

Although *TRADITION* has already featured a number of articles on Masada, the interest aroused by previous discussions prompts the Editors to continue with the examination of the halakhic and religious implications of historic events which have so much contemporary relevance. Mr. Kolitz is a well-known playwright, lecturer, theatrical and motion picture producer, and the author of *Survival For What?*

MASADA — SUICIDE OR MURDER?

It was either suicide or murder at Masada. The Romans were less likely to have shown mercy to the garrison of Masada than to any other conquered enemy in the world. After all, these were the same old "zealots" who had treated them mercilessly and had cunningly eluded them in Jerusalem; the same bitter, cruel and unyielding foes who, for three years, pinned down ten thousand elite-troops of the Tenth Roman Legion in the wilderness of Judea.

But was it suicide or murder at Masada?

Great thoughts, Nietzsche says, are the greatest events. We can say, by the same token, that great events are the greatest thoughts. And they are so because truly great events are inconceivable without great thoughts which made their emergence, under certain circumstances, as good as inevitable.

To understand what had actually transpired on the top of that awesome rock on the Dead Sea shore almost nineteen hundred years ago, when all but faith in an after life was lost; and, to answer the question whether Masada was suicide or murder, is impossible without a closer scrutiny not only of the dramatic event itself but of the spiritual *thought* behind Masada.

And what was the thought of Masada?

Josephus speaks about "three philosophical sects among the Jews" during the last decades of the Second Temple: the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes. On another occasion he

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

mentions a "fourth philosophy," that of the Zealots. Here and there he elaborates on the nature of the three philosophies, but his explanation of the fourth is brief and nebulous. Josephus, by the way, who spoke contemptuously of the Zealots, never heaped scorn on their philosophy. Moreover he did not hesitate to describe as "sages" some of the original founders and exponents of that philosophy like Hezkiya the Gallilean¹

The differences between the three philosophies, as defined by Josephus, are essentially this: "The Essenes believed that all things are best ascribed to God; that the soul is immortal, and that the rewards of righteousness are eternally to be strived for." They didn't offer sacrifices in Jerusalem, because "they have more pure lustrations of their own, on which account they are excluded from the common court of the Temple, but offer sacrifices themselves." They addicted themselves to virtue and righteousness to such a degree that they had no equals "among any other men, neither Greeks nor Barbarians."

They will not suffer anything to hinder them from having all things in common, so that a rich man enjoys no more of his wealth than he who has nothing at all . . . There are about four thousand men who live in this way, and neither marry wives, nor are desirous to keep servants; as thinking the latter tempts men to be unjust, and the former gives the handle to domestic quarrels.²

The Pharisees, according to Josephus differed from the Essenes mainly in matters of interpretation of fate, or on the meaning of predetermination. The Pharisees claimed that

some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our power, and that they are liable to fate but are not caused by fate. But the sect of the Essenes affirms that fate governs all things, and that nothing befalls men but what is according to its determination. And as far as the Sadducees are concerned: they take away fate, and say there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not at its disposal; but suppose all our actions are in our own power, so that we are ourselves the causes of what is good and receive what is evil from our own folly.³

These were the governing thoughts of the first three philosophies. They differed, as it is evident, in the interpretation of the

Masada — Suicide or Murder?

degree in which the Divine will manifest itself in human activity. The "Fourth Philosophy," by contrast, was mainly concerned with the way human activity reflects the Divine will. "The Zealots," Josephus writes, "are in agreement on most other questions with the Pharisees, only that, in addition, they have a fierce love of freedom, saying that God alone rules them and He is their Master."⁴

The words sound almost cliché. Don't all people who pray to God proclaim Him, as a matter of course — or of lip service — as their Master and Ruler? They all do. Only that they mean it — if they mean anything at all — spiritually, while the Zealots — and this is the heart of the matter — meant is also *politically*. The spiritual acceptance of God's mastery over man, according to the Fourth Philosophy, makes it prohibitive for man to subject his political freedom to the will, not to say the mockery, of a mortal ruler. It would be prohibitive to do so in regard to *any* mortal ruler, but if the mortal ruler in question attributes to himself Divine qualities — allegiance to him is tantamount to idolatry.

According to the Zealot philosophy, traceable to Hezkiya the Gallilean and his all embracing concept of Oneness, to be free under God is not a right, but a duty; consequently the toleration of non-freedom imposed by a temporal ruler is a capital sin.

It is important to see this philosophy in its right perspective, for otherwise there is danger of overlooking not only its historical implications, but also the unique nature of the background against which it had emerged. And it was the background of the only monotheistic people in the world resisting the power of idolatrous Rome. Caesar thus represented not only a danger to the political freedom of Israel, but an affront to the Oneness of God. The freedom of Israel and the Oneness of God were interconnected. Not only that Oneness meant freedom, but non-freedom defied Oneness.

The belief that the idea of the Oneness of God clashes head-on with the allegiance to a supreme temporal ruler whose powers are not God-derived was not new in the Israel of the Second Temple. It was alive — often very violently alive — for a hundred and

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

seventeen turbulent years. It arose with the force of an eruption in Gallilee as soon as the Romans raised their hand against the Hasmonean Kingdom of Israel. It began in the year 47 B.C.E. and came to an end at Masada in the year 73 A.D. This belief, basic to Biblical Judaism, was first conceived and formulated as a philosophy by Yehuda, the son of Hezkiya, the Gallilean.

