COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND

# Recovered Roots

THE MAKING OF ISRAELI NATIONAL TRADITION

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criterion for this classification is the bond between the Jewish people and their land, the period of Exile is essentially characterized by a lack. The dispersion to many localities resulting from the loss of direct contact with the land thus undermined the Jews' shared experience of nationhood. During centuries of exile, religion functioned as the adhesive bond for the dispersed Jewish communities. But this exilic way of life was a poor substitute for the earlier national phase, thus conveying a process of spiritual degeneration as well as political regression.

In its highly negative attitude toward the period of Exile and belief in the nation's inner vitality as a historical force, Zionism was influenced by European political and philosophical movements. But the negative view of Exile also continued a trend that began with the Jewish enlightenment, the Haskala, of portraying a highly negative picture of traditional communal life among observant Jews, with an emphasis on talmudic learning and use of the Yiddish language. Much of the Hebrew literature that was used by Hebrew schools in Europe and Palestine during the first decades of the twentieth century was written by Haskala writers and imbued with a critical portrayal that reinforced, in turn, the Zionist youth's negative attitude toward Exile.[17]

Zionism essentially emerged as a reaction against Exile and reflects an acute awareness of the need to find a solution to the problems of the Jewish people and exilic Judaism. In fact, even those who did not regard the return to the Land of Israel as the vital solution to the Jewish problem and who were reconciled to the idea of Jewish life outside the ancient homeland often shared a negative attitude toward Exile.[18]

Zionist collective memory thus constructs Exile as a long, dark period of suffering and persecution. Jewish life in exile constituted a recurrent history of oppression, punctuated by periodic pogroms and expulsions, of fragile existence imbued with fear and humiliation. For the Zionist settlers who left eastern Europe after pogroms, persecution was their final and decisive association with Jewish life in exile, both personally and collectively. They projected those memories back onto the period of Exile as a whole, enhancing the antiexilic attitude that had already marked Zionist memory.[19] The Socialist Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion stated that Exile consists of "'histories' of persecution and legal discrimination, the Inquisition, and pogroms; of self-sacrifice and martyrdom."[20] Another prominent Socialist Zionist, Ya'akov Zerubavel, similarly described Exile as consisting of "the Inquisition and the stake, the expulsion and the tortures, [and] the pogroms." He continued this statement by raising a rhetorical question: "Which other nation has such abundance of martyrs . . . in tragedies which have their source in the passivity of our faith?"[21] This view was later reiterated by a fictional character, Yudke (whose name means "the little Jew"), who protests vehemently against Jewish history in Exile: "You cannot imagine how I'm opposed to it, how I reject it, and how . . . how . . . I don't respect it! Now look! Just think . . . what is there in it? Just give me an answer: What is there in it? Oppression, defamation, persecution, martyrdom. And again oppression, defamation, persecution, martyrdom. And again, and again and again, without end."[22]





The highly negative perception of Exile often turned from *shelilat ha-galut* (the repudiation of the state of living in exile) to *shelilat ha-gola* (the condemnation of the people who live in exile), the product of its demeaning and regressive lifestyle. According to this view, life in exile turned the Jews into oppressed, submissive, weak, and fearful people who passively accept their fate, hoping to be saved either by God or by Gentiles' help. The Zionist image of the exilic Jew often seemed to incorporate antisemitic stereotypes to support this negative portrayal.[23] Exile, Ya'akov Zerubavel wrote, taught the Jew the need "to shrink and to bend one's back."[24] Yitzḥak Ben-Zvi, the Socialist Zionist leader who later became Israel's second president, expressed a similar view of the Jewish past: "The spirit of heroism and courage disappeared in the Jewish ghetto in which it had no place." Instead, he argued, the Jews adapted "a sharp mind, agility, submissiveness toward others, and patience, cowardice, and timidity in relation to neighbors and rulers." This Jewish behavior, continued Ben-Zvi, resulted in a tendency to rely on miracles, as Jews lacked either confidence or self-motivation to improve their situation.[25]

The period of Exile thus represents a "hole" between the two national periods, an acute lack of positive characteristics attributed to it. As a Zionist Revisionist youth articulated this idea: "I stand stirred by the heroism and greatness of the Maccabees, Bar Kokhba, and Elazar ben Yair, but all that happened thousands of years ago. We lack someone in the middle."[26] Exile displays the Jews' choice to prove their devotion to the Jewish faith through a martyr's death. Kiddush ha-Shem (i.e., death for the sanctification of God's name), the traditional Jewish concept of martyrdom, represents the Jews' failure to offer armed resistance to their persecutors and actively defend themselves. It was therefore criticized as an expression of passivity or perceived as an inferior form of "passive heroism" relative to the "active heroism" of armed resistance. As a result Exile turned into a dark and bloody period in Jewish history: "Much Jewish blood was poured during the entire period of Exile, all over the world. Not the blood of heroes, but the blood of 'sanctifiers.'"[27] The distinction between sanctifiers (i.e., martyrs) and heroes is thus significant. Heroes, the writer goes on to explain, can be found only when the nation lives in its own homeland. Therefore,

those who die in the battle for their country are recognized as heroes, a status denied to sanctifiers who die for Kiddush ha-Shem in Exile.[28] Death for one's faith may have been the only form of heroism available to the displaced exilic Jew, but this was a mere substitute for the more honorable death for one's country. The same view was articulated by one of my informants, a man who grew up in Palestine during the prestate period:

> The Jews who live in Israel resemble much more the Jews of Masada, because they [the Masada people] had a state and had something to die for. While the Jews of Exile did not have a state and the only thing they could fight for was their lives. While here we have something else. Although according to traditional stories they [the Jews of Exile] fought for Kiddush ha-Shem and fought for the religion and for other things, these were substitutes. But the main reason they fought for substitutes was that they did not have the basic thing, and this is the state.

When the poet Bialik published his famous poem "be-Ir ha-Harega" (In the city of slaughter) in reaction to the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, it was largely perceived as a severe condemnation of the passivity of the Jews.

> Come, now, and I will bring thee to their lairs
> The privies, jakes and pigpens where the heirs
> Of Hasmoneans lay, with trembling knees,
> Concealed and cowering—the sons of the Maccabees!
> The seed of saints, the scions of the lions . . .
> Who crammed by scores in all the sanctuaries of their shame,
> So sanctified My name!
> It was the flight of mice they fled
> The scurrying of roaches was their flight;
> They died like dogs, and they were dead![29]

This highly negative portrayal of Exile was regarded as a crucial countermodel for the construction of a Hebrew national identity and was therefore raised as a central theme in the education of the New Hebrew youth.[30] "Anything that relates to Exile, or anything that has something of Exile's spirit in it, or anything that smells of Exile, should be out of the reach of this youth."[31] Exile was thus portrayed as "pollution" or "disease" that might undermine the development of the New Hebrew Man. During the first decades of the century, Hebrew literature became the central medium for transmitting the "repudiation of Exile." History textbooks, slower to



respond to changing social views than literature was, began to emphasize the themes of pogroms and persecution in Exile from the 1930s on. Exilic Jews were thus portrayed as objects rather than subjects, victims rather than actors.[32]

The "repudiation of Exile" provoked criticism from those concerned about the youth's ignorance and dismissive attitude toward centuries of Jewish life and culture. Such critics warned that this attitude provides a highly biased view of Exile and undermines the youth's sense of historical continuity. "We have developed a contempt toward Exile that brought with it the neglect of the wonderful cultural and social values that developed in it," observed the historian Ben-Tsiyon Dinur in 1934.[33] Similar criticism of the highly negative and reductionist image of the Exile period was repeated by the philosopher Shmu'el Hugo Bergman in the early 1960s.

> The Jewish Israeli youth that has never seen Exile lacks the understanding of its greatness . . . To this youth, Exile seems a history of tears and humiliation, and they do not know the happiness and the light, the festivities and the exaltation that were part of Jewish life in exile. They erroneously believe that all the great classical achievements of our people have been accomplished in the Land of Israel, an error that was transmitted by their teachers.[34]

Yet if Zionist collective memory constructed a major gap between Exile on the one hand and the national periods of Antiquity and the modern National Revival on the other hand, it stopped short of its total rejection. As the historian Shmuel Almog notes, such an extreme position would have undermined the Zionist claim for historical continuity between Antiquity and the present, between the ancient Hebrews and contemporary Jews. Thus, even the most severe Zionist critics of Exile did not advocate a total rupture with it.[35] Indeed, when the small but vocal movement of the Young Hebrews (also known as the "Canaanites") advocated a full rupture between members of the new Hebrew nation and the Jews of Exile,[36] their views provoked a highly critical response. Their claim that the Hebrews of the Land of Israel and the Jews of Exile were two separate collective identities was thus largely rejected.

Having constructed a profound tension between Hebrew and Jewish identities, the secular Zionist collective memory showed a clear preference for presenting the former as a transformation of the latter. Although it wished to accentuate its break with Jewish tradition, it relied on this tradition as its legitimizing framework. As Yosef Gorni points out, the ambivalent attitude toward Exile was further complicated by the strong ideologi-

cal, organizational, and economic ties between the new society in Palestine and the larger and more established Jewish community that remained in exile.[37] When Hebrew youth's critical approach to Exile and its Jews became more salient during the Holocaust, concerned educators urged introducing a more positive image of Jewish life in Europe and playing up examples of heroic behavior during Exile, to counterbalance that cultural trend.[38]

Jewish longing for Zion during centuries of life in exile as well as sporadic Jewish immigration to Palestine during those centuries supported the Zionist claim for the Land of Israel as its national home. The Zionist suppression of positive aspects of exilic life to promote the centrality of the people-land bond was reinforced by its denial of centuries of Palestinian life in that land. This double denial made it easier to reshape the period of Exile as a temporary regression between the two national periods, metaphorically suspending time and space in order to appropriate both into the Zionist commemorative narrative. Ironically, the recovery of the nation's roots in the ancient past implied playing down its roots in Exile as well as the renunciation of the Palestinians' roots in the same land.

