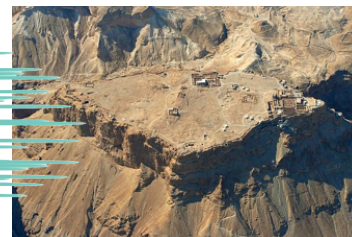


Second Conversation

Chapter Four: Masada, 1942



Masada in 1942 lies at the center of the chapter symbolically but Shavit's narrative begins in the violent years of the Arab revolt of 1936 to 1939. These three years of almost unrelenting terror put Jew clearly against Arab and made it impossible for the Jews to maintain any kind of blindness to the Arab question that so many had exhibited up till then. In Shavit's description, the 1936 campaign brought about a toughening of the Jewish psyche, a final realization that non-violent confrontation would be impossible.

At the same time, Jews in Palestine became aware of the developments in Europe. As the Nazi armies rolled through North Africa, many of the leaders began to fear a full scale attack on the Jews of Palestine. A consciousness begins to develop that there is a need for the new harder Jews of the country to prepare for war both against the Arabs and the Nazi forces.

In that climate, and largely because of the work of one man, Shmaryahu Gutman, Masada developed as a rallying point and a symbol of preparedness for the tough times ahead.

Gutman trained groups of youth movement leaders to scale the mountain and to learn Masada's story of the last Jewish rebels who had chosen suicide over slavery as a last defiant act thousands of years previously. These youngsters, carrying out dramatic night time ceremonies in which they swore loyalty to the mountain and to their fellow Jews, would be the guardians of the nation, toughened on the events of the 30's and the early 40's. It was their task to forge themselves into the human weapon that would ensure that Masada would never fall again.

Quotations and Questions

The Jewish national liberation movement had to acknowledge that it was facing an Arab liberation movement that wished to disgorge the Jews from the shores they had settled on.

- ◆ How would you define a “National Liberation Movement”?
- ◆ From what are the two movements here aiming to liberate themselves from?

Faced with an Arab threat and a Nazi threat, it is clear that without the use of force, Zionism will not prevail. It will go down in history as yet another movement of false messianism. That is why the youth of Israel must be prepared. Only the sons and daughters of Zion can save Zionism from utter destruction.

- ◆ Do you believe there are situations in which force is necessary?
- ◆ Does the use of force strike you as a Jewish quality?

Gutman is not naive. Having grown up beside the malaria-infested marshes near the Valley of Harod, he has always known that Zionism is a struggle. Living under the hateful gaze of the valley's Arabs, he has always known that at its core Zionism embodies conflict.

- ◆ Do you agree with Gutman's assertion of Zionism's core?
- ◆ The Zionism put forward in Shavit's portrait of Gutman is of an oppositional movement, which seems to be more engaged in survival rather than construction. To what extent does this chime with your understanding of Zionism?

The more I learn about them, the more distant they seem to me. In an era of criticism and cynicism and self-awareness I find it difficult to truly comprehend the cadets' state of mind as they prepare to climb Masada for the very first time. Yet I realize that this paradox is exactly the essence of the Zionist Masada...What Gutman is doing in bringing this young, idealistic group to this desert ruin is using the Hebrew past to give depth to the Hebrew present and enable it to face the Hebrew future. In order to achieve a concrete, realistic, and national goal, Gutman imbues the fortress with a man-made historically based mysticism.

- ◆ Do you share Shavit's difficulty in understanding the cadets' state of mind?
- ◆ Have you ever found yourself swept up by a charismatic leader, or an inspiring experience?

It is not Ben Yair who defined Masada, it is Gutman. What matters is not the event that did or did not take place on the fringe of history in ... 73, but the event that does take place in...1942. For the Masada ethos put forth by Gutman would define the Zionism of the 1940s and would decide the fate of 1948 and would shape the young state of Israel.

- ♦ Have you ever visited Masada? If so, what narrative did the tour guide share with you?
- ♦ Knowing as you do now, that the ancient Masada narrative was promoted with a particular agenda in mind, has your perspective on Masada changed?

Additional Sources



Here are three additional sources that you might want to incorporate into the discussion.

