemies. And so they did. 960 men, women, and children ended their lives at their own hands.

The total absence in the Talmud of any reference to the heroism of defenders of the Masada fortress is baffling. Their bravery against the onslaught of the enemy, and their determination not to fall captive to the Romans should have elicited praise paralleling at least those evoked by the victims of Bethar (*J. Taanit* IV, *Gittin* 57-58). Instead we witness a veritable blackout of the episode in the whole range of Talmudic and Midrashic lore.

The disregard of such a noteworthy event has motivated some critical students to question the veracity of Josephus's detailed account which lacks the corroboration of any other contemporary chronicler. To conclude, however, that the Talmud's glossing over the events casts doubt on the actuality of Josephus's nar-

rative appears to be unwarranted. Indeed, avoidance of any reference to the occurrence or even the mention of the name of the stronghold merely indicates the Rabbis' revulsion at the proposal of the leader, Eliezer ben Yair, and the concurrence of the garrison's council that they should, at the finale, slay the members of their own families and then put one another to death.

The explanation by some students of that period's history that the Talmud's silence is due to the antipodal attitude towards the prosecution of the National Zealots, the Sicarii, the acmic exemplars of which were the defenders of Masada and that of the Rabbis whose representative spokesman was Johanan ben Zakkai, needs a brief explanation.

The Sicarii were fanatical nationalists. They were committed to maintain the independence of the Judean State regardless of ensuing hardships and hazards. In their resolve to remove the yoke of Rome they disregarded the consequences should their exploit prove unsuccessful. Their zeal was boundless. Their envisagement of what could and would secure the survival and continuity of the Jewish people was set in a secular frame of reference. They deemed the necessary means for such survival as: a) the possession of the land of their fathers; b) the retention of the State's independence of alien domination; and c) the avowal of allegiance of its subjects to a Judean ruler who would guide his course by the decisions of an autonomous Judean parliament or Sanhedrin.

Opposing the zealots, with solitary exceptions, were the Talmudic Rabbis who were moved by a desire to prevent the futile shedding of blood. Life, to them, was supremely sacred and human personality immeasurably precious to be exposed to the fatal gashes of thrusting swords, especially when the final outcome would spell inevitable defeat and decimation if not annihilation of their people. With the arrangement of a conditioned truce and an agreement of *military* non-belligerency the lives of the Judean combatants, they figured, would be spared. And if in addition, through the unimpeded right to study and to expound the teachings of the Torah they would be able to structure a spiritual foundation for their continuity it would prove more firm and formidable than stipulated territorial boundaries dotted

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with a supposedly unassailable fortress (*Menachot* 63).

While the Rabbis advocated a non-belligerent course they still persisted in strenuously opposing the Jews' indiscriminate emulation of Roman ways. There prevailed a "Cold War" between Edom (Rome) and Israel (Judea). The tactics of the Romans, in addition to imposing heavy taxes upon the Jews, was to distort Judaism's tenets and to deride its proponents. The Jews were made to appear outlandish, uncouth barbarians. Advocates of such anti-Jewish acts included representatives of Roman culture. Seneca, to mention but one, whenever he could, maligned and satirized Jews and Judaism.

The sages' bypassing of the Masada episode was prompted by considerations other than their opposition to the Zealots' military belligerency is indicated by their reference of the exploits of Bar Kochba who spearheaded the subsequent revolt against Rome and who received the revered Rabbi Akiba's support.

What, therefore, accounts for the sages enigmatic disregard of the Masada episode? The following serve as an explanation:

1) Their resolve to slay the members of their families and then one another was a violation of a pivotal commandment of the Decalogue "Thou shalt not murder," (Ex. 20:13, Deut. 5:17). It also contravened the Rabbinic injunction which constrained martyrdom impelled by superfluous zeal. To this end they asserted that a person should expose himself to death only if he is coerced to practice idolatry, to commit murder, or to indulge in adultery (*T. B. Yoma* 85b, *T. B. Sanhedrin* 74a, *Baba Metzia* 62, *Pesachim* 25b, *Sanhedrin* 74a).

2) Suicide to the Rabbis spelled the annihilation of something infinitely precious which was not man's but God's bestowal. The soul was only lent to a mortal being. The Lord gave it to each individual and only the Lord may take it away. Rabbi Eleazar ha-Kappa's saying, "Perforce were you born and perforce do you live and perforce shall you die" pithily accents this tenet. When one of the martyrs was subjected to fiendish tortures one of his disciples hinted a way to relieve himself of his excruciating suffering by hastening his demise. The master preferred, however, to protract his agony rather than shorten his life.

3) Stoicism in the time of the Talmudic sages competed with

Judaism for the allegiance of Gentiles who, dissatisfied with paganism, were seeking a more rational and spiritual faith. Stoicism legitimized suicide when an incident or circumstance tended to deprive an individual of his mental serenity. Many of the eminent teachers of Stoicism voluntarily put an end to their lives — sometimes even for a minor cause.

The Talmudic sages, however, strongly condemned suicide as a most grievous sin. Stoicism, more than any other ethical and philosophic school, influenced Judeans. Tarsus and Gadera were centers of propagation of Stoic teaching. In disregarding the Masada episode the Talmudic sages intended to set up a dam and breakwater against the current Stoic doctrine which they deemed to be a vice. If the practice became widespread, it could debilitate the will for survival and continuity of the Jewish people — especially when the future as well as the present would appear bleak and hopeless.

For nineteen hundred years the Masada episode was consigned to the limbo of neglected events. It was like an old article of clothing which was out of fashion and stored in an attic to which little value or significance was attached. Now, however, this very garb has been taken down from the attic. The dust and the cobwebs that had gathered about it were removed. Its stains were cleaned and the colors restored. It was put in a glistening glass case and set in a conspicuous place in the parlor for exhibition.

What brought about this interest in the old and hitherto unprized garment? The archaeological discoveries of Professor Yigael Yadin may account to some extent for the upsurge of interest. Would not, however, the major explanation be the need of the exemplary fortitude of the defenders of the Masada fortress by Israelis, who had to confront and will continue to confront forty million hostile Arabs openly vowing to retake the fraction of land which was promised by God to their forefathers.