In the formative years the repudiation of Exile provided a way of coming to terms with the enormous difficulties inherent in the task of tearing away from the old society and building a new nation. The darker the imagery associated with Exile, the greater was the promise that Zionism offered and the rationalization for the price it demanded. Yet even during the years following the foundation of the state, Israeli collective memory dwelled on the negative aspects of Jewish life in Exile and constructed a negative image of its Jewry. Although Israeli collective memory has been transformed and its negative construction of Exile has weakened, this representation has by no means disappeared, and the issue of the repudiation of Exile still occupies Israeli scholars and intellectuals.[39]

### *Locating the Nation: Antiquity and the National Revival*

The Zionist collective memory constructs Antiquity as a period in which the ancient Hebrew nation flourished, enjoying an autonomous political, social, and cultural life. Antiquity is thus seen as the nation's golden age, the period to which the Zionists wished to return to recover their lost national roots: the national spirit, the Hebrew identity, the Hebrew language, their homeland, and the social, economic, and political structures of an independent nation. In Zionist memory the ancient Hebrews formed a proud nation, rooted in its land; they cultivated its soil and knew its nature;





they were ready to fight for their national freedom and, if necessary, to die for it. This romantic picture was clearly constructed as the counterimage of Exile and as an inspiration for the new modern era.[40]

Within Antiquity various biblical heroes appealed to the Zionist memory and imagination, among them Samson, Gideon, Saul, and David. But the secular national Hebrew culture displayed an even stronger fascination with the period of the Second Temple.[41] Judaea's wars of liberation against various imperial forces during that period—culminating in the Maccabees' revolt against the Syrians and the Jewish revolts against the Romans during the first and second centuries—gradually became the "hottest" events in the Zionist collective memory in Palestine. These revolts represented the ultimate commitment to national freedom, which the Zionists were so eager to revive: they provided examples of the ancient Hebrews' readiness, when oppressed, to stand up against a more powerful enemy and to sacrifice their lives for the nation. Such figures as Judah the Maccabee, Yoḥanan of Gush Ḥalav, Elazar ben Yair, and Bar Kokhba, who rose as leaders of those ancient revolts, provided the Zionist settlers and the Hebrew youth with historical models for their own struggle for national renewal, the importance of which they knew but whose outcome they could not predict.

These ancient heroes became vivid images for Hebrew youth: "Here I see the supreme heroes who served our people and who have become our symbols . . . I see them in my mind's eye: Judah the Maccabee standing in front of his army and making [his soldiers] take an oath of allegiance; Bar Giora, Elazar, the hero of Masada, Bar Kokhba."[42] The memory of the ancient revolts was also important as a proof that Judaea fell not out of indifference or lack of patriotic zeal, but in spite of intense and desperate fights for its autonomy. The Zionists would therefore continue the spirit of total commitment that the period symbolized. As the poet Ya'akov Cahan declared, "In blood and fire Judaea fell; in blood and fire Judaea will rise."[43]

In commemorating these wars of liberation, the tendency was to play up the national-political aspects of these conflicts and diminish their religious significance. This orientation also marked the teaching of history in the new Hebrew schools.[44] Although the subperiodization of Antiquity into the First Temple and Second Temple periods might appear to enhance the religious dimension, their common representation in modern Hebrew as the First or Second "House" eliminates the explicit reference to their sacred dimension and renders them closer in spirit to the English terms, the First or Second Commonwealth.[45]

The Zionist emphasis on the national-political significance of the past was clearly shaped by Zionist settlers' belief in their historical contribution to the modern era of nation building. No longer waiting for a divine

sign or intervention on their behalf, they saw themselves as a group of ideologically committed individuals who left exile on their own initiative to return to the Land of Israel. This nonreligious approach was easily transformed into a more radically antireligious attitude, suggesting that "self-redemption" also expressed an act of defiance against God. "To arms, comrades! Seize sword and lance, spear and javelin—advance! Heaven's rage defy, and in storm reply. Since God denies us, his ark refuses us, we will ascend alone," wrote the Hebrew national poet Ḥayim Naḥman Bialik.[46] Although the explicit reference here is to that ancient generation who died in the desert on the way to the Promised Land, they can also be seen as representing the Jews of exile rebelling against God to free them from their imprisonment there.

Hebrew culture from the prestate period suggests that this shift from the religious to the national was pervasive. This was clearly manifested in the transformation of biblical or traditional allusions to God into a reference to the people of Israel.[47] Thus, the biblical verse praising God, "the guardian of Israel, neither slumbers nor sleeps" (Psalms 121:4) was applied to new Zionist "guards," the representatives of the ideology of Jewish self-defense. Changing the traditional memorial prayer (Yizkor) from "let God remember" to "let the people of Israel remember" is another expression of this orientation.[48] These transformations implied that the people's will would be the most important force for changing the course of history, an idea that was clearly articulated in a saying attributed to Herzl: "If you will, it is not a dream."[49] That this saying became an important slogan in the emergent national Hebrew culture indicates the centrality of the secular activist ethos that it reinforced.

Zionist collective memory not only defied Exile and its spirit; it also blamed it for a deliberate suppression of the national memory of the ancient struggles for liberation. The high commemorative density of these revolts was therefore seen as an important act of revolt against Jewish memory and its constraints. Consider the following quotation from a preface to the popular historical anthology on historical evidence of Jewish heroism, *Sefer ha-Gevura* (The book of heroism), written by Berl Katznelson, the prominent Socialist Zionist leader who was particularly active in the cultural and social spheres:

> With the loss of political freedom, Jewish historiography lost its freedom as well . . . The power of forgetfulness and omission in Jewish history is great . . . That which escaped from external censorship was caught by internal censorship. Did we get any of the Zealots' writings? Those expressions of Hebrew heroism that did not result in victory were doomed to oblivion . . .





> But with the rise of Zionism, a new light was shed on the defeated and neglected Jewish heroism. The forgotten people of Masada were saved from a foreign language; Rabbi Akiba now appears to us not only as the old man who sat in the Yeshiva [a religious academy of learning], but also as the prophet of the revolt; and Bar Koziba has been transformed back into Bar Kokhba in people's minds.[50]

The writer and Zionist activist who later founded the Zionist Revisionist movement, Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, made similar observations regarding the transformation of Jewish memory of the Hasmonean revolt. Jabotinsky accused "the sophistic mind of the ghetto" of distorting history by deliberately wiping out the memory of the Hasmoneans and turning the commemoration of the historical revolt to a celebration of a divine miracle of the flask of oil for the performance of religious worship at the Temple.[51] Indeed, Ḥanukka provides an excellent example of the transformation of traditional Jewish memory in the secular national Hebrew culture and the rising importance of its place in the curriculum of the Hebrew schools as a paradigm of a national struggle for freedom.[52]

The belief in Jewish collective amnesia as far as the national heroic aspects of the past were concerned led to a deliberate Zionist search for suppressed symbols of ancient heroism. Zionist collective memory thus turned to previously belittled leaders and groups involved in the ancient Jewish wars and rehabilitated them as part of Zionism's desired national revival. Thus, the terms *kana'im* (Zealots), *Sikarikim* (Sicarii), and Biryonim, which had been coined as derogatory names of extremist groups were now raised as positive references.[53] The discussion of Masada and the Bar Kokhba revolt in secular national Hebrew culture in chapters 4 and 5 will provide a closer examination of the drastic transformation of their commemoration along these lines.

The reawakening of a dormant "national memory" was thus seen as an expression of triumph over Exile and a means of obliterating its influence. The Zionist choice of an activist approach to the future was thus intimately linked to an activist view of the ancient past. The selective reconstruction of Antiquity was part of the historical mission of reviving the ancient national roots and spirit. Antiquity became both a source of legitimation and an object of admiration. Zionist collective memory emphasized the identification with heroes of the ancient past.

In fact, Zionist memory shaped the image of the young generation of New Hebrews as "grandsons" of the ancient heroes. This association acknowledged the existence of "fathers" (namely, the Jews of Exile) to allow for continuity within the Jewish past, but it enhanced the affinity between the ancient forefathers and the New Hebrews while marginalizing the exilic

Jews. A eulogy for Trumpeldor, the dead hero of Tel Ḥai, thus stated: "He fell dead, the hero of Israel! Like a figure of ancient magic this man was, *the great-grandson of the ancient heroes of Israel,* one of those who joined Bar Kokhba's host, one of those who followed the hero of Gush Ḥalav."[54] At times the need to emphasize symbolic continuity resulted in the projection of modern-day issues on Antiquity. This was the case in Ya'akov Zerubavel's statement that applied contemporary socialist concerns to the ancient Hebrews: "The Biryonim and the soldiers of Bar Kokhba were the last fighters for political freedom and *free labor* in the Land of Israel. Their grandchildren, the Hebrew workers, are the first fighters for free Jewish life, life of labor and creation in the Land of Israel."[55]

The use of the adjective *ivri* (Hebrew) to reinforce the tie with the ancient past and to dissociate from the concept *yehudi* (Jewish) had appeared prior to the emergence of Zionism as a political ideology.[56] But for the Zionists it was particularly appealing as a way of marking the symbolic discontinuity between the period of Exile and the modern National Revival. Zionism wished to present the "Jew" with an opportunity to transform into a "Hebrew" or, as Berdiczewski puts it, to be "the last Jews or the first members of a new nation."[57]

The pervasive use of the term "Hebrew" during the prestate period thus implied both symbolic continuity with the ancient national past and departure from Exile. The mere addition of this adjective was indicative of the national significance attributed to its referent. Thus, the Hebrew culture celebrated the emergence of "Hebrew youth," "Hebrew work," "Hebrew guards," "Hebrew labor union," "Hebrew literature," "Hebrew schools," "Hebrew language," and other such manifestations of its growing distance from traditional Jewish culture.

While the term "Hebrew" was also popular in Zionist circles outside of Palestine, the secular national Hebrew culture greatly enhanced the contrast between the "Hebrew" and the "Jew," along with its repudiation of Exile.[58] The highly negative image of the Jew of Exile was counterbalanced by the no less extreme positive image of the new native Hebrew, later known by the nickname *Tsabar* (Sabra).

> The Sabra became a mythological—and necessarily also archetypal—figure that forms a solid mold by which the Israeli-born would be shaped. The superior Sabra is characterized not only by what he possesses, but also by that which he does not have: he has no fear, weakness, or timidity; he has none of the exilic spirit [*galutiyut*]. He is the product of the Land of Israel, the outcome of generations' hopes, and he stands in contrast to the Jew of Exile. He is Hebrew and not Jew, and he is to put an end to the humiliation of his fathers. Anything that the Jew has lacked he has: strength, health, labor, return to nature, deep-rootedness, and a little of the peasant's slowness and heaviness.[59]





The New Hebrew was thus expected to be closer to his ancient forefathers than to his exilic parents. Accordingly, the uprooted Jew turns into a native who is deeply rooted in the homeland, settles in it, works its soil, and is fully prepared to defend it. Unlike the passive, submissive image of the exilic Jew, the New Hebrew is seen as active, self-reliant, and proud. The desire to compensate for what was seen as the excessive spirituality and verbosity of the exilic Jew resulted in the admiration of activism and physical strength.[60] The New Hebrew was thus portrayed as a man of action, not a man of words. His emergence would help recover the national pride and dignity that was lost during Exile.[61]

Within this context, it should not come as a surprise that the new Hebrew society in Palestine, which referred to itself as the Yishuv (Settlement), cultivated a special admiration for its youth, the new representatives of the Hebrew. For the Zionist settlers the young generation of Hebrews was the key to the future, the concrete evidence of the success of their vision and efforts to rebuild the nation. Youth worship, as the historian George Mosse points out, is characteristic of periods of dramatic political and social change.[62] Revolutionary movements mark their futurist orientation by symbols that revolve around young people or project youthfulness. In its portrayal of the New Hebrews as a radically transformed breed of Jews, Zionism reached closest to a revolutionary stance. However, even though the imagery of the New Hebrew often implied a dramatic contrast to its "Jewish" predecessor, Zionism rejected a total rupture between the two, as the response to the Canaanites showed. Zionism thus sought to induce a "fundamental" rather than a "radical" transformation,[63] using different periods of the past as both a countermodel and a source of legitimation.