The first is from the famous speech of Elazar Ben Yair, the leader of the Zealots of Masada as he calls on the Jews to commit collective suicide rather than fall in slavery to the Romans. It is this speech, taken from the Josephus account of the last episodes of the Jewish war against the Romans after the fall of the second Temple, that became a mythical element in the Zionist self-perception from the mid-1920's onward.

Brave and loyal followers! Long ago we resolved to serve neither the Romans nor anyone other than God... The time has now come that bids us prove our determination by our deeds. At such a time we must not disgrace ourselves. Hitherto we have never submitted to slavery... We must not choose slavery now... I think it is God who has given us this privilege, that we can die nobly and as free men... In our case it is evident that daybreak will end our resistance, but we are free to choose an honorable death with our loved ones. This our enemies cannot prevent, however earnestly they may pray to take us alive; nor can we defeat them in battle. Our possessions and the whole fortress go up in flames. It will be a bitter blow to the Roman, that I know, to find our persons beyond their reach and nothing left for them to loot. One thing only let us spare--our store of food: it will bear witness when we are dead to the fact that we perished, not through want but because...we chose death rather than slavery....

Speech of Elazar ben Yair from Josephus Flavius c 70c.e.



The second source is taken from the poem “Masada” written by the Ukrainian born Jewish poet, Yitzhak Lamdan (1899-1954), who had come on Aliyah at the beginning of the 1920’s and who wrote his epic poem in 1927, inspired by the terrible Ukrainian pogroms after the First World War. In the poem, Lamdan called for Jewish victims from all over the world to converge on Masada for the last stand of the Jews. The poem began the rise of Masada to its mythic place in the Zionist story.

On Ukrainian paths, dotted with graves, and swollen with pain,
My sad-eyed, pure-hearted brother fell dead, to be buried in a heathen grave.
Only father remained fast to the doorpost wallowing in the ashes of destruction,
And over the profaned name of God, he tearfully murmured a prayer.
Whilst I, still fastening my crumbling soul with the last girders of courage,
Fled, at midnight to the exile ship, to ascend to Masada. I was told
The final banner of rebellion had been unfurled there and demands from Heaven and Earth, God and Man:
‘Payments’.
Stubborn nails grind the gospel of comfort on tablets of rock;
Against the hostile Fate of generations, an antagonistic breast is bared with a roar: “Enough! You or I! Here
will the battle decide the final judgement!”

Yitzhak Lamdan 1927 from “Isaac Lamdan: A Study in Twentieth Century Hebrew Poetry” by L. Yudkin [Cornell University Press 1971]



The third piece is a description of a tiyul (trek, hike) to Masada by Meron Benvenisti, Israeli writer and intellectual who describes himself as being, in his youth, one of the “High Priests” of the cult of Masada in the 1950’s. It describes briefly the extreme “ritual” that surrounded the hikes to the mountain fortress.

The tiyul was not just an outing. It was the high ceremony of the cult of “homeland.” The preparations took weeks, and involved not only logistics such as transportation and food, but rehearsals of performing troupes and preparations for evening lectures. Sometimes the logistics were quite esoteric. Before one tiyul in the early 50s, we found we would not be able to maintain radio contact, so we got hold of a half-dozen pigeons, carried them on our backs, and released one each evening at sunset with a message attached to its leg. The tiyul itself was a test of endurance. We walked for days in temperatures that sometimes reached 42 degrees centigrade (108 degrees Fahrenheit). Water rationing was a particularly controversial feature of our tiyulim. In actual fact, children got sunstroke and there were even deaths from dehydration. One day, on the shores of the Dead Sea, a group leader reported to me that a water container had been stolen from his group that night. I demanded that the culprit identify him or herself, and when nobody owned up, I told the entire group, 800 strong, to empty out its water supplies, leaving only one canteen per 30 people for emergencies. That day we walked 12 hours to Ein Gedi without drinking a single drop of water.

Meron Benvenisti 1986 from “Conflicts and Contradictions” [Villard publishers]

If you are interested in this chapter
you might want to have a look at...

<http://www.masada.org.il/index.php?q=en>

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1040>