Josephus, who hurled at the zealots such epithets as "bandits," "gangsters," "brutes," or "terrorists," had some very kind words for Yehuda. Besides his describing him as a "great sage," he stresses his role in the rebellion, saying that he incited his people to rebel against the Romans

for he thought that it would be shameful if they will bow to the oppressor and pay taxes to the Romans, so that in addition to their accepting the rule of the Kingdom of Heaven they will accept the rule of a king of flesh and blood . . . This sage founded a sect which was unlike any other sect (in Israel).⁵

Now, who was this Yehuda, the son of Hezkiya, the Gallilean?

Very little is known about this strange and inspired man. A halo of mystery envelops his thought as well as his dynasty — for a dynasty it was. What is known is that he had first emerged on the increasingly troubled horizon of the Holy Land during the period when the Roman General Pompey confirmed the reign of Yohanan Hyrkanos the Second against his brother and rival Aristobulos. To make doubly sure of the loyalty of the Royal House of Israel to Rome, the General appointed Antipater, the father of Herod, as an "overseer." That was the beginning of the Roman rule by proxy. It also marked the beginning of the revolt. It ended with the fall of Masada, but erupted again with the uprising of Bar-Kochba, more than a century later.

Hezkiya, the father of Yehuda, the Gallilean, raised the banner of revolt against Rome as soon as Antipater raised the Roman banner in Jerusalem. He opened up with guerilla warfare in Gallilee. Antipater entrusted Herod, his son, with the task of suppressing the uprising. Herod captured Hezkiya and some of his followers and summarily executed them. Israel was outraged.

Masada — Suicide or Murder?

Herod, beginning to cast a spell of fear over the land, was ordered to appear before the "Sanhedrin." The manner of his appearance was as ominous as it was blasphemous. He was armed from head to toe and accompanied by Roman soldiers. Only Shemaya and Abtalion, the two most distinguished members of the Sanhedrin, remained steadfast. Fear muted the rest into inaction. It was then when Yehuda, the son of Hezkiya, together with Zadok the Pharisee (Prof. Joseph Klausner, in *Jesus of Nazareth*, referred to the Zealots as "activist Pharisees") organized the clandestine Zealot movement and further formulated its philosophy — the Fourth Philosophy, as it is referred to.

We first encounter Yehuda, the son of Hezkiya, three years B.C.E. as a guerilla leader in Gallilee. Heading a large group of Zealots, he stormed and captured the armory and treasury of King Archileus, son of Herod. Armed with captured Roman weapons, his men were soon in control of the whole of the Gallilee. Varus, the Roman General, heading a force of twenty thousand men, marched on the Gallilee, surrounded the rebel fortress of Zipori, and finally conquered and destroyed it, setting the city afire. Yehuda escaped. He reorganized the sect, and he, as well as his descendants, kept on harassing the Romans for another seventy years.

Yehuda had three sons and a daughter, who was married to Yair, the father of Eliezer, Commander of Masada. Another version has it that Yair was not the son-in-law of Yehuda, but his fourth son. His other sons were Jacob, Simon and Menahem. Simon and Jacob became leaders of the Zealots in Judea. They were soon caught and crucified by Tiberius Alexander, the Roman Procurator of that province. Tiberius was a converted Jew from Egypt and a nephew of Philo of Alexandria.

Menahem, the third son of Yehuda, was in charge of Zealot operations in the wilderness of Judea. With the outbreak of the general hostilities against Rome, it was Menahem who, in a surprise attack, conquered the "unconquerable" fortress of Masada. How he performed this feat in almost no time will never be known. Josephus tells us nothing about it.

Menahem, after annihilating the Roman garrison of Masada,

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

rushed to Jerusalem. The Zealots in the besieged city welcomed him like a hero and put him in command. But Menahem, it seems certain, was soon overcome by his own importance, showing conceit to his subordinates and brutality to his foes. He went to the Temple dressed in royal robes and when the High Priest Ananias resented it, he put him to the sword along with scores of other dignitaries. Menahem's punishment was swift and bitter. Eliezer, son of the slain High Priest, put him to a most unglorious death in front of masses of outraged people who demanded, according to Josephus, that he be shown no mercy. This was just before the Romans effected a break through the walls of Jerusalem — a city dying of hunger and drowning in the blood of its populace. (According to Josephus, there were 630,000 casualties in Jerusalem!)

Everything seemed lost, but the Zealots still refused to surrender. Titus Vespasianus, the Roman Commander of the siege, addressed the Zealots in a manner that gives us an idea of their defiance and ferocity, and bears testimony to the words of Cassius, the Roman historian, that "the whole world trembled when the Jews battled Rome." Titus asked the Zealot leaders, addressing them across a ravine:⁶

Are you satisfied now, Gentlemen, with the sufferings of your country — you who, in utter disregard of our strength and your weakness, have, through your reckless impetuosity and madness, destroyed your people, your city and your temple, and richly deserve the destruction that is coming to yourselves; you who, since the days of Pompeii have never stopped rebelling, and now have made open war on Rome. Did you rely on numbers? Why, a small fraction of the Roman Army sufficed to deal with you! Well then: on the trustworthiness of your allies? And which of the nations outside our Empire was going to prefer Jews to Romans? Or on your wonderful physique? Yet you know that the Germans are our slaves! On the strength of your walls? What wall could be a better obstacle than the open sea that is the bulwark of Britain? But Britain was brought to her knees by the arms of Rome! On your invincible determination and the wishes of your Generals? Yet you know that even Carthage was overwhelmed!

