

From Shrine to Forum: Masada and the Politics of Jewish Extremism

ABSTRACT

Zionist collective memory has long associated Masada with the struggle to secure Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel. This article examines the effects of the political upheavals of the Oslo and post-Oslo periods on the meanings ascribed to Masada. It documents the popularity of a critical counter-narrative in tour guides' presentations of Masada to diaspora Jewish tourists. Directly informed by memories of the Rabin assassination, this critical counter-narrative emphasizes the dangers posed by Jewish extremists adhering to messianic religious ideologies. The focus on internal rather than external threats to Jewish sovereignty represents a sharp break with past framings of Masada's meaning. The paper discusses the implications for the study of political culture and collective memory.

THE SIGNING OF THE OSLO Accords with the PLO in September 1993 inaugurated an era of socio-political upheaval in Israel. Punctuated by jolts such as the Rabin assassination, the second Intifada, and the Gaza withdrawal, the past decade-and-a-half has transformed long-simmering debates over the country's future into sometimes violent conflicts concerning the present. In such a situation, where the future and present are hotly contested, the past is inevitably drawn into the fight.

Of all the sites through which Israel represents its past as a "model of" and "model for" the present and future,¹ the one most closely associated with existential questions of national survival has long been Masada. In accordance with other studies of collective memory,² research on Masada has found that the meanings attached to this iconic cultural artifact have

shifted in the past, together with changes in the broader socio-political context.³ In this article, we ask whether the upheavals of the past two decades and the increasing polarization over immediate (rather than deferred) questions of national security policy have led to yet another shift in Masada's construction in Israeli collective memory.

MASADA'S NARRATIVES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Yael Zerubavel's study of Masada describes its centrality in Israeli political culture and its shifting meanings at key "turning points" from the period of the Yishuv through the early 1990s.⁴ In the first phase, Masada represented Jewish military valor and the "culmination of the ancient Jewish spirit that contemporary Jews should venerate and attempt to revive."⁵ The mass suicide was ignored or glossed over as a form of "fighting until the end". In this format, the Masada narrative provided a potent antidote to internalized anti-Semitic images of an exilic Jew who cowered in the face of persecution and, most notoriously, went "like a sheep to slaughter" during the Shoah.

According to Zerubavel, following the disastrous Yom Kippur War, Masada narratives took on a more tragic quality. The renewed sense of vulnerability in Israeli society animated a new commemorative narrative. In the new narrative, Masada represented not a break with the exilic past, but instead the continuity of persecution and Jewish suffering: "Whereas the activist commemorative narrative emphasized the contrast between Masada and the Holocaust, the new narrative highlights the analogy between the two events. In this framework, the situation, not the act of suicide, is strongly condemned."⁶ Although to an extent in competition with one another, the two alternative narratives contributed to a higher order synthesis. Both narratives "contribute to Israelis' commitment to be powerful and ready to sacrifice themselves for their nation to ensure that the Masada/Holocaust situation does not recur."⁷ In a phrase, the two competing Masada narratives promoted the common slogan, "Masada shall not fall again!"

The conventional Masada narratives have been subjected to intense academic scrutiny. Nachman Ben-Yehuda compares core claims of the conventional narratives to Josephus's account in *The Jewish Wars*—the only historical record known.⁸ He treats divergences from the Josephus account as evidence of deliberate ideological fabrication. A strict reading of Josephus, he argues, would lead to the conclusion that Masada's defenders were not Zealots who fought valiantly in Jerusalem, sustained their rebellion from the desert fortress at Masada, and then made a heroic last stand when

confronted with defeat. Rather, they were Sicarii—a band of Jewish extremists known for their embrace of political assassination in their struggle against those Jews who promoted a more pragmatic line against Rome. During the latter days of the Second Temple, the Sicarii rushed headlong into a hopeless rebellion against Rome, dragging their unwilling Jewish compatriots with them. Religiously fanatical, the Sicarii believed that God would rescue the Jews from the clutches of Rome if only they showed the fortitude to rebel.