More than realistic portrayals, the Zionist constructions of the exilic Jew and the New Hebrew suggest ideal types that provide another link between the Zionist view of the past and its vision of the future. Similarly, the construction of a new native Hebrew culture was more of an aspiration than a description of a reality. The cultural situation in Palestine was, indeed, much more complex. As the cultural critic Itamar Even-Zohar points out, many "exilic" and foreign elements were incorporated into the supposedly native Hebrew culture. The blend of new and old, Jewish and foreign, is particularly evident in such domains as dress, food, dance, and songs,

which were the product of an attempt to construct indigenous cultural expressions.[64]

In spite of its constructed character as an ideal type, the "Hebrew" image was internalized by the Yishuv society and new Jewish immigrants were met with the social expectation that they would transform accordingly. The emergence of a literary archetype of the native youth in the literature of the late 1940s and the 1950s indicates the internalization of this image by Hebrew youth themselves. Ironically, one of the symbolic expressions of the parents' success in transmitting the ideal of a New Man is youth's self-portrayal in the literature as metaphorically "parentless." As the literary critic Gershon Shaked remarks, when Moshe Shamir chose to begin his 1951 novel, *Bemo Yadav* (By his own hands) with the statement that its young hero, Alik, was born of the sea, he was in fact articulating the social and literary expectations of that period.[65] Along with the admiration of the new Hebrew youth and culture, enormous pressures were exerted on new immigrants to relinquish their own languages and traditions and accept the values and norms of the Hebrew culture. Indeed, only during the last two decades has Israeli society begun to face the political and cultural manifestations of the deep psychological scars that these pressures produced.[66]

The Zionist vision of national revival centers around the image of the New Hebrew, but land and language were essential aspects of this revival. Here too, the construction of the past provided the guidelines to the future: national life degenerated in Exile as a result of the rupture from the ancestral land, Zion, and the use of a new hybrid language, Yiddish. The vision of the modern National Revival thus centered upon three main elements: the Hebrew man, the Land of Israel, and the Hebrew language.

National redemption was thus intimately linked to the idea of redeeming the land. The Zionist settlers believed that in the process of settling in and working the land they would find their own personal and collective redemption. As a most popular Hebrew song of the prestate period notes, "We have come to the homeland to build [it] and be rebuilt [in it]." The attachment to the land was further reinforced by the educational emphasis on the study of agriculture, nature, as well as local geography and history (known as a class on *moledet* [homeland]). *Yediat ha-aretz* (knowing the Land) did not simply mean the recital of facts in the classroom, but rather an intimate knowledge of the land that can only be achieved through a direct contact with it. As we shall see later, trekking on foot throughout the land was particularly considered as a major educational experience, essential for the development of the New Hebrews. During the prestate period, Hebrew schools and the highly popular youth movements assigned great significance to such trips.[67]

To erect a Hebrew settlement and work its land required a total com-





mitment, devotion, and readiness for sacrifice.[68] Tel Hai emerged as a central myth of the settlement period because it was believed to demonstrate the significance of these values. Death for the country was itself a modern reenactment of the ancient spirit of heroism, indicating the beginning of a new national era.[69] The importance of working the land was particularly enhanced by the Socialist Zionists and received its most explicit expression in the teachings of A. D. Gordon. Gordon's writing, which focused on the link between the physical and spiritual dimensions of work, highlighted its sacred nature and gave rise to the concept *dat ha-avoda* (the religion of labor).[70] In the same vein, the poet Avraham Shlonsky portrayed the pioneers' work of building settlements and toiling on the land as sacred acts, using terms borrowed from the Jewish ritual domain:

> My land is wrapped in light as in a prayer shawl.
> The houses stand forth like frontlets;
> and the roads paved by hand, stream down like
> phylactery straps.
>
> Here the lovely city says the morning prayer to its Creator.
> And among the creators is your son Abraham,
> a road-building bard of Israel.[71]

Settling was a central pioneering activity that implied rerooting in the land. Founding a new settlement was defined as the ultimate realization (*hagshama*) of the pioneering ideology which Zionist youth movements transmitted to its members. Perhaps the most obvious expression of the prominence of this activity was the emergence of the concept of Yishuv, Settlement, as the collective reference to the new Hebrew society in Palestine. Rebuilding the nation thus became a sacred act, a work of creation; in Shlonsky's bold terms, the Zionist Settler replaced God as the creator.

The Hebrew language likewise emerged as a central component of National Revival. Zionist collective memory cast Hebrew as the language of the ancient Israelites who lived in the Land of Israel, which fell out of active daily use during Exile. Hebrew, accordingly, remained the Jewish sacred tongue of prayers and religious studies while other languages took its place as the languages of everyday life. As the Jews lost their unified territorial base in Zion, so they lost Hebrew as their unified national language. National Revival thus required a return to Hebrew as a means of reconnecting with the hidden national spirit.

For the European Zionists, the most notable example of the exilic substitute for Hebrew was Yiddish, the Jewish language spoken predominantly in eastern Europe. Compared to Hebrew, Yiddish was scorned as a lan-

guage devoid of spiritual depth and artistic qualities. As Aḥad Ha-Am, the proponent of cultural Zionism, emphasized, only the Hebrew language could function as the tongue through which Jews could connect again with their national past and would be able to achieve a full literary and spiritual renaissance.[72]

Like other Zionist reconstructions of the Jewish past, this extremely dichotomized view ignored developments that did not fit its model. After all, Aramaic competed with Hebrew as the language spoken by Jews during the later part of Antiquity. Conversely, Hebrew did not remain constrained to the sacred domain during centuries of Exile but was also a language of poetry and writing, and served as the lingua franca for Jews who came from different countries.[73] Thus, the concept of the "revival of the Hebrew language" is not accurate, nor is the celebration of the "rebirth" of modern Hebrew in conjunction with Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's immigration to Palestine in 1881. That this event became a temporal marker of rebirth is an example of how collective memory reconstructs the past by selecting a symbolic "event" to represent a gradual process of transition. In spite of Ben-Yehuda's remarkable contribution to the development of modern Hebrew, efforts to expand the use of Hebrew as a spoken tongue actually predated his immigration to Palestine. Indeed, the decisive turn in the status of Hebrew in Palestine came later, during the second decade of this century.[74]

Like other aspects of the Zionist collective memory, the association of Hebrew with Antiquity and the negative attitude toward other Jewish languages associated with Exile predated the rise of Zionism. Yet Zionism presented a new insistence upon a full-scale "revival" of the ancient tongue with a more pronounced nationalist bent, and adjusted the perception of the past accordingly. The anecdote told by the archeologist Yigael Yadin of Ben-Gurion's reproach when he saw letters from the Bar Kokhba period that were written in Aramaic is quite revealing: "'Why did they write in Aramaic and not in Hebrew?' was [Ben-Gurion's] immediate angry reaction, as if the scribes had been members of his staff."[75]

The attitude toward the exilic languages and the commitment to turn Hebrew into an everyday language was not uniform, however, even among the Zionists. The emergence of Hebrew as the Yishuv's national language was a complex process that entailed a struggle on both ideological and practical grounds. The 1913 "Languages War" marked the success of the pro-Hebrew teachers and students, supported by the Socialist Zionist settlers of the Second Aliya, in abolishing the use of European languages in Jewish schools and establishing Hebrew as the main language of instruction.[76] For most Jewish immigrants, Hebrew was not a native tongue but a newly acquired spoken language. While its vocabulary was rich in some areas, it was severely limited in others. The use of the language thus re-





quired an ongoing effort to find (or construct) appropriate words, idioms, and concepts.

Yet the emergence of Hebrew as the primary and official language of the Yishuv was ultimately seen as a critical link to the ancient past, as constructed in Zionist collective memory. For this reason too, the eastern European settlers wished to adapt the Sephardi Hebrew pronunciation which, they believed, follows the ancient Hebrew accent. Thus, although Palestinian Hebrew actually formed a new system of pronunciation, drawing selectively on both the Sephardi and the Ashkenazi Hebrew,[77] it was seen as an adaptation of the Sephardi accent and therefore as closer to ancient Hebrew. That this was a new synthesis meant, however, that for both the eastern European Zionist settlers and the Middle Eastern Jews the new Palestinian Hebrew provided a further ritualized expression of change. This transformation thus symbolized the cultural transition from exilic to Palestinian Hebrew, from a primarily sacred and literary language to a secular language of everyday use and the official language of the revived Hebrew nation.[78]

## *Historical Continuity/Symbolic Discontinuities*

The Zionist collective memory produces a master commemorative narrative that outlines three periods—Antiquity, Exile, and the modern National Revival. Within this semiotic framework, as it developed in the national Hebrew culture in Palestine, the meaning of each period is largely determined by its relations to the other periods. The following graphic display (figure 1) represents the Zionist vision of symbolic continuities and ruptures within Jewish history.