Titus offered to spare the Zealots' lives if they surrendered. The Zealots rejected the offer. Instead they asked, as a price for

Masada — Suicide or Murder?

laying down their weapons, a safe exit from Jerusalem. This outraged Titus who regarded it as an impudent attempt by the defeated to dictate terms to the victor. The Zealots nevertheless managed cunningly to elude the Roman trap and escape the burning city. Headed by Eliezer Ben Yair, they made their way to Masada.

Eliezer Ben Yair was, according to Josephus, "one of the dignitaries of Judea." His ideas and ideals, as well as those of his forefathers are referred to as "The Fourth Philosophy." I have already introduced some features of this philosophy. I shall explain it more fully.

The philosophy of the Zealots was based on a unique interpretation of the word "One": "Hear, oh Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is One." What does "One" mean? The word, first pronounced by Moses, crashed into Jewish history with the fiery impact of a celestial body. It was supposed to declare the Oneness of God — we all know that — but what does the belief in Oneness commit one to? This, undoubtedly, was the question uppermost on the minds of thinking Jews for more than hundred years prior to the destruction of the temple. Most of them gave the principle of Oneness a purely spiritual interpretation. "God is One" meant that He is the Only One, the Creator of heaven and earth, of man and beast, of bird and plant, of good and evil. It also meant that the One God is a conscious Supreme Being who knows, in the words of Maimonides, "all the deeds of men and all their thoughts." It further meant that Oneness connotes unity, for if God is One, it follows that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," as the Psalmist says in 24:1.

But if the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof — can one who believes in the Oneness and unity of God put limits to His reign? Can one say: I believe in the spiritual Oneness of God, but I also believe in the political supremacy of Caesar? That was the question which faced the Zealots. They were faced, in other words, with the question whether the concept of Oneness — the heart and soul of the Torah — permits a division between the earthly and the unearthly in life. It was not a question of division between church and state — this term, in its very formulation, is non-Jewish — but between God and man.

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

The Biblical man, as Martin Buber rightly observed, rebelled against the very notion that there are areas in life which belong to God and others which are reserved for man alone. Such a thought was intolerable; to the Zealots, however, it was plainly blasphemous. The extremes of bloody unforgiveness to which they went in their zeal should not divert our attention from the mighty sweep of their religious vision, as breathtaking in its concept as it was merciless in its implementation. John MacMurray said that the Hebrew mode of spiritual thought doesn't recognize a distinction between the secular and religious spheres of life. That is true, of course. To the Zealots, however, it was not a question of distinction between spheres of life, but between God and Ba'al. The concept of Oneness, as understood by the ideologists of the fourth philosophy, regarded as idolatry any attempt by man to recognize in *any* sphere of human endeavor any other supreme authority but that of God. The famous expression, "Give to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's," must, therefore, be seen in a context different from the plain proverb which most people are used to. It was, to be sure, a very important statement which took issue with one of the most burning and crucial issues of the day. Christians as well as Jewish theologians have always found it difficult to understand how the statement fits into the tenor of those days in general and into Jesus' own views in particular. Most of them have repeatedly pointed out that Jesus deduced from the image of Caesar on the coin the duty not to refuse tax to the earthly ruler. (The Zealots, as aforementioned, singled out the paying of taxes to an idolatrous earthly ruler as an affront to the principle of Oneness!) They explained this duty as something which is in the nature of a restitution. Martin Buber, rejecting this explanation, defends this saying of Jesus' on different grounds. Buber rightly felt that there is a clash in that famous statement between the principle of Oneness and the political principle. The clash is even greater in view of the equal division of dues between God and Caesar, implied in that saying.

How can that which he is obliged to give to God be placed on the same level? Is the reciprocal relationship between God and man, which each human creature enters into by his existence, also one

Masada — Suicide or Murder?

of reciprocal limited claim, Does man, then, have any claim at all to God? When he actually turns to God — that is, when he prays in truth and reality, he can hardly persist claiming Him for a moment. But if God has a claim on man, how can it be limited. If one begins to measure from the side of Caesar what a man has to “give,” shall the remainder, or the actual part of the remainder, fall to the share of God? In this wise it has clearly been understood by those who have explained the saying as meaning that one ought to comply with the worldly power as long as it demands nothing which stands in contradiction to the reverence due to God in the form of creed and service, has nothing of sacrificing to the Roman Emperor as a God-like being. But thereby the sphere of the Divine, the sphere in the life of a man pledged to God, is inevitably reduced to cult and confession. In other words, instead of being the Lord of Existence, God is made into the God of religion.⁷

Buber puts forward his own explanation of this enigmatic saying. What he actually says, however, is non-conceptual in nature and doesn't add much to the ontological, theological and historical understanding of the saying. According to Buber, human life, imprinted with mortality, cannot run its course in wholeness; it is bound to separation, to division. But what is legitimately done in the sphere of separation receives its legitimacy from the sphere of wholeness. Thus giving to the state that which is due in the sphere of separation, is authorized by the sphere of wholeness, in which we give to God what is due to Him: ourselves. “Give to God your immediacy, the saying about the tribute money says to us, and from so doing you will learn ever anew what of your mediacy you will give to Caesar.”