With Josephus as the touchstone, Ben-Yehuda charges the conventional narratives with sins of omission and commission. He offers in their place a decidedly unheroic portrait of the Jews of Masada, calling attention to aspects of the Josephan narrative typically overlooked. These include Josephus' reports that the Sicarii fled Jerusalem before its fall, escaping the fighting, and that while encamped in the Herodian fortress, they raided the nearby Jewish settlement of Ein Gedi, killing hundreds of its inhabitants and stealing their food. Ben-Yehuda also highlights the lack of textual basis for the claims that the Sicarii engaged in resistance "raids" against Rome, that the siege lasted more than a few weeks, or even that the defenders fought in the final days of the siege.⁹

Ben-Yehuda is aware of the questions raised by historians about the Josephan account.¹⁰ Shaye Cohen, for example, offers a reading of Josephus' Masada story that demonstrates how the Jewish-general-turned-Roman-historian consciously balanced the roles of "apologist for the Jewish people" with "polemicist against Jewish revolutionaries".¹¹ Most important for our purposes is the polemical nature of Josephus' characterization of the Sicarii. Ben-Yehuda contends that the debates "about the validity and accuracy of Josephus' narrative are simply irrelevant" to his purposes, because he is concerned only with how the narrative has been "changed and molded" in Israeli collective memory.¹² Ben-Yehuda's work, however, does not merely analyze the processes of collective myth making. It also engages in them, offering a counter-narrative in place of the conventional myths that Ben-Yehuda seeks to discredit and grounding the new narrative in a specific set of truth-claims. Among the rhetorical and interpretive strategies Ben-Yehuda employs in the construction of this counter-narrative, is the appropriation of the Josephan anti-Sicarii polemic coupled with the marginalization of critiques of the source material that raise questions about Josephus' neutrality.

Ben-Yehuda's critical counter-narrative includes its own alternative hero and moral paradigm for action in the context of imperial domination. According to the Talmud,¹³ around the time the Sicarii fled Jerusalem,

Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai was smuggled in a coffin past the Zealots guarding the gates of Jerusalem to an audience with Vespasian. The Jewish leader flattered the Roman general, prophesying that the latter would soon become the next Caesar, and asked for the permission of Rome to establish a small rabbinic academy in the village of Yavneh. According to this tradition, it is because of Yavneh that the Jewish people survived the destruction of the Temple and loss of national sovereignty. Ben-Yehuda presents Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai as a model for “spiritual Judaism” over and against militant, messianic Judaism. He represents the virtues of pragmatism that stand in opposition to “military-political activism, zealot fervor, and false messianism”.¹⁴

At the time Ben-Yehuda conducted his research, the counter-narrative was clearly dissident. It circulated among a small number of professors at The Hebrew University and was evident in ultra-orthodox circles.¹⁵ No popular guidebook included the counter-narrative.¹⁶ Observation of tour guides on the summit of Masada in the late 1980s and early 1990s recorded only minor variations on the conventional narratives.¹⁷ Youth movement publications, school textbooks, children’s literature, and media discourse likewise ignored the counter-narrative in favor of what Ben-Yehuda labels “the Masada myth”. Quite simply, during the decades extending between the 1930s and early 1990s, the critical counter-narrative was not part of the mainstream political discourse.

Research on collective memory, including Zerubavel’s study of Masada, raises the question of whether this situation has changed. As noted, Masada’s place in Israeli collective memory is closely associated with ongoing attempts to secure Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel. Have recent changes in Israeli political discourse around such issues produced yet another shift in the meanings ascribed to Masada? Whereas the earlier threats to sovereignty were typically perceived as stemming from external sources, the socio-political upheavals of the past two decades have stoked fears that Jewish sovereignty might be threatened from within. The nature of this sovereignty and the threats to it are conceived differently by rival factions within Israeli society. For many, the Rabin assassination and threats of violent opposition to territorial withdrawal constitute assaults on state sovereignty, intended to undermine the institutions of self-government on which national self-determination rests. For their part, opponents of the Oslo Accords and the Gaza withdrawal have tended to conceive of sovereignty in territorial rather than institutional terms, viewing the state’s steps to relinquish control over territory as a renunciation of Jewish sovereignty in the areas ceded. In light of the increasing tendency to identify existential

threats from within, we may reasonably ask: To what extent are contestations over the Israeli present reflected in constructions of the Jewish past? Is the critical counter-narrative of Masada, articulated by Ben-Yehuda and others, entering mainstream political discourse? Moreover, if so, how is it being appropriated in the current political debate?