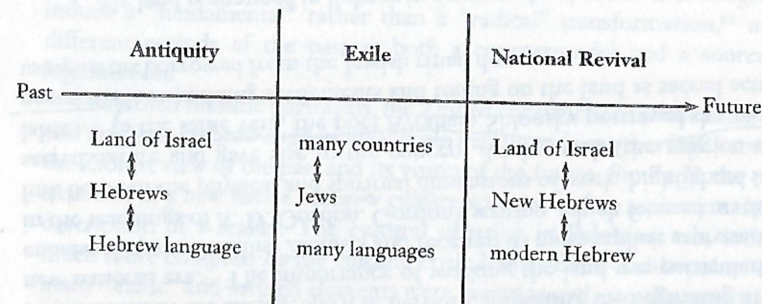


*Figure 1*

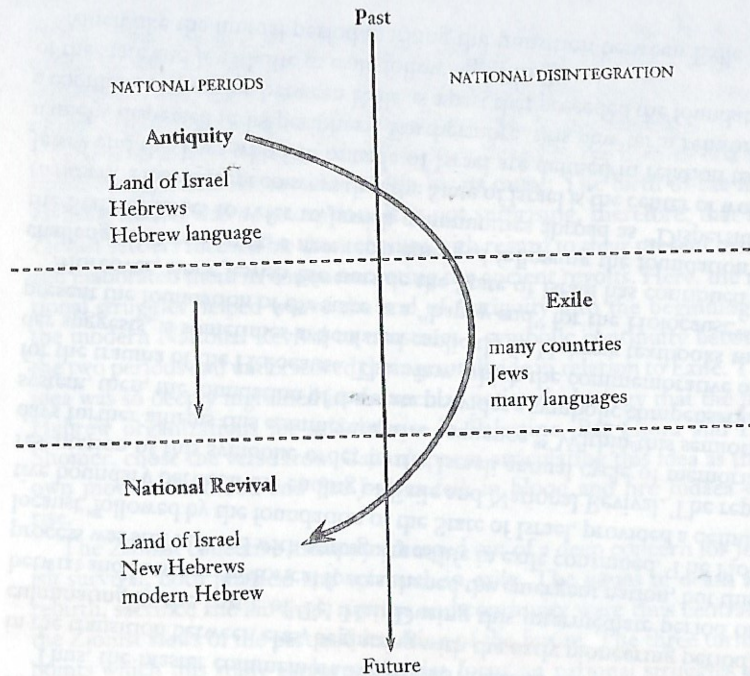


*Figure 2*

This semiotic system presents a basic conception of linear progression through historical time. But its segmentation into three periods also suggests some notion of historical recurrence that transcends this linearity. This does not imply a fully circular movement through time, but rather a spiral thrust forward to the future with a symbolic incorporation of certain features of the ancient past, as is demonstrated by figure 2.

Figure 2 thus displays how the national periods (Antiquity and the National Revival) became separated by a period of national disintegration. From a nationalist perspective, then, Exile is represented by blank space, a "historical detour" which denies continuity of national life. This gap, however, is not constructed by history, but rather by memory, imposing its ideological classification of the past.

To compensate for this disruption, the Zionist commemorative narrative constructs a *symbolic bridge* between Antiquity and the modern period, emphasizing their affinity and distancing both from Exile. The New Hebrews' renewed bond with land and nature as well as the revival of the Hebrew language help construct this bridge. This is clearly expressed in



the Hebrew literature written for children. Nature is often described as supporting the Zionist efforts to bridge over Exile, thereby constructing the symbolic continuity that history denies. Thus, for example, the writer Ya'akov Ḥurgin informs his young readers that the ancient rebels' story had never left Zion to Exile and was, therefore, transmitted to him by the waves of the Sea of the Galilee.[79] The waves thus provide the symbolic bridge that makes it possible to "weave" the ancient past into the modern National Revival, skipping over the discredited exilic past. The result is an appearance of seamless continuity between Antiquity and the modern National Revival.

The alignment of the national periods on the one hand and Exile on the other plays up the positive images of the first and third periods against the highly negative image of the middle period. Even though Zionist memory acknowledges Exile as a very long period (often marked by the formulaic reference to "two thousand years"), it defines it by its lack, as if it were "empty" in substance. As a result, Hebrew education expanded greatly on Antiquity, with a special emphasis on the two centuries of national revolts against the Romans, and devoted relatively little time to the history of Exile.[80] Among his protests against Jewish history, Yudke, Ḥayim Hazaz's fictional hero, complains that Jewish history is boring because it consists of an endless recurrence of persecution and martyrdom.[81] Commemorative time created by the Zionist master commemorative narrative thus differs from historical time considerably, reflecting the different significance it attributes to each of the periods.

## *Historical Turning Points: Liminality and Transitions*

The Zionist reconstruction of symbolic continuities and discontinuities in Jewish history was clearly designed to support the ideology of national revival. The dramatic contrast between the repudiation of Exile and the glorification of Antiquity accentuated the appeal of the future national era and highlighted the notion of a new beginning. The resettlement of Palestine represented a *national rebirth*. The Zionist settlers regarded themselves as engaging in the work of Creation, secularizing religious metaphors and drawing upon biblical images to highlight their own contribution to the formation of a new national era.[82]

While the early pioneering period symbolized the process of national rebirth, it was the 1920 battle of Tel Ḥai that provided the commemorative marker of a new beginning. Tel Ḥai was a sign that the expected historical transition was taking place. But a new beginning presupposes the end of the preceding period: The commemorative sequence strives to portray the

transition as consisting of an end, a great divide, and a new beginning. The reality, however, is more complex and does not offer a clear-cut sequence. Jews lived in Palestine prior to the "first" Zionist immigration, and Jews continued to live in exile even after the beginning of the Zionist immigration and appeared to flourish more than their brethren in Palestine. To legitimize the delineation of a new beginning and reinforce their periodization, the Zionist settlers referred to the pre-Zionist Jewish population in Palestine as the "old Yishuv" (the "old settlement") and regarded it as a symbolic extension of Exile, thereby highlighting its distinction from the new Zionist Yishuv.[83]

The prestate period nonetheless continued to represent a highly ambiguous situation with regard to the end of Exile. Indeed, it was only with the Holocaust that the Zionist commemorative narrative was able to draw a clear boundary indicating the end of Exile. The fate of European Jewry sealed that period of misery and persecution and affirmed that the future belonged to the Zionist national revival in Palestine. It is not surprising, therefore, that the national Hebrew educational discourse emphasized this view of the Holocaust, implying a critique of the Holocaust victims for failing to understand that historical lesson in time and to join the Zionist effort.[84]

Thus, the master commemorative narrative allows for a liminal period in the transition between eras, beginning with the early pioneering period, culminating in the battle of Tel Ḥai. During this intermediate period of betwixt and between, historical forces shaped the emergent nation, but this process was still imbued with ambiguity as life in exile continued. The Holocaust, followed by the foundation of the State of Israel, provided a definitive boundary between the ending of Exile and National Revival. The representation of this symbolic order in the Israeli annual cycle of memorial days further affirms this commemorative sequence.[85] Within this semiotic system, then, the foundation of the state provides a symbolic compensation for the trauma of the Holocaust. This view, which the commemorative order suggests, is sometimes articulated explicitly in Hebrew textbooks that present the foundation of the state as a "happy end" for the Holocaust.[86]

Moreover, since Jewish life outside the State of Israel has continued to challenge this construct, a new term emerged following the foundation of the State of Israel to refer to Jewish communities abroad as "Dispersion" (*tefutsot*). This concept conveys that the State of Israel is the center of world Jewry and the Jews who live outside of Israel are defined in relation to it, namely, dispersed in its periphery. Furthermore, this new term reinforces a cognitive distinction between Exile as a past that preceded the foundation of the state and Jewish life in exile following 1948.[87]

Much like the liminal period marking the transition between Exile and

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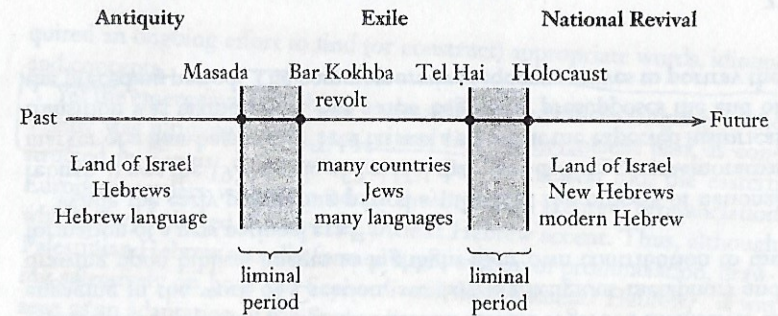


*Figure 3*

the Zionist National Revival, the Zionist master commemorative narrative constructs a similar liminal period that separates Antiquity from Exile. Although Masada was seen as a key turning point in Jewish history that indicates the conclusion of the Jewish revolt against the Romans in A.D. 73, this end did not actually represent a full transition from Antiquity to Exile. After all, Jews remained in Judaea under Roman rule while others continued to live in various diasporas throughout the Roman Empire. It was the outbreak of the Bar Kokhba revolt sixty years later that provided the Zionist commemorative narrative with an event to mark the conclusion of that transition: the Bar Kokhba revolt symbolized the final outburst of the ancient Jewish activist spirit, and its defeat ended the liminal period that had begun with the Great Revolt of the preceding century. Figure 3 represents the introduction of these turning points as temporal markers, signalling the entry to and exit from those liminal periods of transition. The three historical events that this book explores are thus located in the liminal periods of transition that the Zionist master commemorative narrative constructs. This commemorative location helps us understand why they emerged as major symbolic events in the national Hebrew culture and why they later became subjects of intense controversies over their meaning.

The designation of Masada and the Bar Kokhba revolt as major turning points that mark the transition from Antiquity to Exile and the emergence of Tel Ḥai as a symbolic marker of the onset of the Zionist National Revival were part of the Yishuv's attempt to shape its collective identity in relation to the past as well as the Jewish society outside of Palestine. While the division of the past into Antiquity and Exile continued the periodization constructed by traditional Jewish memory, the reinterpretation of Masada and Bar Kokhba as highly valued events marking the ending of Antiquity was a Zionist innovation. Jewish tradition emphasized the destruction of the Second Temple as the critical turning point ending this

period, while it ignored Masada and was more ambiguous in its commemoration of the Bar Kokhba revolt. The reconstruction of these events as markers of major transitions in the nation's history was nonetheless essential for enhancing the ideological premises of the Zionist ideology.

The notion of a "national birth" is often linked to the themes of a national struggle and the sacrifice of life for its cause. The birth of the new Hebrew nation was no exception. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Zionist settlers focused on these themes with regard to their present reality and elaborated them in commemorating the ancient revolts. Here, the national struggles helped weave the end of Antiquity into the beginning of the modern National Revival to construct a symbolic continuity between the two periods and underscored their great divide in relation to Exile. This idea was so deeply ingrained in the secular national ideology that the first Hebrew organizations for self-defense in Palestine, Bar Giora and Ha-Shomer, chose the verse from Cahan's poem articulating this idea as their own motto: "In blood and fire Judaea fell; in blood and fire Judaea will rise."[88]

The Zionist collective memory emerged out of a deep concern for Jewish survival, both physical and spiritual, in exile. The issues of death and rebirth, sacrifice and survival, rupture and continuity were thus central to the Zionist views of the past and its vision of the future. The three turning points which this study explores likewise focus on national struggles and articulate the new Zionist outlook on those fundamental issues. That they became major heroic national myths of the emergent Hebrew nation in Palestine attests to the power of collective memory to artfully rework historical information in the construction of its commemorative narratives.