It is rather doubtful whether Buber, with this explanation, has contributed much to the real understanding of Jesus' famous saying. The question was not what part of himself man, committed to the wholeness, or Oneness of God, can give to Caesar, but whether giving *anything* to Caesar — anything at all — wasn't *undermining* the very principle of wholeness? This principle was not a matter of degree, but of a total commitment. It was even more so in the shadow of Caesar, because Caesar was not just a temporal ruler, a “state,” but a “Ba'al” — a man who attributed divine wholeness to himself. The political principle, as represented by Caesar, thus clashed head on with the principle of Oneness, as represented by God, because to pay

Masada — Suicide or Murder?

of reciprocal limited claim, Does man, then, have any claim at all to God? When he actually turns to God — that is, when he prays in truth and reality, he can hardly persist claiming Him for a moment. But if God has a claim on man, how can it be limited. If one begins to measure from the side of Caesar what a man has to “give,” shall the remainder, or the actual part of the remainder, fall to the share of God? In this wise it has clearly been understood by those who have explained the saying as meaning that one ought to comply with the worldly power as long as it demands nothing which stands in contradiction to the reverence due to God in the form of creed and service, has nothing of sacrificing to the Roman Emperor as a God-like being. But thereby the sphere of the Divine, the sphere in the life of a man pledged to God, is inevitably reduced to cult and confession. In other words, instead of being the Lord of Existence, God is made into the God of religion.⁷

Buber puts forward his own explanation of this enigmatic saying. What he actually says, however, is non-conceptual in nature and doesn't add much to the ontological, theological and historical understanding of the saying. According to Buber, human life, imprinted with mortality, cannot run its course in wholeness; it is bound to separation, to division. But what is legitimately done in the sphere of separation receives its legitimacy from the sphere of wholeness. Thus giving to the state that which is due in the sphere of separation, is authorized by the sphere of wholeness, in which we give to God what is due to Him: ourselves. “Give to God your immediacy, the saying about the tribute money says to us, and from so doing you will learn ever anew what of your mediacy you will give to Caesar.”

It is rather doubtful whether Buber, with this explanation, has contributed much to the real understanding of Jesus' famous saying. The question was not what part of himself man, committed to the wholeness, or Oneness of God, can give to Caesar, but whether giving *anything* to Caesar — anything at all — wasn't *undermining* the very principle of wholeness? This principle was not a matter of degree, but of a total commitment. It was even more so in the shadow of Caesar, because Caesar was not just a temporal ruler, a “state,” but a “Ba'al” — a man who attributed divine wholeness to himself. The political principle, as represented by Caesar, thus clashed head on with the principle of Oneness, as represented by God, because to pay

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

any dues to Caesar was nothing short of subscribing to the thought of duality.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to relegate, as some theologians do, Jesus' relevant statement to the convenient realm of the enigmatic. There is nothing enigmatic, in the view of this author, about that saying. It is a statement which was consistent with another one, as famous as the first and much less enigmatic, namely, "My Kingdom is not of this World."

If the Kingdom of God is not of this World, but of another, there is a wide area left in this world — in fact, there is an entire "physical" world left — for other kingdoms, even evil ones, to which man, willy-nilly, must pay his dues. The division then, is, by no means, equal. It is not a division between the political principle and the principle of Oneness, but, actually, the relegation of the entire political principle to the incurable lowliness of this world, and of the entire principle of Oneness to the glory of the next. Man in this world which is, anyway, corrupted, may as well ease his burden, if not his conscience, by not arousing the ire of the Caesars. This is something entirely different from arousing the ire of the priests, for example, a prerogative which Jesus fully exercised. Contrary to Caesar, they, the priests, laid claim to being the representatives on earth of a kingdom which cannot possibly be of this earth at all. That was why Jesus had much more to say against the priests than the Caesars. A most recent example will suffice, I believe, to explain the point. The Communists, immediately following the revolution, regarded as their most dangerous enemies not the remnants of the bourgeoisie, but those who tried to compete with them on the same ground; the social revolutionaries, or the "Menshevics."

The philosophies which had emerged in Israel prior to the destruction of the Temple were thus five, not four. Josephus doesn't mention Jesus at all. (By now it is generally agreed that the passages in Josephus about Jesus were inserted by some pietistic forgers in the fourth or fifth century.) The Fifth philosophy preached a morality which was not of this world in the literal sense of the word. It remained so, in fact, ever since. It always rested the poetic wings of its lofty morality on heights

Masada — Suicide or Murder?

hardly accessible to man. It negated the flesh with the same fervor it negated the world. That is why Christian morality, contrary to Judaism, never had a social side.

The Essenes may have felt something similar. Jesus, in all likelihood, drew inspiration from them. But there was a difference. The Essenes preached and practiced a social idea which was based on the banishment of inequality. Regarding the political principle, they eluded it altogether by retreating into the desert. Mammon they banished; Caesar — so as not to give him his due — they simply circumvented.