ABOUT THE STUDY

In the context of the changes since Oslo and the Rabin assassination, we conducted observations on the summit of Masada to see what narratives tour guides are telling today. Because the site attracts more foreign than domestic visitors,¹⁸ tour guides often find themselves representing Israeli collective memory not only to Israelis, but also to foreigners, a fact that adds an additional layer of complexity to the already complicated politics of representation. Among the many foreign visitors to Masada are diaspora Jews. Their participation in the construction of meaning at Masada highlights the problematics of speaking of Masada as a site of *Israeli* collective memory. Insofar as Masada speaks to Jewish history rather than Israeli history, and insofar as diaspora Jews are stakeholders in the Zionist enterprise, they, too, lay claim to the collective memory embodied in the site. In light of the fact that the nation and the state are not isomorphic, it is more reasonable to speak of Masada's role in *Zionist* collective memory than *Israeli* collective memory.

The current study draws upon the field notes of observers on eleven diaspora Jewish "Israel Experience" tours and on subsequent interviews with the tour guides. The tour groups each consisted of approximately 40 participants between the ages of 18 and 26. Five of the tours integrated North American and Israeli Jews at ratios of 4:1 to 6:1 in a joint tour, whereas others were comprised solely of North American Jews. The bus groups were organized by various tour providers working within the framework of a single umbrella organization. The tours differed in their orientations emphasizing outdoor adventure, Israeli–Diaspora peer encounters, specific denominational orientations, or some combination of the above. The tour groups typically arrived at Masada before dawn and ascended by way of the Roman ramp. The tour on the summit lasted a few hours, after which the group descended by the Snake Path. During the busiest times of the year, several groups visited the summit at the same time, but the tours were conducted separately. The guides were licensed Israeli tour guides who traveled with the bus groups for the duration of their visit to Israel.

In ten of the eleven cases in our sample, the observers ascended Masada with their tour group, followed the group throughout its time on the summit, and then descended with the group. In the remaining case, an observer joined a second group mid-way through its tour. The observers took comprehensive notes on the guides' narratives of the site. Both the guides and observers were bilingual Hebrew-English speakers. For many, English is a second language, and this sometimes is evident in the field notes. To remain as true to the original material as possible, we quote directly from the field notes, sometimes adjusting punctuation or inserting bracketed material for clarity. In no case, however, did we alter the content of the field notes. In the extracts below, quotation marks indicate a direct quote of the guide; all other notes are the observer's own paraphrasing.

ON THE SUMMIT

The tours in our sample typically included a great deal of detail about the various archeological points of interest on the summit as well as about local geography and history. In every case, the guide also told a version of the Masada narrative and elaborated on its significance for Israel and contemporary Jewry. The compiled field notes include examples of the conventional (activist and tragic) narratives as well as unanticipated instances of the critical counter-narrative. The diversity in narratives was dramatically captured by one of our field observers who moved between two groups on the summit. The guide of the first group, whom we shall call Yariv,¹⁹ narrated the conventional account of the significance of Masada. In the following extract, Yariv is play-acting the part of Elazar Ben Yair, the leader of the Jews of Masada:

Jews will never be slaves to any culture! . . . What culture has [an . . .] ancient book like we do?! How can we give it up, leave our principles when we have such a beautiful religion?" When [Ben Yair] understood that [the Roman general] Silva was entering Masada the next day, [he] told the people to give [their] life to God and commit suicide, not [to] give the Romans the pleasure of killing them or taking them as slaves. "Now thousands of people come and see the brave move we did, fighting the Romans with no weapons, just our spirits. They know now how Jews stand up for their values . . .

At the last stop, the guide explains how it [is] to look at Masada from an Israeli point of view:

In Israeli society they say that there will not be a second Masada, there will not be a situation where someone will surround us for 3 years that in the end we'll have to commit suicide. We'll always remember Masada. . . . As a soldier, we are faithful to the warriors of Masada, maybe not to the way but to the fight, the active movement, taking our fate in our hands, this is what Israel is all about. In our culture we use the lessons of Masada from the past to protect us and teach us about the future. (Extract 1, Group 2)

As Yariv's group was finishing its tour, the observer left to join another tour group that was gathered nearby, Canadian Jews traveling as part of the same Israel Experience program. Their guide, Yonatan, was building to the core of his narrative, that a people's wisdom is reflected in the choice of life and not destruction: "The only reason that you are standing here today is not because of Elazar Ben Yair, but because of somebody else, Yochanan Ben Zakkai."