The basic premises of the Zionist collective memory described here relate mostly to the prestate period that shaped the foundations of the national Hebrew culture. Although the seeds of these ideas were formed in Europe, the emphasis of this book is on the development of the Zionist collective memory within the framework of the Yishuv and, after the foundation of the state, within Israeli culture. As the society has undergone considerable changes, its collective memory has also been transformed. And yet, even after the establishment of the state, Israeli society has confronted death and survival as part of its experience and these issues have remained central to its collective memory and political discourse. Israelis thus continuously engage in examining the relation between the past and the present and reconstructing symbolic continuities and discontinuities between them as they explore and reshape their identities as both Israelis and Jews.

# Three

## THE BATTLE OF TEL ḤAI

In March 1920 news of eight Zionist settlers who died in the defense of a small settlement by the name of Tel Ḥai in Upper Galilee shook the Jewish society of Palestine. Although there had been other fatal incidents between Arabs and Jews in the preceding decade,[1] this confrontation was the first to be regarded as a full-fledged battle in which Zionist pioneers stood up to defend a new settlement. Tel Ḥai thus provided tangible and concrete evidence for the Zionists' readiness to sacrifice their lives for the national revival in their ancient homeland. With the death of eight settlers, Tel Ḥai seemed to have turned Cahan's prophetic verse, "In blood and fire Judaea fell; in blood and fire Judaea will rise," into reality.

Tel Ḥai was one of four Jewish settlements on the northern frontier of Upper Galilee, far from the center of Jewish population in Palestine. As a result of the prolonged negotiations between the French and British governments over their spheres of influence in the Middle East, the political fate of that region remained ambiguous following World War I. Only in November 1919, when the British withdrew their forces from the north into Lower Galilee, did control over that territory pass to French hands. The Zionist pioneers who had settled in Upper Galilee found themselves separated from the rest of the Yishuv, which was under the British mandate. The French, attempting to suppress a revolt against them in northern Syria, did not have enough forces to establish their control in southern Lebanon and Upper Galilee, where they were challenged by the local Muslim population. As the militancy of those rebels grew, the situation of the Jewish settlers became more precarious.

Although the hostilities were initially directed against the French forces and the local Christian population who supported them, the Jewish settlers, who had declared their neutrality in this conflict, were often robbed and harassed by "armed gangs" that controlled the region.[2] Shortages of food, supplies, and weapons and the difficulty of communicating with the rest of

the Yishuv increased the settlers' vulnerability in the rapidly escalating tensions. Many Jewish settlers therefore decided to leave the northern frontier for the British-controlled south, and one of the four Jewish settlements, Ḥamra, was deserted. At the end of February 1920 the number of Jewish settlers in the remaining settlements (Tel Ḥai, Kfar Giladi, and Metula) declined to less than one hundred defenders, who felt committed to stay there despite the dangers facing them.[3]

On March 1, 1920, the eleventh of Adar in the Hebrew calendar, a large group of armed Arabs (estimates of their number vary from 150 to several hundreds) assembled near Tel Ḥai. Their representatives insisted on entering the yard and the building, which were enclosed by a wall, to see if the Jewish settlers had let in French soldiers. Although the Jewish settlers gave them permission to enter, lack of communication and misunderstandings led to the opening of fire inside the yard, and shooting continued for several hours, until the Arabs left. Five settlers died in that battle, and the group's commander, Yosef Trumpeldor, who was critically wounded, died a few hours later. Those who survived the attack decided to leave Tel Ḥai for nearby Kfar Giladi in the evening, carrying with them the dead and the wounded. Before they left Tel Ḥai, they burned down what they left behind. Two days later, upon hearing that large Arab forces were approaching Kfar Giladi, the rest of the Jewish settlers withdrew from the French-controlled region to the south, to the territory under the British mandate.[4]

Eight settlers died in the defense of Tel Ḥai: two were killed shortly before March 1 and six on that day. For the small Jewish society in Palestine (approximately 57,000 people)[5] this was a shocking figure. The death of Yosef Trumpeldor, a well-known military hero and Zionist activist, contributed to the traumatic impact of this event. Unlike most Zionist settlers, Trumpeldor had extensive military experience and had established his reputation as a hero prior to the battle of Tel Ḥai. During the Russian-Japanese war of 1904–5, he lost his left arm in combat and was later decorated for bravery. His unusual career as a Jewish officer and a hero of the czarist army thus brought hin fame before his immigration to Palestine in 1911. During World War I Trumpeldor and Ze'ev Jabotinsky collaborated in the effort to form a special Jewish unit within the British army. When the British finally approved the establishment of a Zion Mule Corps, Trumpeldor served as its second in command under a British commander.

After World War I Trumpeldor diverted his energies to organizing Jewish emigration from Russia to Palestine and became the president of the Zionist organization the Ḥalutz in Russia. In fact, Trumpeldor joined the Tel Ḥai settlers only at the end of 1919, in response to a request to help them organize their defense in view of the growing instability there. He

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regarded his stay in Tel Ḥai as temporary and was planning to resume his mission of leading the Ḥalutz youth to Palestine.[6]

Trumpeldor, who was in charge of the defense of Tel Ḥai, was severely wounded early in the battle. According to eyewitness accounts, in spite of the great pain he must have suffered, he uttered no complaint during the battle but tried to encourage his comrades. When the settlers left Tel Ḥai in the evening, they carried him with them, and on the way to Kfar Giladi Trumpeldor died. A few minutes before he died, when the doctor asked him how he was feeling, he reportedly said, *ein davar, kedai lamut be'ad ha'aretz* (never mind, it is worth dying for the country).[7]

## *A New Commemorative Tradition*

Several days passed until the news of the attack on Tel Ḥai, the settlers' resistance, the casualties, and the evacuation of the Upper Galilee reached the center of the Yishuv. The impact of the news was overwhelming. Reports, obituaries, stories about Trumpeldor, and articles discussing the significance of this event filled the newspapers. Parties planned for the celebration of the Jewish holiday of Purim were canceled or postponed, and the call for a meeting to commemorate the dead generated such a response that about fifteen hundred people could not enter the crowded hall.[8]

Trumpeldor's fame and heroic image added to the immediate impact of the news about the fall of Tel Ḥai. The story of his life as well as his death became an important part of the commemoration of this battle, and his last words constituted the peak of the commemorative narrative. The educational value of his final statement was instantly recognized as providing a succinct and powerful ideological message. With the omission of the qualifying beginning ("never mind") and some slight modification, it soon became a national slogan known as "Tov lamut be'ad artsenu" (it is good to die for our country). Teachers' custom of hanging posters of Trumpeldor's famous words around the eleventh of Adar highlighted the saying's centrality to the commemoration of Tel Ḥai and presented it as its legacy for future generations.

The Yishuv soon began to commemorate annually the defense of Tel Ḥai. Within a short time a new national memorial day made its way into the Hebrew calendar. The day was called Yom Tel Ḥai (Tel Ḥai Day), and was also designated by its Hebrew date, Yod Alef ba-Adar (the Eleventh of Adar). Every year on the eleventh of Adar, many local communities and public institutions held commemorative ceremonies for the fallen heroes of Tel Ḥai. These activities and the public speeches delivered on that day

received wide coverage by the press. Public schools devoted special classes to the defense of Tel Ḥai and to Yosef Trumpeldor's heroic figure and held memorial ceremonies to honor the dead. Similarly, youth movements held educational programs and special activities for that day. The establishment of Tel Ḥai Day thus made room for an annual ritual that provided the occasion to shape and reinforce the memory of this event.

A few days following the Tel Ḥai battle, the writer Moshe Smilansky shared with the readers of the Hebrew daily *Ha-Aretz* his earlier concern about the lack of holy places for the education of Hebrew youth and announced with excitement: "And now a holy place has been created. Every year, on the eleventh of Adar, teachers and students from all over the free country will flock to the Upper Galilee, to Tel Ḥai and Kfar Giladi."[9] Within a few years, Smilansky's vision indeed materialized.

The first stage of this development occurred in 1924, when the bones of the six heroes who had died on March 1, 1920, were transferred from Kfar Giladi to the cemetery located between it and Tel Ḥai. The other two Tel Ḥai casualties as well as members of the small but prestigious Ha-Shomer defense organization were also buried in this cemetery.[10] A few years later the sculptor Avraham Melnikov constructed a large statue of a lion on the tomb of the Tel Ḥai heroes, inspired by ancient Babylonian statues. This monument, known as the Roaring Lion, was "the first modern monument in the country."[11] With this development a new sacred site emerged, and a new tradition of pilgrimage to it soon followed. The establishment of a separate date and a unique site for the commemoration of Tel Ḥai singled it out as a key turning point in the Yishuv's history. While the yearly commemoration provided a strong stimulus for the production of memoirs, poems, songs, stories, and plays written about Tel Ḥai, the new pilgrimage tradition added a central national ritual.

The rising importance of Tel Ḥai during those early years is also evident from the attempts of various groups of quite diverse political orientations to use the names Tel Ḥai and Trumpeldor as part of their symbolic identity. An experimental cooperative group of Ḥalutz members who immigrated to Palestine called themselves Gedud ha-Avoda al shem Yosef Trumpeldor (the Yosef Trumpeldor Work Legion), and a few years later they named their new communal settlement Tel Yosef after the dead hero.[12] Trumpeldor's name was also adopted by a Zionist group named the Yosef Trumpeldor Guard Association and by a commune of the Ḥalutz members in Poland, Kibbutz Tel Ḥai.[13] At the same time a group of students influenced by Ze'ev Jabotinsky formed a new, right-wing youth movement, Betar, whose name refers to the last stronghold of Bar Kokhba's revolt against the Romans in A.D. 135, but also is an acronym for Brit Yosef Trumpeldor (the





Yosef Trumpeldor Association). To achieve this desired double meaning, the Betarists changed the Hebrew spelling of Trumpeldor's name (from the Hebrew letter tet to tav) to fit the spelling of the ancient site. Betar also selected "Tel Ḥai" as a form of greeting and an official salute, and the Revisionists also named their financial agency Keren Tel Ḥai (the Tel Ḥai Fund).[14]

## *A Myth of New Beginnings*

During the prestate period the historical battle of Tel Ḥai gave rise to a modern national myth, and Trumpeldor emerged as the first national hero of the young Hebrew society in Palestine. Tel Ḥai provided Israeli society with a myth of origin, a point in time that symbolized the rebirth of the nation and the beginning of a new era. The spontaneous response to Tel Ḥai revealed the Zionist pioneers' immediate recognition of the symbolic significance of this event as a major turning point in Jewish history.[15]

The construction of a myth of origins requires the twofold strategy of emphasizing a new beginning as well as discontinuity with an earlier past. "For something genuinely new to begin," Eliade notes, "the vestiges and the ruins of the old cycle must be completely destroyed."[16] The Zionist settlers therefore hailed Tel Ḥai for its symbolic rupture with Exile. Readiness to die for the country and the nation, so clearly expressed by Trumpeldor before his death, was in itself seen as a positive sign of breaking away from the exilic pattern of traditional martyrdom, namely, Kiddush ha-Shem. According to this view, the Jew of Exile always played the role of the victim. Hence, Trumpeldor's readiness to bear arms and fight was greatly praised as an innovative stance that marked the way of the future.[17] With pronounced admiration the poet David Shimoni welcomed Trumpeldor's patriotic message: "Your words, 'It is good to die for our country,' split our night like the rays of a proud sun."[18]

Neither the acts of Jewish self-defense nor the readiness to sacrifice oneself for the national cause was in fact new. As we saw earlier, these ideals originated in Europe, and Jewish organization for self-defense in its modern secular form predated the immigration to Palestine, most notably during the first decade of the century in Russia. Nonetheless, the Tel Ḥai battle provided a single, dramatic event to mark this transition within the context of the Zionist reconstruction of Jewish national life in Palestine. The recovery of the national spirit and its heroic manifestations were thus symbolically linked to the Zionist National Revival, and the establishment of this meaning helped accentuate the symbolic departure from Exile.

