

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 Gallilean<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup>

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).<sup>5</sup>

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:<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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?

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## 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