And it is here where the Zealots come in, so to speak, with a vengeance. To the Zealots, it seems clear, the political principle was part and parcel of the principle of Oneness. The Kingdom of God begins here, in this world, though it doesn't end here. If man recognizes the supremacy of God's Oneness, the idea of a Caesar is intolerable on any account. It's either God or Caesar. Caesar must neither be pacified, eluded or escaped. Caesar must be treated without mercy for the sake of God's Oneness. The Oneness of God, moreover, means freedom. And freedom is a duty, not just a right. To tolerate non-freedom is a violation of the First Commandment.

We find traces of this philosophy of freedom, as preached by the Zealots, in the Talmud and in the Midrash. The Talmud, on more than one occasion, gives some distinctly social and political interpretations to seemingly theological concepts. The First Commandment, "I am the Lord, your God, who has taken you out from the land of Egypt and from the house of slaves . . . Thou shall not have any other Gods upon my face," clearly turns the political principle (freedom from Egypt) into a concomitant of the principle of Oneness, ("I am the Lord your God."). Many a Biblical commentator were marvelling at it.

The First Commandment, proclaiming the Oneness of God, doesn't say "I am the Lord your God who created heaven and earth," which is by far a greater miracle than that of freeing the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. May not one, therefore, infer that the Bible, placing freedom above creation, proclaimed it as the very essence of "creation?" Slavery violates the spirit of creation and is an affront to the Creator. Thus freedom from

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

slavery is an affirmation of Oneness in as much as it gives purpose to Creation. Caesar is an idol, as is anybody who derives his authority from him, and idolatry is punishable by death.

The other example is even more explicit. It deals with the question of a slave who refuses to be freed by his master. The refusal, according to the Mosaic law, carries a punishment and a stigma. The slave's ear should be drilled by his master whom he shall then serve forever. The Sages explain this law as follows:

The ear (of the man) who has heard on Sinai (the words) that the children of Israel are my servants and that they cannot be servants to servants — who then goes and gets himself a master — let it be drilled!⁸

What the law clearly implies here is this: It's one thing if man is not in a position to choose, but if he is actually faced with a choice between slavery and freedom — choosing freedom is his duty, not just his right. If he violates this duty and chooses slavery, he is committing a crime, and should be punished accordingly. The question, of course, arises again, in this instance: what has the principle of Oneness to do with the socio-political principle? Cannot one remain a loyal servant of God spiritually while in political bondage to man? The answer, according to the Bible is clear: If socio-political bondage is chosen, or tolerated, it clearly is in violation of the principle of Oneness.

And this is probably the very heart of the Bible. The eternal and the temporal are interwoven and intermingled to a point where one doesn't know where the first ends and the second begins, and, maybe, one shouldn't. The Oneness of God encompasses all facets of creation. Contrary to Greek mythology where there was a sharp distinction between humanity and immortality, the Hebrew view regarded immortality as starting right here, in this world of humanity, as it is written "and eternal life He planted in our midst." God sets the scene of the world in its entirety. Once the scene is set, the rest follows logically. We are told, for example, that since the whole earth is God's, no title to land can be given in perpetuity. This is the law as it is laid down in Leviticus (25:23). Professor Leon Roth writes:⁹

Masada — Suicide or Murder?

For the modern man the premise is as breathtaking as the consequence is revolutionary, yet, for the Hebrew Bible the premise is obvious, and the consequence a simple deduction. Agrarian legislation flows immediately from theology, a theory of property from the nature of God. Moral living rests on a similar basis. It is uncompromisingly God-derived. When we are told not to reap the corners of the field or put a stumbling block in the way of the blind; when we are told to love our neighbor as ourselves and to honor the old, it is not in the interest of private advantage or of the smooth running of society, but because "I am the Lord your God."

Tacitus, in his account of the Roman war which extinguished the Jewish state, summed up the creed of the Jews in the following sentence: "*Mente sola unumane numen intelligunt.*" "They understand the Divine to be *one* and grasped by the mind alone."

In the Herodian era, the principle of Oneness was first defined as a revolutionary idea, and this idea soon brought about the unleashing of a major revolution. It was the first, and the last, revolution of its kind known to man, and one of the fiercest and bloodiest in history. It molded the inner images of some of the most fiery, bitter and wrathful men ever to emerge on the Judaic scene. Not much is known about them. The little we know comes to us through tortuous conjecture rather than by means of a historian's straight and unbiased narrative. Josephus, mercurial and erratic, torn between Rome and Jerusalem, sometimes confronts us with shattering accounts of revolutionary frenzy, which, paradoxically enough, he ascribes to "bandits." At closer scrutiny, however, we suddenly realize that these "bandits" must have been motivated by something which completely transcended the physical, not to say the material. One example will suffice. Josephus gives us the following account of Herod's war against the "bandits in the caves" of the Judean wilderness:

At that period, Anthony was living near Athens, and Ventidius sent for Silo and Herod to take part in the Parthian war, instructing them first to settle the problem of Judea. Herod was delighted to second Silo to Ventidius, while he, himself, took the field against the bandits in the caves. These caves opened almost to vertical slopes, and could not be reached from any direction except by winding, steep and very