For the Yishuv, then, Trumpeldor became the symbol of the New Hebrew, the antithesis of the exilic Jew. His centrality to the commemoration of origins was not as an individual but as a collective representation, the model of the new type of man that the Zionist National Revival would produce. Tel Ḥai and its defenders were thus hailed as "the *first sign* of the future"[19] and as generating "a *new* voice and *new* words."[20] Trumpeldor and his comrades were congratulated for being "*the first* to know for what you lived and for what you died,"[21] and "the standard-bearers of our great ideal, those who went *in front of us* and showed us the way to Zion."[22] That the youth assimilated these ideas as central to the commemoration of Tel Ḥai is evident in the following piece written by a high school student in 1937:

> The Eleventh of Adar! Another date in the history of Hebrew heroism; yet perhaps this is a first date since it was then that Hebrew heroism reappeared after two thousand years . . . What is the essence of this date and its importance for us? If we examine Jewish self-defense during generations in Exile, it appears that we do not have a glorious past: a few incidents of self-defense by Russian Jews during pogroms, that's all. And until those incidents, Jews had extended their necks in front of the aggressors to be slaughtered. But on that day, the eleventh of Adar, a new chapter was opened in Jewish history.[23]

The educational message of Tel Ḥai was thus formulated on the premise that it provides a new paradigm of action for the new nation: "From this we can learn about the courage, the readiness, and the self-sacrifice of those people who wished to hold on to these isolated settlements. They knew well that the enemy outnumbered them ten times and that they had no hope of receiving real aid from the rear, which was also weak and lacking in resources. Nonetheless, they would not give up."[24]

Tel Ḥai assumed mythical dimensions as a symbolic event that stands for the new commitment to build Hebrew settlements in Palestine and to defend them at all cost. But it also signaled the heroic paradigm of the future struggle for national independence. The Tel Ḥai commemorative narrative thus stresses the theme of *a few against many* that encapsulates the Yishuv's as well as the later state's experience in the Israeli-Arab conflict.[25] The educational narrative in *Mikra'ot Yisrael*, the most widely used series of textbooks for the general public schools until the late 1970s, describes how "one day a mob of armed Arabs attacked Tel Ḥai. Trumpeldor and his brave comrades resisted them heroically, a few against many attackers." The story elaborates on this theme by describing how Trumpeldor fought





against the enemy, "one hand against many hands."[26] This expression also emphasizes Trumpeldor's personal commitment to defense in spite of his own disability, an important theme in the literature that Tel Ḥai has inspired (see chapter 6).

The annual commemoration of Tel Ḥai thus provided a point in time in which the Yishuv society could celebrate its origins and highlight its symbolic departure from Exile. Yet the annual commemoration also marks the nation's indebtedness to those who sacrificed their lives to bring about this rebirth. Again a writer, Yosef Ḥayim Brener, articulated the moral burden of debt and guilt toward those who had spilled that blood: "And the question is asked: Do we, who live on, deserve such sacrifices? . . . Do we have the right to pronounce the name of 'Tel Ḥai'?"[27] The blood spilled in Tel Ḥai sanctified the renewed bond between the new nation and the ancient land.[28] Tel Ḥai thus became a modern variant of the myth of death and rebirth, representing a collective experience through the focus on the individuals who died in that battle.[29]

Tel Ḥai's special role as a symbolic beginning of the modern era of National Revival underlies the development of its commemoration. Tel Ḥai Day, the Eleventh of Adar, was also celebrated as the "Defense Day," providing an occasion to review Jewish heroism from a historical perspective.[30] Youth movements and military units still continue the pilgrimage tradition to Tel Ḥai, and special ceremonies are performed on the platform next to the Roaring Lion monument. The special prayer for Israeli soldiers who die in war, the military Yizkor prayer, follows the transformation of the traditional prayer implemented by Berl Katznelson's secularized Yizkor for the Tel Ḥai heroes.[31] Moreover, Tel Ḥai's status in secular national Hebrew culture is manifested in the unique place of the Eleventh of Adar in the Hebrew calendar: it is the only separate memorial day for those who fell for the country besides the national Memorial Day for Israeli soldiers. Whereas Israel's Memorial Day treats the fallen soldiers collectively and anonymously, the Tel Ḥai commemoration singles out one particular historical event and tends to center on Trumpeldor's heroic image. In fact, the preference for anonymous commemoration in Israeli culture culminates in what I call numerical commemoration, namely, the commemoration of heroic action through reference to the number of casualties involved.[32]

Tel Ḥai is also marked as a sacred site of modern Israeli society. With the graves of Ha-Shomer members and the Tel Ḥai defenders, the cemetery acquired a historical national significance early on, representing the pioneering ethos of heroism and self-defense. The large inscription of Ha-Shomer's motto ("In blood and fire Judaea fell; in blood and fire Judaea will rise") near its members' special lot, and the inscription of Trumpeldor's

famous last words on the base of the Roaring Lion monument articulate the ideological framework of this memorial site.

With the later addition of a youth hostel to accommodate young pilgrims and other visitors, the establishment of a Ha-Shomer museum, and the transformation of the building and the yard of Tel Ḥai into a historical museum, the area surrounding Tel Ḥai has been expanded to offer a broader cultural reproduction of Israel's "beginning." The museum now displays old photographs of Tel Ḥai as well as historical artifacts and implements relating to the pioneering period. Tel Ḥai thus became a national site representing the period of *ḥalutsiyut* (pioneering), to which Israeli historiographic discourse also refers as *tekufat ha-meyasdim* (the period of the founders) or *ha-rishonim* (the first ones). The result is a large commemorative site that celebrates the nation's origins, an important institution for any modern nation.[33]

It is interesting to note that, unlike other important Israeli museums, the Tel Ḥai national site is not designed as an attraction for foreign tourists, including Jews from abroad. As a culturally reproduced beginning, it is primarily geared to Israelis themselves. The site is frequented by classes of schoolchildren, youth movement groups, army units, and families who visit its various components to explore and reexperience the essence of that period.[34] As such, a visit to Tel Ḥai is considered an educational lesson in the early history of Israeli society, an experience that has recently become increasingly popular in Israel.[35] The educational dimension has also been enhanced by the opening of Tel Ḥai Regional college at the site.

Within the historic cemetery the Roaring Lion stands apart and above other graves, representing Tel Ḥai as the focal point of beginning. The monument provides a visual representation of the Hebrew nation's primal experience of blood in its symbolic rebirth, its scream forever fixed in the lion's roar. But the lion also represents a universal symbol of power and domination that sets high hopes for the future, and as the emblem of ancient Judaea it is also associated with that glorified national past. The lion, like Trumpeldor himself, provides the missing link between Antiquity and the modern National Revival, compensating for the rupture of Exile. Indeed, the allusions to Trumpeldor as a modern reincarnation of the ancient heroes appeared in the first eulogies and obituaries: "Trumpeldor seemed like a soldier in Bar Kokhba's army who joined us from previous generations. Like this ancient soldier, he was whole, with no fear, full of bubbling energy, and quiet. Even his amputated arm reminded one of the legend about the Bar Kokhba heroes who proved their strong will and readiness to sacrifice themselves by cutting off their fingers."[36] As we shall see, this theme was greatly emphasized in the literature about Trumpeldor.





Tel Ḥai's importance as a national myth of beginning may be explained more by the timing of the historical battle than by its extraordinary character. The defense of Tel Ḥai happened early enough in the history of the Yishuv that it could serve to symbolize the departure from the Jewish society of Exile and the beginning of a new national era. During the following decades, as nationalist sentiments flared up in Palestine and the Arab-Jewish conflict escalated, the Tel Ḥai battle could no longer be seen as a unique historical incident. Nor was Trumpeldor the only one who uttered a highly ideological statement that might have become a national slogan.[37] At that point, however, Tel Ḥai was already established as a highly symbolic event and its paradigmatic character supported its status as a turning point in history.[38] Tel Ḥai emerged as a myth of origins to fulfill the classical role of a new national myth for a young nation in the process of defining its historical mission and forming its social and political foundations. Its historical battle thus opened the period of transition into nationhood that culminated with the establishment of the State of Israel. As the video presentation at the Tel Ḥai Museum asserts, "The circle that had been opened with Tel Ḥai closed with the War of Independence."

# Four

## THE BAR KOKHBA REVOLT

About sixty years after the defeat of the Jews' Great Revolt against the Romans and the destruction of the Second Temple, and a few decades following the failure of a revolt by Jewish communities in the Diaspora (A.D. 115–17), Judaea took to arms again, rebelling against the Roman Empire. This revolt, which broke out in A.D. 132 and lasted three years, is identified by its leader, Bar Kokhba. Having initially encountered success in liberating parts of the country from the Roman garrisons, the rebels established Bar Kokhba as *nasi* (president) of Judaea. Yet with the mobilization of additional troops to this area the Romans managed to suppress the Jewish revolt and ended this short-lived liberation.

In Zionist collective memory the Bar Kokhba revolt symbolizes the nation's last expression of patriotic ardor and the last struggle for freedom during Antiquity. As such it became an important symbolic event for the Jewish national movement. The fact that the revolt was commemorated did not constitute a dramatic change from Jewish tradition. Jewish memory continued to mark the fall of Betar, Bar Kokhba's last stronghold, as an important historical event. Yet the Zionist representation of the revolt differed considerably from that constructed in Jewish tradition and thus transformed the meaning of this event and the nature of its commemoration.