Yonatan tells how the man came [to] the Romans and told them, give me Yavneh and its wise people, open the gates of Jerusalem for 3 days, let the Jews who want to, leave, and they did just that.

The Jews who survived were those who went to Yavne and started again the culture and religion of the Jewish people, not the people who decided to fight for the death. . . . Fanaticism never ever works! That's how there will [be] continuity, not in the way of Elazar Ben Yair . . . There is a saying that people say when they come to Masada 'again Masada shall not fall,' that's right, it will not fall because the people of Israel want to live! They don't want to die! And that's the message—*am Israel chai*, the people of Israel lives and will continue to live.

All stand and yell [*am Israel chai*] towards the mountains and the words echo back. The guide is very charismatic and the group is very attentive. All cooperate in yelling the sentence at the end. (Extract 2, Group 3)

In a sample of eleven observations, five guides provided only a version of the conventional Masada narrative (along the model of Extract 1); two guides provided only the critical counter-narrative (along the model of Extract 2); four mixed the conventional and critical narratives. In the balance of this section, we examine each of these variations in further detail.

As Zerubavel noted, the conventional narrative sometimes stresses "activism" and repudiation of the exilic Jew. This version of the conventional narrative is visible above, in Extract 1. The more recent Jewish version of the conventional Masada narrative highlights the continuity of Jewish suffering

across time and place (the “tragic” narrative). In the following extract, the guide, Shani, analogizes the bitter predicament of the Masada defenders to other notorious instances of persecution, including the Inquisition and the Shoah:

Masada is an example, a lesson for us. Time after time, the Jews were facing a catastrophe and destruction; and time after time, they found a solution. . . . Also in the Holocaust, as we could see yesterday in Yad Vashem, people made different choices. The same happened at the pogroms, at the Spanish Inquisition . . . Today we are here, because there was never just one Jew to himself. We were always a community. We shall never stand alone—we are part of one community all over the world. If we don't help each other—we are doomed.

Shani illustrates her point that as a community we are stronger than we are as individuals. She shouts towards the mountain—and nothing happens. Then she asks the whole group to shout—and a strong echo answers back. She suggests that they will all shout together ‘Masada shall not fall again’, and explains: “When Masada fell, it was a great trauma. Today when soldiers are finishing their training, they often come to this place, in order to show and remember that this will not happen again.” The whole group shouts word by word *Mitsada lo tipol shenit* in Hebrew, and the mountains answer back. (Extract 3, Group 4)

Based on previous research, the prevalence of the activist and tragic narratives was to be expected. The surprise, however, was the presence of the critical counter-narrative in more than half of the tours. In several cases, the critical counter-narrative was expressed alongside the conventional story. In these cases, it provided one possible interpretation of Masada among many. In the following extract, the guide, Doron, employs the conventional tropes of heroism in his narrative of the final days of the Roman siege:

Now the Jews were prepared for this moment, they knew that despite their faith in God that this can happen to them, just like they had faith in God but still the Temple was destroyed. . . . [W]hat they decided to do was to commit mass suicide rather than to give in to the Romans . . . They decided to burn and destroy everything so that the Roman won't get any loot; actually, the only thing they left was their food . . . Because they wanted to show to the Romans that ‘you didn't starve us out and you didn't kill us, we took our own life’ and that was their way of making their protest. (Extract 4, Group 6)

Having presented core elements of the conventional storyline, Doron next develops the Yavneh counter-narrative. Were it not for Yochanan Ben Zakkai, who did not abandon hope, the Jews might not have survived. The criticism of the Masada defenders is fairly explicit. The observer's field notes continue, uninterrupted:

. . . Yochanan Ben Zakkai . . . was the leader of the Jewish community in Jerusalem, a great rabbi, he knew that the Romans won, he saw the writing on the wall, but decided unlike the people here who were fighting till the death which will only lead to death and destruction, it's better to try and compromise or at least make a deal with the Romans. The story is that he fakes his own death, and as Jews don't bury Jews within the city walls, they took him in a coffin and snuck him out of the city, then he went and talked to one of the Roman leaders, and said to him that he's going to be the next Roman leader and asked, just give me Yavne and a group of our sages, and he was granted this . . . Certainly, there is a romantic idealism in fighting to the death [and] not giving victory to the Romans, but if everybody did this we wouldn't be here, so at what point is compromise practical and at what point it is cowardice? It's an open question."