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

narrow paths; the cliff in front stretched right down into ravines of immense depth, dropping straight into the torrent bed. So for a long time, the King was defeated by the appalling difficulty of the ground, finally resorting to a plan fraught with the utmost danger: he lowered the toughest of his soldiers in cradles till they reached the mouths of the caves; they then slaughtered the bandits with their families and threw firebrands at those who proved awkward. Wishing to save some of them, Herod invited them to come up to him. Not a man surrendered voluntarily, and of those who were brought out forcibly, many preferred death to captivity. One old man, father of seven children, was begged by the children and their mother to let them come out, as their lives were guaranteed. His response was terrible. One by one he ordered them to come out while he stood at the cave-mouth and killed each son as he emerged. Herod, in a good position to watch, was cut to the heart and stretched out his hand to the old man, begging him to spare his children, but he, treating the suggestion with contempt, went so far as to sneer at Herod for his lack of guts, and after disposing of the rest of his sons and killing his wife, too, flung their bodies down the precipice and finally leapt over the edge himself.¹⁰

The story, as related by Josephus, is as horrifying as it is mystifying. Is it really possible that these people were plain "bandits?" What more does a hunted bandit want than to have his life spared? How come then that after Herod, "cut to the heart" by what he saw, guaranteed the life of the man and his family, that he chose to kill his family and himself rather than accept Herod's offer? Isn't it self-evident that the old "bandit," by rejecting Herod's clemency, was fighting for something other than just life and safety?

The affirmative answer to this question must be sought and found, in our opinion, in Herod's illegitimacy as a sovereign as in the old man's ferocity as a rebel. The anti-Roman uprising first began with the emergence of Herod. Herod, an Edomite convert to Judaism, must have been regarded by the Zealots not only as a disgrace to David's throne — the majority of the Hebrews felt that way — but as an affront to the principle of Oneness — a principle which David's throne was supposed to have symbolized. Prophetic Israel, we must remember, was very severe in its attitude toward Israel's kings. Even the best of them didn't escape criticism. In Israel 600 B.C.E. the prophets would

Masada — Suicide or Murder?

point an accusing finger on the God-anointed kings and call them "sinners!" The very institution of royalty in Israel was conceived, as it seems clear from the Mosaic law dealing with it, as a concession to popular taste. The term "like all the peoples round about you" is always mentioned in the Bible derogatorily. Yet, that sentence (in Deuteronomy 16:15) which speaks of the eventual popular clamor for a king, clearly states that the Divine consent will only come as a response to a desire on the part of Israel to have a King "like all the peoples round about them." That, undoubtedly, was why Saul, Israel's first, and most unhappy King — an unhappiness which was closely associated with his "firstness" — was made to bear the full brunt of the prophetic dismay at the very idea of a King over Israel. Time and again, Samuel admonishes his people for the desire to have a King of flesh and blood rule over them "at a time when the Lord God is your King!" (I Samuel 12:12) No king in Israel, not even David and Solomon, escaped prophetic censure. As long as the king was chosen "from amongst his brethren," however, as the Mosaic law specifies, the head that wore the crown became worthy of wearing it simply because it was "God-anointed." With Herod it was entirely different. The overriding fact that he was "Caesar-anointed," so to speak, was enough for the spiritual elite of Israel to regard his sins against God and man not as accidental, but as inherent in the very nature of his foreign origin, his divided loyalties and, hence, in his totalitarian mentality.

Why, then, one may ask, were the Zealots, — defending, as they did, to the bitter end a principle which represented the very soul of the Law — the principle of Oneness? Why were they passed over almost in silence by the sages of the Talmud and Midrash? The answer, in the opinion of this author, is two-fold. First, the sages, it seems certain, were appalled and, consequently, muted by the excesses of brutality to which some leading Zealots had resorted as a means to achieve a noble end. To the sages, means and ends were as inseparable as was the Oneness of the earthly and unearthly Kingdoms of God to the Zealots. Second, the final stand of the Zealots, in Jerusalem, was marked by a confrontation between two great men, one of

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

whom saved the spirit of the Torah for all generations to come. That man was Johannan ben Zakkai. He had to feign death, as we remember all too well, so as to be permitted by the Zealots to be carried through the gates for "burial" outside the walls. It was he who confronted a victorious Titus with the request, "Give me Yavneh and her sages!" Eliezer ben Yair went to Masada to die for Oneness; ben Zakkai went to Yavneh to perpetuate it. Ben Yair believed that to tolerate the political subjugation of Jerusalem to idolatrous Rome was a flagrant violation of the principle of Oneness; ben Zakkai believed that the principle must and will survive even with the temporary suspension — never abolition — of the integrated political principle. Ben Yair, as is evident from his last, great oration, as recorded by Josephus, believed that the death of Masada would mark the end of the Jewish people, a people incapable of living without an all-embracing Oneness; ben Zakkai believed that Yavneh and her sages, and the sages who would follow them, would keep the torch of Oneness burning, all storms notwithstanding, till the Messiah restores it to its original glory by restoring it to its original meaning. History has proven him right. But that does not diminish the grandeur of the drama acted out by his opponents. There is an isolated sentence in the Midrash which sounds like an outcry of a long muted lamentation over tragic heroes whom few, if any, dared eulogize. We are referring to a highly significant, though little known, passage in *Koheleth Rabbah* (I:30). The passage is a comment on the following sentence in Ecclesiastics (I:II):

There is no remembrance of former things, neither shall there be any remembrance of things to come with those that shall come later.

