

COMMUNICATIONS

MASADA AND THE TALMUD

TO THE EDITOR OF *TRADITION*:

In Volume 10, No. 2 of *TRADITION*, Dr. Bernard Heller, in his article "Masada and the Talmud," concludes that the reason for the silence with which the Rabbis pass over the final stand of the defenders of this last hold-out in the Jewish War of 66-70 C.E. was their disapproval of the self-destruction of the garrison just before the Roman conquest. I do not think that his conclusion is a valid one inasmuch as the instances and citations from Talmudic literature quoted by the author in support of his contention are not identical with the situation under discussion. They treat in a general manner only of the prohibition of murder and the proscription of suicide under conditions which either do not warrant it or only hasten a certain death. Much more pertinent, however, is the following Midrash which leads one to infer a viewpoint diametrically opposed to that imputed to the Rabbis by Dr. Heller. I refer to Midrash Raba — Genesis 34:19, to the verse:

וְאֵךְ אֵת דַּמְכֶם לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם אֲדַרְשׁ

from which the Talmud derives the prohibition of suicide. The Midrash comments:

"יָכוֹל בְּשֵׂאוֹל, תִּיֵל 'אֵךְ'"

Thus the word 'אֵךְ' is interpreted to except suicide in situations such as the one in which King Saul found himself at the climax of his last battle with the Philistines at Mt. Gilboa, when he, his sons and aides killed themselves rather than fall into the hands of their adversaries, who, he feared, would abuse and torture them before finally executing them. From this Midrash it therefore appears that the Rabbis were far from disapproving of suicide under conditions such as were experienced by King Saul and the defenders of Masada.

The question then still remains: Why does the Talmud not mention the episode of Masada? The answer may perhaps be inferred partly from the archeological finds in the ancient stronghold and partly from another Midrash.

1. Documents unearthed by Professor Yigael Yadin in Masada seem to point to the fact that the defenders were members of, or ideologically close to the Sect of Qumran, who certainly were he-

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terodox Jews and far from normative Judaism. As examples of such documents I should like to mention the "Scroll of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice" with its heretical arrangement of the Jewish calendar, the fragment of the "Ben-Sirah Scroll," which was proscribed by the Rabbis of that age, and various fragments of the Qumran Sect's apogrypha.

2. Professor Saul Lieberman in his book *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: 1965), page 179, cites *Midrash Shir Hashirim Zuta*: "ד'א. ב'ר'ח דודי': בימי מנחם והלל, שנפלה מחלוקת ביניהם, ויצא מנחם, הוא ושמונה מאות תלמידים עמו, מלבושים בתרקי זהב, ובה חנין בן מטרון, ובעט בו יהודה אתיו של מנחם והרגו:"

"Another interpretation. 'Flee my beloved,' when did it happen? In the time of Menahem and Hillel, when dissension arose between them, and Menahem left together with eight hundred students who were dressed in golden scale armor; Hanin ben Matron came, and Juda, the brother of Menahem kicked him to death."

Professor Lieberman proves that this part of the Midrash does not actually refer to Menahem, the contemporary of Hillel I, but to Menahem, the original leader of the Masada group (Josephus "Jewish War," II, 17:9), who murdered the High Priest Ananias at the out-

break of the revolt in 66 C.E. The Rabbis in this Midrash condemn him for this dastardly deed.

According to Josephus it was a close relative of this same Menahem, by the name of Elasar, who succeeded him in the leadership of the Masada group when they retreated to that fortress (in opposition, by the way, to the Zealots of Jerusalem!) shortly after Menahem was killed by the enraged populace of Jerusalem. It is this Elasar who led the defenders all through the siege by the Romans and who conceived of the idea of their death by their own hand.

In view of these indications it should no longer be difficult to understand why the Rabbis could not consider the defenders of Masada as true Jewish patriots, contrary to their attitude towards Bar Kochba, who was after all, at least in the early stages of his revolt, faithful to Torah and Rabbinic law, as has recently again been confirmed by documents found during excavations at Nahal Hever. The Rabbis of the Talmud with their penetrating insight into the reality of things, and opposed to views then as well as now all too prevalent, were not misled by popular conceptions of folk-heroes but only recognized true Jewish greatness in the spirit of Torah.

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CORRECTION

The Editors regret that the name of the author of the article on "Meyer Wolfsheim and Robert Cohn: A Study of a Jewish Type, and Stereotype" was misspelled in our Spring 1969 issue. It should have read: Josephine Knopp.