Doron concludes his narrative by inviting participants to shout "Shalom" over the edge of the cliff. (Extract 5, Group 6)

In the final set of cases, the critical-counter-narrative was expressed exclusively. For one guide, Eran a doctoral student in Bible, Masada was the educational cornerstone of the entire tour. He began his Masada narrative a few days earlier at the Mt. Herzl cemetery in Jerusalem. The observer recorded the following scene at the gravesite of the assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin:

We went first to the graves of Israel's leaders and their spouses, walking among the graves while Eran explained who could be and was buried there. At Rabin's grave Eran's tone changed. Whereas before he provided occasional conversational explanations of the cemetery, here he stopped and adopted a more serious, grave tone. He told us that Rabin was "murdered by a religious zealot", and that "that was the greatest shock, I think, to our society." At Masada, he told us, we would talk about "what happens when someone takes religion and becomes a zealot." (Extract 6, Group 10)

A few days later, at Masada, Eran picked up the theme of the dangers of zealotry. "In a way," he told the group, "I was building the tour up to

this moment.” In the extract below, he argues that secular Zionists, who embraced Masada as a symbol during their struggle for statehood, ignored the Zealots’ messianic religious convictions, and the disastrous choices which they produced. Today, however, religious extremists once again place their bets on divine intervention and thereby threaten fellow Jews.

Two thousand years later, the Jews . . . looked for a symbol and they found Masada, a place surrounded by enemies where the people put religion before everything else. However, Eran explained, because they [the Zionists] were secular, there was one thing they left out: that these people [Masada’s defenders] believed that God would save them and were therefore willing to do irrational things. He told us that this fact is important because there are zealots around today. They are the people who believe that “if you return land God has given you, you are sacrilegious traitors.” He said “the modern day zealots I know better than the old time zealots, their devotion should not confuse anybody, they are terrorists. . . . and eventually (if they continue to push) just like we lost the first and second Temples, we will lose Israel.”

Eran talked about “the day Rabin was murdered,” how he was murdered by a zealot, how this was a failure of democracy, and how even though the signs were there that something like this might happen, nobody really heeded them. He told us then “It’s the mission of my life to warn the world from zealots; they are willing to take everything to the edge and then march forward . . . that is why I stayed here longer than all the other guides and tortured you and I don’t care.” . . . (Extract 7, Group 10)

GUIDE INTERVIEWS

What do the guides tell us about their own narrative choices? We interviewed nine of the 11 guides a year later. The interviews focused mostly on their goals in guiding tour groups and in particular with respect to Masada. We also asked how their Masada narratives have developed and changed over time and about the source materials they relied on to prepare their Masada explanations. Most of the interviews were conducted in Hebrew; the quotations that appear below are the authors’ translations.

All of the guides in the sample stressed their personal commitment to fostering Jewish identity and a connection to Israel among participants in their tours. Shani, who told the tragic version of the conventional narrative, wants “all groups to develop a familiarity with the Land of Israel [*ha’aretz*]

and a connection to Judaism in all of its forms—Judaism as religion, as a culture, and also perhaps as a type of nationality.” Such a commitment was expressed no less by guides who told the critical narrative. “I want them to love Israel; I want them to see how much I love Israel. I want them to see my Israel. I want them to see a personalized Israel, not just a touristy one,” said Avi. Another guide, Motti, who on Masada analogized the internecine Jewish strife during the Roman era to the situation that led to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, adding, “Jews never learn from history,” explained to us his philosophy of guiding by citing “a very, very, very great leader, Yigal Allon.” As Motti’s off-the-cuff translation phrased it, “An *am*—a group of people—who doesn’t respect their past, their present is very shallow and their future is somewhere in the fog.”

We also asked the guides about their specific motivations in relation to Masada. The guides who narrated Masada in a conventional fashion described a variety of goals: conveying Jewish heroism or the miraculous return of the Jewish people after their apparent destruction (in fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy: the dry bones live!); encouraging diaspora tour participants to think about what they believe in strongly enough to die for; emphasizing the importance of Jewish continuity and opposition to assimilation. In Shani’s words, “For me, it’s important that the tour participants understand that they have a responsibility, that their deeds have implications for the Jewish world. Up until today we have [survived] and, therefore, it is obligatory that we continue, and they should understand that they have a responsibility.”