The written sources about the Bar Kokhba revolt are scant and provide only fragmentary information. They include works by Roman and early church historians, most notably Dio Cassius's account, some Samaritan sources, and several brief narratives in the rabbinical and talmudic literature that are more legendary than historical in character. Until the unearthing of archeological evidence from the Bar Kokhba period, including letters and coins bearing Bar Kokhba's name and complex subterranean constructions designed for hiding, little was known about the identity of the leader of the Jewish uprising, the popular following he had enjoyed, the organization and development of the revolt, and the extent of the destruc-







tion that Judaea suffered in its aftermath. Even with this additional evidence, information about the event is still limited.[1]

The available sources suggest that Jews took to arms in the year 132. Their revolt may have been triggered by their outrage at the emperor's plans to rebuild Jerusalem as a Roman city and erect a temple for Jupiter at the site of their own destroyed Second Temple. The Romans' prohibition of circumcision is likely to have been another reason for the outbreak.[2] It appears that initially the Jews succeeded in defeating the Roman army stationed in Judaea. The coins and letters from that period bear evidence that the rebels were successful in establishing their own government and administrative structure.[3]

Faced with the rebels' initial success, the Roman emperor Hadrian sent additional legions to Judaea and assigned his capable general Julius Severus as their commander. According to the Roman historian Dio Cassius, Severus's tactics were to progress slowly, besieging the rebels and destroying Jewish villages as his forces pushed ahead. Although these tactics prolonged the war, they eventually proved successful. Bar Kokhba and his men withdrew to a nearby mountain town, Betar. The Romans besieged this last Jewish stronghold and eventually overcame the rebels.

Both Jewish and non-Jewish sources describe the enormous scope of destruction and bloodshed during that war, although the numbers given are probably exaggerated. Dio Cassius writes that the Romans destroyed 985 settlements and "nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate," 580,000 Jews fell in battle, and many others died in starvation and illness.[4] The Bar Kokhba revolt was crushed in 135. According to Jewish tradition, this happened on the ninth of the Hebrew month Av.[5]

Both Jewish and non-Jewish sources reveal that the revolt was also kindled by an upsurge of messianic hopes. In his history of the church Eusebius writes that the man who led the revolt was named Chochebas (star) and that he persuaded his people that he had come from heaven.[6] Rabbinical sources recount that Rabbi Akiba, the most prominent scholar of the period, attributed to Bar Kokhba the saying "A star shall step forth from Jacob." Alluding to the leader of the revolt as the "King Messiah,"[7] he articulated the belief that the revolt was not only a war of liberation from the Roman rule but also the first phase of the much anticipated messianic redemption.

### *Dual Image and Transformed Memory*

Since the Bar Kokhba revolt is the only ancient war that is identified by a single leader,[8] his image plays an important role in the construction of the

memory of this event. It is therefore interesting to note that the Jewish sources indicate a highly ambivalent attitude toward this leader, appearing to be far more negative than positive. This ambivalence is clearly expressed in the names attributed to the leader. While the name Bar Kokhba by which he is currently known was transmitted by non-Jewish sources, early and medieval Jewish sources called him Bar Koziba, which derives from the Hebrew word *kazav* (lie):

> Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Rabbi would expound "A star shall step forth from Jacob," thus do not read "star" [*kokhav*] but "liar" [*kozev*]. Rabbi Akiba, when he saw this Bar Koziba, would say: "This is the King Messiah." Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Torta said to him: "Akiba, grass will rise from your cheeks and the son of David will not yet have come."[9]

The two names thus articulate diametrically opposed perceptions of the revolt's leader. One is highly laudatory, relating to him as the Messiah; the other is extremely derogatory, accusing him of being a liar and betraying his people's trust and hopes. Prior to the discovery of the Bar Kokhba letters, the leader's actual name was an enigma; the letters revealed that his name is Shimon Bar Kosiba (or Koseba). On the basis of this recent information it appears that Bar Kokhba and Bar Koziba were both improvised forms that his followers and opponents, respectively, applied to him in order to convey their opposing views of his leadership.[10] That the glorifying name (Bar Kokhba) was preserved by non-Jews whereas Jewish sources until the sixteenth century referred to him exclusively as Bar Koziba is indeed striking.[11]

Only recently did the image of Bar Kokhba in the ancient and medieval Jewish sources become the focus of systematic inquiry. In his detailed study of the development of this image from Antiquity to the premodern period, Richard G. Marks demonstrates how the Jewish sources relate to Bar Kokhba as either a false messiah or a national hero, with only a few attempts to merge these two conflicting images.[12] Accordingly, the early rabbinical references recreate Bar Kokhba in the image of the biblical heroes who have extraordinary strength, courage, fighting ability, and charisma, but who also suffer from overconfidence and lack of sophistication, which lead them to disobedience to God. The rabbinical stories describe how Bar Kokhba "would catch the stones of the catapults on one of his knees and throw them back, killing many of [the Romans]," or would kill a man by the force of his kick. They imply that his enemy could not harm him and that he was eventually killed by a snake and not by a human. But Bar





Kokhba is also portrayed as a vain man who relied too much on his own power, challenging God not to interfere in the process of the war. "When he would go out to battle," the story goes, "he would say, 'Master of the world, neither help [us] nor shame [us].'" Bar Kokhba, according to those stories, was highly demanding of his men, testing their courage and commitment by requiring them to cut off one of their fingers, a demand that provoked the rabbis' rebuke. He was also described as a short-tempered, impulsive man who kicked and killed Rabbi Elazar of Modi'im upon hearing (unfounded) allegations that he betrayed the rebels. Betar's downfall is described as a punishment for this act of wrath, thus attributing the failure of the revolt to Bar Kokhba's character flaws and transgressions.[13]

These stories reveal admiration for Bar Kokhba's heroism but put an even stronger emphasis on his personal shortcomings. The tendency to dwell on the negative image may be more pronounced in the Babylonian than the Palestinian Talmud,[14] yet both sources indicate that he failed both as a person and a leader. Moreover, they ultimately show more appreciation of the rabbi than the leader of the revolt, suggesting that Rabbi Elazar of Modi'im, who was sitting in sackcloth and praying for God's help, contributed more to the revolt's potential success than Bar Kokhba.[15] These stories therefore imply that the way to redemption should follow the route of reliance on God, piety, and prayers.

A few medieval references to Bar Kokhba depart from this earlier, more negative approach, referring to the ancient leader as a king who had enjoyed glory and power for a relatively short time but who ultimately failed.[16] The great medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides wrote that Rabbi Akiba was *nose kelav* (armor-bearer) of Bar Koziba and that he "would say about him that he was the King Messiah and he and all the sages of his generation held the opinion that he was the King Messiah, until he was killed in his iniquities."[17] Bar Kokhba, according to Maimonides, was a promising hero who at the end turned out to be a false messiah.

As Marks points out, the twelfth-century scholars clearly focus on the messianic hope associated with the Bar Kokhba revolt. In describing Bar Kokhba's heroic image along with his emergence as a false messiah, they attempt to address issues pertaining to messianism that underlay their own polemics with the Karaites, Christians, and Muslims.[18] Similarly, the sixteenth-century references to Bar Kokhba deal with the man and his revolt in the context of the Jews' latest trauma of expulsion from Spain and Portugal. Whether they focus on his heroic stature and his revenge on his opponents or emphasize his role as a false messiah, they aim at encouraging exiled Jews by implying that redemption is possible and discouraging them from turning to false messiahs.[19]

With the emergence of Jewish interest in Antiquity during the nineteenth century, attention was first focused on the roles of spiritual leaders such as Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiba. But as the national interest in the period of the Second Temple intensified, Bar Kokhba too became a central heroic figure, and his revolt was seen as an important manifestation of the ancient national soul and the readiness to fight for freedom.[20] Indeed, in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Masada was still considered a marginal episode in Jewish history, Bar Kokhba and the revolt began to attract attention as a subject of historical novels and plays.[21] This trend received great impetus from the rise of Zionism. Zionist writers and poets found Bar Kokhba a popular literary subject and referred to his revolt as a major turning point associated with the glorified national past.[22] The rising symbolic significance of Bar Kokhba was also evident in the use of his name for various groups and publications, such as the Bar Kokhba Association of Jewish students in Prague in 1893 and the *Bar Kokhba* magazine for young German Jews published in 1919–21; or use of the name of his last stronghold Betar for the Revisionist Zionist youth movement (founded in Riga in 1923), which became one of the important Zionist youth movements in eastern Europe and Palestine.[23]

The Zionist search for roots in the ancient national past clearly led to the enhancement of Bar Kokhba's positive image. The preference for the name Bar Kokhba over the traditional Jewish Bar Koziba symbolizes a departure from the predominant attitude of the earlier Jewish sources. Moreover, while the traditional Jewish turning point signaling the end of Antiquity and the beginning of Exile was the destruction of the Second Temple, the Bar Kokhba revolt provided Zionist memory with an alternative turning point, enhancing the national-political over the religious dimension of the periodization of the past. As the last war of liberation of Antiquity, it became a source of inspiration for the modern national movement.

Bar Kokhba was a "giant" figure who represented the greatness of the ancient national past. At a time of despair over the repeated victimization of the Jews, Ḥayim Naḥman Bialik wrote a poem calling on the Jews to begin a new era of armed struggle in their defense, using Bar Kokhba as an inspiration for his blunt and desperate call for revenge.[24] The Hebrew poet Sha'ul Tchernichovsky juxtaposed the image of Bar Kokhba the "giant" with that of a "crowd of contemptible midgets" who belittled him during centuries of life in "the filth of exile."[25] The Zionists' departure from the exilic tradition is thus articulated by their renewed admiration of "the son of the star" who has, in turn, inspired them by his light.