To this Rabbi Zerah remarks:

How many pious and learned men were worthy of being counted (among those to be remembered), like Yehudah the son of Hezkiyah! It is about such men that it is said that "neither shall there be any remembrance of things to come with those that shall come later." But with the coming of the Messiah (*Leatid Lavo*) he will summon to his side a council of the wise, and he will accommodate them at

Masada — Suicide or Murder?

the great meeting of the righteous, as it is written, "Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed when the Lord of Hosts shall reign in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and there will be glory to his ancients" (Isaiah 24:23).

Some Midrashic interpreters, like the Hidushei Razal, express an opinion that "Yehuda, the son of Hezkiya" mentioned in the Midrash was a reference to two Talmudic scholars, "Yehudah and Hezkiya, the sons of Rabbi Hiya." This interpretation, however, hardly holds water, as has already been pointed out by Dr. L. I. Rabinowitz, former Chief Rabbi of South Africa (*Mahanayim*, No. 87, 1964). In the aforementioned passage, Rabbi Zerah speaks clearly and sorrowfully of sages who were not counted with, who were forgotten, even slighted — something which was not the case with the two above-mentioned Talmudic scholars of old! But there is another reason for assuming that Rabbi Zerah had none other but the founder of the Fourth Philosophy in mind when he spoke of "Yehudah, the son of Hezkiya." And we are referring to the passage in Isaiah which he quotes in support of his forecast that glory will ultimately be restored to the name of a man to whom glory was due, but who never got it. In the quoted Biblical passage clear mention is made of the principle of Oneness which will triumph one day when "The Lord of Hosts shall reign in His mount of Zion and in Jerusalem," a reign which will restore "glory to His ancients." It speaks, moreover, of a glory which is due to men like Hezkiya on account of ordeals so terrifying that the moon should have been confounded and the sun ashamed at having witnessed them in silence. That is why the entire Midrashic passage, as well as the prophetic quotation contained therein, cannot be seen in any other context but that of a consciousness of injustice done to the memory of mighty men who, in their death, became one with the Oneness they preached and practiced. Ben Yair gave subdued expression to this unshakable creed when he opened his famous oration to his doomed garrison, exhorting it to commit suicide, with the following:

My loyal followers . . . Long ago we resolved to serve neither the Romans nor any one else, but only God, who alone is the true and

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

righteous ruler of men . . . Now the time has come that bids us prove our determination by our deeds . . .¹¹

But was it suicide at Masada? Even if all the evidence points toward a spiritual inability to survive defeat by idolators — why suicide? Why not a fight to — literally — the last man? Wouldn't that have been much more in keeping with the Jewish law and its spirit than suicide? Not only — so goes the anti-suicide theory — is suicide branded as a cardinal sin by the Mosaic law, but the very thought of self-inflicted mass slaughter, as described by Josephus, is non-Jewish in nature. Judaism is a life-affirming religion, and there is no place in it — there never was — neither for mortification of the flesh nor for the idealization of death. Besides — so goes the same argument — Josephus is suspect, particularly on the question of suicide. Josephus, as is well known, and as he, himself, admits, cheated himself out of a decided-upon suicide at Yotaphta, when he was commander of the besieged Gallilean fortress. By inventing the suicide theory of Masada, Josephus was trying to rid himself of his guilt feeling about not having committed suicide himself.

This last argument is indeed very strange. If one can rid one self of a guilt feeling at not having done something he was supposed to do, he can do it only by proving that nobody else did it under similar circumstances, not the other way round! Josephus' betrayal of his friends, moreover, with whom he had entered into a suicide pact in the Gallilee, appears much less forgivable *after* Masada than *after Yotaphta!* Besides, a biased historian — and Josephus was certainly biased against the Zealots — is never more credible than when he praises his adversaries for having done something which he, admittedly, lacked the courage to do. When one reads carefully Josephus' account of Masada's last hours, one gets the inescapable impression that the historian, overpowered by the great drama, couldn't help but speak as a witness to the truth. Along with the Romans he had to bow his head before "the nobility of their resolve and the way in which so many had shown in carrying it out without tremor and utter contempt of death."¹²

But besides the "credibility gap" there is, as already men-

Masada — Suicide or Murder?

tioned, the religious argument. The Bible is very explicit in its condemnation of suicide. "And I shall surely make you accountable for the blood of your own souls" (Genesis, 9:5)* puts man's shedding of his own blood in the same category as shedding someone else's blood. There is a difference, so runs the "religious" argument (with which only a few religious Jewish thinkers agree) between the suicide of Jewish military commanders in the Gallilee, for example, following their defeat by the Romans, and the indiscriminate self-slaughter, involving women and children, claimed to have taken place in Masada. Jewish history, from the crumbling walls of Jerusalem to the walls of the Warsaw-Ghetto is interspersed with innumerable cases of self-immolation *Al Kiddush Hashem*, for the sanctification of God's name. Such acts of self-immolation, however, are conditioned upon situations the alternative to which were forced conversion or moral degradation. In Masada, so runs the "religious" argument, there could have been no question of conversion, while moral degradation could have been only a matter of conjecture. The women would have probably be sent into slavery, not prostitution. That, in all likelihood, would have happened to most, if not all of the men, too.