Several guides also emphasized Masada’s pedagogical value as an opportunity to present a dilemma for the tour participants to grapple with: Was it right for the Masada defenders to commit suicide? Were they in violation of Jewish law? What would you do under similar circumstances? Notably, just one of the guides we interviewed professed a commitment to what is arguably the core message of the conventional narrative: That all Jews must somehow prevent another Masada by defending the state against its enemies.

Several of those who told the conventional narrative indicated in the interview their own personal doubts but also explained why they kept them to themselves. In some instances, they intimated personal skepticism with respect to the factual basis for the conventional narratives. “I can’t tell [an Israel Experience] tour group that there is a doubt over whether it happened,” explained Hagit. “My opinions are not important. For me it’s important to see that the mission of [the tour organizers] to struggle against assimilation continues . . . this is my ideology.” In other instances,

they expressed discomfort with the valorization of martyrdom. “To my mind it’s not a heroic story but that’s my personal opinion; I don’t shatter myths,” explained Daphna.

Notably, several “conventional” guides with whom we spoke further emphasized the problematic character of martyrdom by drawing parallels to Islamist suicide terror.²⁰ Yariv, who told only the conventional narrative, expressed elements of the critical counter-narrative during the interview. The following extract from our conversation with him includes references both to the murder of Rabin and to the image of Bin Laden:

Question: Has the narrative you present at Masada changed over the years or has it always remained more or less the same?

Answer: In general, the narrative has not changed. In spite of that, actual events occur—like the murder of Yitzhak Rabin, like Bin Laden—that cause you to think about the story in a more complex way. The basic questions that are asked about the Masada story are renewed again and again in connection to real [dilemmas arising] in the State of Israel. Some groups raise Bin Laden as an example of religious zealotry—of how far it is permissible to take one’s faith.

Why did these guides not share their doubts about the official Masada narrative (or, in the last case, their familiarity with the critical counter-narrative)? They either viewed their doubts as “personal” and hence irrelevant to their professional duty to teach the established story, or they viewed their criticisms as contradicting the ideological project of the Israel Experience tour. In either case, skepticism regarding the conventional accounts is apparently more widespread among the guides than even the field note data suggest.

Among the guides who mixed narratives, the decision to include aspects of the critical counter-narrative in their Masada performance was merely a matter of providing “both sides” or “providing an alternative”. The truth of what happened at Masada cannot be known, these guides explained. In Avi’s words,

What actually happened there we don’t really know. However, the historical truth is less important. More important is, ‘What does it mean, this story that we’ve been telling for so long?’ I study folklore at the university, so I believe in stories more than in history. We become the stories we hear. In 1943, the kids [from the HaNoar HaOved youth movement] came and they said “The

same way they fought the Romans, we will fight the British.” What is the story they heard that affected them, that touched them? We are not taking you here to teach you history. We are taking you here to tell you stories that will touch you.

From this perspective, the critical account becomes merely another story. Avi continues,

When I was a kid, they told me how great they [the Zealots] were. I was used to the Zionist narrative. I was used to stories of Tel Hai, Bar Kochba . . . In high school, I first heard criticism [of the heroic narrative]. I was shocked [at the time, but now] I think it is beautiful that stories have a life of their own.

Finally, two of the 11 guides expressed strong, coherent, and impassioned support for the counter-narrative exclusively. For example, Eran, whose delivery of one of the more impassioned instances of the critical counter-narrative, explained the development of his Masada narrative: “From the time Gush Emunim became militant, in the ’80s and ’90s, I already saw the danger in their inability to compromise. I was always a strong believer in seeking peace and thought it Israel’s only chance for survival in the Middle East.” It was not until after the assassination of Rabin, “a turning point in my life,” that Eran changed the manner in which he guided Masada. In his view, the Masada defenders were messianic fanatics who “looked away from the realistic risk” of challenging Rome and were therefore responsible for the destruction of the Second Commonwealth. Those he perceives as their ideological heirs, moreover, similarly threaten the modern Jewish state. “Rabin’s assassination made this more clear to me,” he explained, “These people will yield for nothing . . . If the Jewish people are not warned then we face destruction.”

DISCUSSION

The advent of the critical counter-narrative alongside or in place of the conventional narratives suggests changes in the contemporary significance of Masada. During its heyday, against a background of “fiercely growing Arab resistance, pogroms in Europe prior to World War II, the horrific Holocaust, and a general anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews,” the conventional Masada narrative provided an attractive basis for social solidarity and

collective identity.²¹ The “New Jews” of the Yishuv and young state hearkened back to the Jewish warriors of old, to the last time the Jews enjoyed sovereignty over their own soil. The visions of Jewish heroism displaced internalized anti-Semitic notions about Jewish fitness for fighting and alleviated anxiety caused by external threats. Earlier and later versions of this narrative differed in their regard for diaspora life; the former repudiated it; the latter identified with it. In both activist and tragic versions, however, the message to contemporary Jews was clear: the tale of ancient Jewish martyrdom in defense of fading sovereignty dramatized the need to defend the new Jewish state whatever the price. These conventional narratives and the meanings they convey remain in circulation today.²²

During the years since Oslo, alongside ongoing worries regarding external enemies, there have arisen a new set of concerns about Jewish extremism, political violence, factionalism, and infighting. In the aftermath of the Baruch Goldstein massacre in Hebron, the Rabin assassination, and violent opposition to the Gaza withdrawal, Israelis have worried increasingly about the specter of *milchemet achim*—civil war. Some have also expressed fears that opposition among settlers to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza would lead to ever-escalating conflict with the Palestinians and political isolation for Israel. Such worries have formed the context for the third “turning point” in the symbolic significance of Masada. Alongside the activist and tragic versions of the contemporary narrative, Masada today also evokes a new, critical counter-narrative—one that warns against religious zealotry, messianic militarism and ideological absolutism. According to this view, the religious Zealots of old waged a civil war against their fellow Jews and triggered a hopeless rebellion against Imperial Rome, actions that ultimately led to the destruction of the Second Commonwealth. Those deemed their ideological heirs today are seen as similarly threatening the modern state of Israel. Only by rejecting the way of the Sicarii, and embracing the pragmatic and compromising spirit of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai, the critical counter-narrative suggests, will today’s Jews prevail over the threats—both internal and external—to Jewish sovereignty in the Third Jewish Commonwealth.

The case study of Masada has implications for our understanding of the dynamics of collective memory. Because the critical counter-narrative told by many of the guides follows the details of Ben-Yehuda’s critique so precisely, we wondered whether the changing narratives were indicative of the “reflexive” effects of sociology.²³ Unlike research in the natural sciences, sociological research sometimes influences its own analytical objects, changing the reality it purports to describe. In the case at hand, both Zerubavel’s

and Ben-Yehuda's scholarship was the focus of much attention both within and outside of academic circles. Zerubavel's was recognized with the American Academy of Jewish Research's 1996 Salo Baron Prize. Ben-Yehuda's thesis has filtered into public discourse through the Israeli press.²⁴ Did this critical literature directly or indirectly shape the guides' narratives? Is Masada a case of the sociological subject (Ben-Yehuda, Zerubavel) influencing the sociological object (the collective memory of Masada)?

As a group, the critical guides were careful to describe the Masada defenders as "Sicarii" rather than Zealots; they stressed that the Sicarii practiced political assassination, fomented civil war among the Jews and perpetrated a mass murder at Ein Gedi, and they contrasted the pragmatic behavior of Ben Zakkai with the allegedly fanatic behavior of the Sicarii. In their digressions from the conventional narratives they follow Ben-Yehuda rather precisely.

On the other hand, none of the guides we interviewed referenced Ben-Yehuda's texts when asked what sources they consulted; indeed, none possessed knowledge of either of the sociologists who have written expansively on this subject. In their accounts, they developed their critical narratives on their own, in response to the changing social and political situation, drawing upon their own knowledge of the Josephan and Talmudic texts. Still, the possibility of indirect influence, through the media and other channels of communication cannot be readily dismissed.

Regardless, this study shows just how malleable iconic artifacts can be. The potential meanings of Masada incorporate diametrically opposed alternatives. The collective memory describes the site as both a symbol of commitment "even unto death" and also as a warning against Jewish zealotry. Today, Masada represents both itself and its negation. This seems strange only until one begins to compare Masada to other iconic artifacts. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, in Washington DC, for example, evokes both discourses on the valor of young fighters and also on the scandalously wasteful and unnecessary character of that war. Philadelphia's Independence Hall evokes pride in the wisdom enshrined in the American Constitution by its founders; it also triggers memories of the Constitution's accommodation to slavery. Perhaps the fact that Masada increasingly evokes multiple and contradictory meanings indicates, not the decomposition of Israeli society, but instead its social and political maturation.