But in its only possible context, namely that of the Fourth Philosophy, this argument is hardly tenable. If the alternative faced by the defenders of Masada was slavery, and if slavery was placed by them in the same category as conversion, idolatry or prostitution — self-immolation *Al Kiddush Hashem* was almost consequential. Slavery, moreover, became tantamount to *Hillul Hashem* — the desecration of God's name — the most extreme form of dishonor in Judaism. It must have been the alternative to this shameful category into which the sages have relegated the suicide of King Saul, for example. When the unhappy, sorely tried first King of Israel saw that the battle with the Philistines was lost, he either killed himself by falling on his sword or — which is, for that matter, the same — ordered an Amalekite boy to plunge the sword in his heart. The Talmud

* The translation of this sentence in the King James version of the Bible, "And surely your blood of your lives I will require," is both erroneous and misleading.

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

and the Midrash glorify Saul's last deed. It is stressed, moreover, that Saul killed himself at the explicit advice of his dead mentor, the prophet Samuel. As we may recall from the Biblical account of the tragic story, Saul, in his distress, went to the Witch of Endor and asked her to conjure up the soul of the dead Prophet. Samuel, according to the Biblical narrative, told Saul that "tomorrow you will be with me" (I Samuel 28:19). This forecast of certain and imminent doom didn't prevent Saul from going back to the battlefield. The sages have this to say on the much-discussed subject: Samuel told Saul that

if you hearken to my voice and die by the sword, your death will be your absolution, and your place will be with me, where I am now . . . And Saul adhered to the Prophet's advice and he died with his sons so that his portion (in the world to come) would be with Samuel, as it is written "with me," that is, in my realm.¹³

Nachmanides, one of the great interpreters of the law in the middle ages, is even more direct in his comment on the suicide of King Saul. To him the King's suicide was justified on account of the total hopelessness of his situation.

. . . And we also find a case of a great man who committed suicide because he was constrained to. And we mean Saul, King of Israel, who killed himself . . . Since he was lost anyway, he was justified in doing what he did.¹⁴

But to be "justified" is not the same as to be obligated. Under what conditions is self-immolation obligatory? The Tossafot, quoting Rabenu Tam, is quite unequivocal in its verdict:

If there is a fear (among them) that the heathen will force them to transgress by means of torture impossible to endure — self-immolation is a holy deed.¹⁵

In Masada it was not only the fear of tortures impossible to endure, of which Ben Yair spoke in his last oration, and which was partly responsible for the suicide decision, but the unalterable conviction that the endurance of slavery as such, even if unaccompanied by torture, constitutes a capital sin. The 959

Masada — Suicide or Murder?

men, women and children who killed themselves on the top of Masada, did not make a cult out of dying. Death provided them with a way out of what they regarded as a flagrant violation of the Law of Oneness. Not that they chose to die so as to remain faithful to God, but to their own selves in as much as they reflected the oneness with the Divine which was their only *raison d'être*. These people, at least in the great moment of truth, saw themselves as standing directly in the sight of God, measuring themselves by their vision of His Majesty. Soren Kierkegaard had something very pertinent to say about such a rare spiritual ability:

The self acquires a new quality or qualification in the fact that it is the self directly in the sight of God. This self is no longer the merely human self, but is what I would call, hoping not to be misunderstood, the theological self, the self directly in the sight of God. And what an infinite reality this self acquires by being before God! A herdsman who (if this were possible) is a self only in the sight of cows is a very low self, and so is a ruler who is a self in the sight of slaves — for in both cases the scale or measure is lacking. The child who hitherto has had only his parents to measure himself by, becomes a self when he is a man by getting the state as a measure. But what an infinite accent falls upon the self by getting God as a measure!

On the men and women of Masada, by measuring themselves against the Ultimate, fell the infinite accent of greatness. This accent, as expressed in their self-inflicted death *Al Kiddush Hashem*, must have assumed the nature of a bitter urgency, let alone necessity, in view of what must have been an irresistible inner need for the expiation of sins. Some of the lines in Josephus' account of ben Yair's last speech, such as the idea that the soul craves to part with the body, smell of Greek influences. But there can be little doubt that ben Yair's penitential references to transgressions committed by him and his followers, were faithfully recorded by Josephus.

Masada — the thought as the event — is the story of one word which shook the world, and that word is — "One." As an ontological idea, this word, encompassing all of creation, may turn men, as they did on Masada, into "Knights of infinite resignation" and "witnesses to the truth" in the Kierkegaardian sense

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

of the terms. The "Fourth Philosophy" was the practiced thought of Oneness — a practice which made the event of Masada not only possible, but inevitable. It is the thought which, by its application to the political and social aspects of life, turned men into rebels against the very idea of division, of fragmentation, of materiality, of complacency and of lack of roots in eternity. The Fourth Philosophy was thus the practice unto death of one thought, contained in one word, which created an everlasting storm in the history of the human spirit — the thought and the word of "ONE."

NOTES

1. *The Jewish War*, II, 17.
2. *Antiquities*, Book XVIII.
3. *Ibid.*, Book XIII.
4. *Ibid.*, Book XVIII.
5. *The Jewish War*, II, 8.
6. *Ibid.*, 21.
7. Buber, Martin, *Pointing the Way*.
8. *Kidushin*, 22:2.
9. Roth, Leon, *Judaism — A Portrait*.
10. *The Jewish War*, III.
11. *Ibid.*, 23.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Yalkut Shmuel*.
14. *Torat Ha'adam*.
15. *B. Avodah Zarah* 18:19.
16. Kierkegaard, Soren, *The Sickness Unto Death*.