CONCLUSION

Masada today triggers meanings that we could scarcely have anticipated a generation ago. When Ben-Yehuda and Zerubavel completed their studies, the signature line for the Masada experience was Masada will not fall a second time! We still hear that line today. Several tour groups in our sample were encouraged to shout it, to a resounding echo, over the edge of the cliff. Other groups, however, were told a different story, and were invited to shout a different slogan. For one group, the message shouted over the edge of the cliff was *am yisrael chai*, the people of Israel lives! This slogan is meant to invert the emphasis on martyrdom and resistance unto death; life, achieved through pragmatic compromise, is the point. For another group, turning combativeness on its head, the preferred slogan was “Shalom”.

Even as the slogans and the narratives behind them have changed, Masada continues to be framed as a place to meditate upon issues of national security and survival. Notions of threat are still very much present as tourists are led around the summit of the desert fortress. As the nature of the threat has become a point of contestation in Israeli politics, however, the past is being reimagined accordingly. Masada, once a shrine to Jewish steadfastness in the face of the Roman/Arab onslaught, has increasingly become a forum where the complexities of politics and memory are set forth and debated.

NOTES

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1. Schwartz was the first to extend Geertz’s notion of religion as a “model of” and “model for” society to the domain of collective memory. Barry Schwartz, “Memory as a Cultural System: Abraham Lincoln in World War Two,” *American Sociological Review*, 61.5 (1996) 908–927; Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973).

2. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York, 1985); Barry Schwartz, "Social Change and Collective Memory: The Democratization of George Washington," *American Sociological Review*, 56.2 (1991) 221–236 and "Postmodernity and Historical Reputation: Abraham Lincoln in Late Twentieth Century American Memory," *Social Forces*, 77.1 (1998) 63–103; Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, IL, 1992); Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998) 105–140.

3. Edward M. Bruner and Phyllis Gorfain, "Dialogic Narration and the Paradoxes of Masada," in Edward M. Bruner (ed), *Text, Play and Story: The Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society* (Prospect Heights, IL, 1983) 56–79; Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago, IL, 1995).

4. Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*.

5. *Ibid.*, 202.

6. *Ibid.*, 193.

7. *Ibid.*, 196.

8. Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel* (Madison, WI, 1995) and *Sacrificing Truth: Archaeology and the Myth of Masada* (New York and Amherst, MA, 2002).

9. Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 38–43.

10. *Ibid.*, 27–31, 43–48.

11. Shaye Cohen, "Masada: Literary Tradition, Archaeological Remains, and the Credibility of Josephus," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 33 (1982) 385–405.

12. Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 29.

13. Babylonian Talmud, Gittin, 56a-b. For a discussion of the Rabbis' own motivations in rendering the tale of Ben Zakkai's escape from Jerusalem, see Amram Tropper, "Yohanan Ben Zakkai, Amicus Caesaris: A Jewish Hero in Rabbinic Eyes," *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal*, 4 (2005) 133–149.

14. *Ibid.*, 48.

15. Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 202–203.

16. Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 193–194.

17. *Ibid.*, 202, "With no exception . . . tourists to Masada receive the Masada mythical narrative."

18. *Ibid.*, 199.

19. All guides' names are pseudonyms.

20. As Masada's place in Israel's collective memory continues to evolve, future research should be attentive to the development of this nascent theme. The drawing of parallels between the Islamist justification of suicide attacks and the Sicarii justification of politically-motivated suicide subverts the black and white dualism inherent in the conventional narrative's equation of Zealot vs. Roman with Israeli vs. Arab. As the strict dualism is ruptured, the boundary between hero and foe becomes blurred.

21. Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*, 293.
22. With public discourse on the Iranian nuclear threat expanding following our field research, we would expect the conventional narrative to be resurgent.
23. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA, 1990).
24. Mooli Brog, "Young Peres Atop Masada," *Ha'aretz*, 2 February 1996; Baruch Kimmerling, "The Man Who Invented Masada," *Ha'aretz*, 1 March 1996; Merav Neshet, "Two Schools in Jerusalem Cancel Their Tour to Masada, High School Principal: Defenders of Masada were Murderers," *Ha'aretz*, 25 March 1997; Dan Williams, "Masada's Last Stand," *Jerusalem Post*, 16 February 2001.

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