The invisible link between Bar Kokhba's men and the new Zionist pioneers was very much part of the attempt to construct historical continuity between Antiquity and the Zionist National Revival. When Herzl's associate, the famous Zionist leader Max Nordau, praises the Biluyim group of the First Aliya of the 1880s, he compares them to the legendary soldiers of Bar Kokhba, who had fought for national survival.[26] Rachel Yana'it, a prominent settler of the Second Aliya (later to become the wife of the second President of the State of Israel, Yitzḥak Ben-Zvi), describes her fifth-grade students' eagerness to hear about Bar Kokhba and their upcoming trip to Betar (around 1909). "I believe," she writes, "that we ought to raise Bar Kokhba's history in light of the reawakening of Galilee." In a revealing statement she then confesses: "I write about Bar Kokhba, but in fact I wish to write about anyone in our group. In my eyes, they carry the message of the beginning of a revolt . . . For me the connection between these histories is so clear that it does not require additional explanation."[27] This sense of identification is reconfirmed by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion when the State of Israel was established. Ben-Gurion points out the symbolic continuity between the ancient Bar Kokhba followers and contemporary Israeli soldiers: "The chain that was broken in the days of Shimon Bar Kokhba and Akiba ben Yosef was reinforced in our days, and the Israeli army is again ready for the battle in its own land, to fight for the freedom of the nation and the homeland."[28]

The identification with Bar Kokhba and his men sometimes led to the projection of the present onto the past. As I mentioned in chapter 2, the Socialist Zionist leader Ya'akov Zerubavel attributes to the ancient heroes a concern not only with freedom but with the modern socialist agenda of "free labor." A student similarly employs an anachronistic term when he describes Bar Kokhba addressing his soldiers as *ḥaverim* (comrades), like members of the socialist youth movements and the kibbutzim of the student's time.[29] And a children's book tells of Bar Kokhba's "declaration of independence," a term conventionally applied to the foundation of the State of Israel in May 1948.[30]

Hebrew education in Palestine since the beginning of the century elevated the heroic image of Bar Kokhba and the importance of his revolt.[31] Hebrew literature and textbooks tend to draw more on the positive aspects of the traditional tales about the hero than on the negative ones.[32] Moreover, the construction of a new legendary lore about the ancient hero contributed to his heroic stature (see chapter 7). In this lore, Bar Kokhba's symbolic role as a model for the New Hebrews often took the literary form of an appearance in person in front of contemporary children, a common device in children's literature.[33]

The elevation of the ancient leader as a prominent historical and sym-

bolic figure was an important feature of the Zionists' revival of what they regarded as the suppressed heroic national past. Yet some ambivalence underlies the representation of this transformation. Along with the desire to dramatize the departure from the traditional rabbinical attitude toward him, the Zionist commemoration of Bar Kokhba also implies that he had always been a folk hero. The most popular children's song about Bar Kokhba asserts that "the whole nation loved him."[34] Gershom Scholem, the famous student of Jewish mysticism, claims that "popular tradition did not subscribe to the rabbinic disparagement of Bar Kokhba's memory. He remained a kind of a hero-saint."[35] The archeologist Yigael Yadin makes a similar statement that Bar Kokhba's name was preserved by folk tradition but almost lost to authenticated history.[36] Elsewhere he remarks that the folk attachment to Bar Kokhba would withstand the pressure of historical inquiry, much as it resisted the rabbinical opposition to him.[37] In this statement Yadin asserts the primacy of collective memory over history in preserving a long, if at times suppressed, tradition of heroism around Bar Kokhba's folk image.

The Zionist elevation of Bar Kokhba and his revolt as a major turning point in Jewish history focuses on the act of initiating an armed struggle for national liberation. Zionist collective memory clearly preferred to dwell on the rebels' courage, determination, love of freedom, and readiness for self-sacrifice as a manifestation of the national spirit of Antiquity. Although the course and scope of the war are not clear, Hebrew educational texts state that Bar Kokhba freed Jerusalem, and highlight the initial successful phase of the revolt.[38] In this construction, the outcome of the war, the defeat, is clearly perceived as secondary to the symbolism of choosing to fight for national freedom and responding to oppression by taking up arms. In fact, in his address to the second Zionist Congress, Max Nordau went so far as to state that the Bar Kokhba war was superior to the Hasmoneans' victories.[39]

Various strategies are employed to diminish the significance of the defeat. One such strategy has been to demonstrate that the Romans also suffered heavy losses in the war. In reviewing the scant sources about the revolt, Yadin states:

> But perhaps the most important piece of information in Dio's description is recorded at its end and deserves verbatim quotation: "Many Romans, moreover, perished in this war. Therefore, Hadrian in writing to the Senate did not employ the opening phrase commonly affected by the Emperors: 'If you and your children are in health it is well; I and the legions are in health.'" Hadrian must have suffered heavy casualties indeed if he was forced to omit the customary formula.[40]



Another means of playing down the defeat is to show that the Romans' victory was short-lived from a historical perspective. In a polemic essay on the significance of the revolt Yisrael Eldad points out that Hadrian's statue is now standing in the garden of the Israel Museum in the capital of the State of Israel, after being unearthed by Bar Kokhba's descendants. In a triumphant tone he points out that now Israelis can "peek in the eyes of the 'victorious' Hadrian and pose the question, 'Where are you and where are we?'"[41]

The contrast between traditional Jewish memory, which highlights the outcome of the war and emphasizes Bar Kokhba's negative image, and the Zionist commemoration of his revolt is indeed striking. Rabbinical tales gloss over the rebels' initial success and provide harrowing descriptions of the massacre and destruction that the revolt brought upon Judaea: "And [the Romans] went on killing them, until horses waded through blood up to their nostrils. And the blood rolled rocks weighing forty 'seah' [an ancient measure], until the blood reached the sea forty miles away."[42] In the same vein, some later sixteenth-century sources dwell on the suffering, bloodshed, and persecution brought by the revolt. As Marks observes, this focus on Betar as one of the most horrifying examples of Jewish suffering inflicted by Gentiles was triggered by their recent memories of the expulsions from Spain and Portugal.[43]

The commemoration of the Bar Kokhba revolt during the annual festival of Lag ba-Omer reinforced the dramatic transformation of its traditional Jewish commemoration. Jewish tradition fixes the fall of Betar on the fast day of Tish'a be-Av (the ninth of Av) along with the destruction of the First and Second Temples. The commemoration thus focuses on the end of the revolt and its consequences and counts them among the most traumatic disasters of Jewish history and a major cause for collective mourning. Zionist collective memory, on the other hand, associates the Bar Kokhba revolt primarily with the celebration of the Lag ba-Omer holiday. This festive holiday shifts the commemoration from the outcome of the revolt to Bar Kokhba's victory over the Romans during the initial stages of the revolt. Since within the holiday framework itself there is no obligation to expand the commemorative narrative beyond that specific time, Lag ba-Omer serves to enhance the importance of the uprising and obscures the fact that the victory was short-lived. The revolt is transformed from a cause for collective mourning to a cause for collective celebration. For the ma-

jority of secular Israelis who do not observe the traditional fast of Tish'a be-Av, Lag ba-Omer becomes the exclusive commemorative setting for the revolt. As we shall see in chapter 7, this change has had far-reaching consequences for the memory of the Bar Kokhba revolt.

### *Archeological Findings and Symbolic Roots*

The 1960s witnessed a new development in the rise of the Bar Kokhba revolt as a major national event from Antiquity. The impetus for this development came from archeological discoveries providing further evidence about the revolt that made Bar Kokhba and his men emerge as historical figures. Although letters from the Bar Kokhba period had been discovered in the early 1950s in Vadi Murabbat, these discoveries were not made by Israelis. In May 1960 Yigael Yadin, a professor of archeology at the Hebrew University and a former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, turned an archeological discovery into a major national event.

In a meeting at the home of the president of Israel, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, in the company of the prime minister, cabinet ministers, members of the parliament, and other important guests, Yadin made public a "momentous secret," a discovery he had made in the Judaean desert only a few weeks earlier. In the opening of his book on Bar Kokhba, Yadin describes his dramatic buildup of this scene.

> A screen had been erected at Mr. Ben-Zvi's house, and when my turn came to report, I projected onto the screen through a film slide the colored photograph of part of a document and read out aloud the first line of writing upon it: "Shimon Bar Kosiba, President over Israel." And turning to our head of state, I said, "Your Excellency, I am honored to be able to tell you that we have discovered fifteen dispatches written or dictated by the last President of ancient Israel eighteen hundred years ago."
>
> For a moment the audience seemed to be struck dumb. Then the silence was shattered with spontaneous cries of astonishment and joy. That evening the national radio interrupted its scheduled program to broadcast news of the discovery. Next day the newspapers came out with banner headlines over the announcement.[44]

Yadin's skills in dramatizing the announcement about his finding clearly contributed to its impact. But the discovery of the Bar Kokhba letters turned into a national sensation because the ancient hero occupied a major



symbolic place in the Israeli pantheon of ancient heroes. It is also important to note Yadin's rhetoric of continuity, linking the ancient past with contemporary Israel as he transmits a letter from "the last president of ancient Israel" to the current president of modern Israel. In this act he thus symbolically erases the rupture of eighteen hundred years of life in Exile.

Yadin's rhetorical skills are also evident in his writing about the expedition. The Hebrew title of his book *Ha-Ḥipusim Aḥar Bar Kokhba* (The Search for Bar Kokhba) reads like that of an adventure story, and the drama is accentuated by chapter titles such as "Behind the Legend," "The Curtain Rises," and "Rays of Hope." Similarly, Yadin invites the reader to join in the explorers' disappointments and hopes, their moments of extreme difficulties and excitement, adding to the dramatic unfolding of their discoveries.

Yadin's presentation had great appeal for the elite audience at the president's house and the Israeli public at large because it was nurtured by Israelis' long-standing interest in archeology. For Israelis, archeology is like a "national sport."[45] They volunteer to participate in archeological excavations, make pilgrimages to reconstructed archeological sites, and visit museums that display archeological findings, as if through these activities they ritually affirm their roots in the land. That the archeological excavation was considered a major national mission is evident also from the extent to which the military was involved in its planning and in carrying it out. According to Yadin's testimony, the idea of searching the caves for archeological remains was suggested to him by Israel's chief of staff in 1959. At the time Israeli politicians and archeologists were deeply concerned about the Bedouins' access to caves within Israel's territory where they found archeological remains, which they later sold outside the State of Israel. When the Israel Defense Forces were ordered to increase their patrol in that area, the chief of staff recommended a shift from a defensive strategy to "an all-out archeological offensive." "Why be on the defensive?" he argued, "the best defense is, after all, attack!" (32).

The military proved to be of vital help in the preparations for the excavation: the extremely difficult conditions of the terrain in which the archeologists were to work, the desert environment, and the proximity to the Jordanian border all required that involvement. The army's considerations dictated the duration of the excavation, and the minister of defense was to approve the archeologists' plan. The Israel Defense Forces also supplied helicopters for the exploration of the steep slopes of the canyons where the caves are located, prepared the sites for archeologists' overnight camps, and provided transportation, communication equipment, and security. Soldiers' involvement continued throughout the excavation, and in fact, some

of them volunteered for dangerous assignments or provided useful technical assistance to the archeologists (42–46).[46]

The merging of the military and the archeological dimensions of this national project is manifested in Yadin's rhetoric. Not only was the archeological dig conceived in terms of an "attack" rather than "defense"; in describing the preparations for the excavation, Yadin resorts to paramilitary rhetoric, referring to the date for its beginning as "D-Day" (32–40). Moreover, he intersperses the narrative about the excavation with nationalist themes that emphasize the direct continuity between contemporary Israeli explorers and the ancient fighters for freedom. After describing the fellow who first discovered a fragment of a scroll, a red-haired, North African immigrant nicknamed Gingi (Ginger), Yadin adds: "I can still see his shining eyes as I write these lines. Alas, Gingi is no more; he was killed in the Six-Day War of 1967. He fought gallantly, and I am sure he visualized himself as a descendant of the Bar Kokhba warriors" (113–14).

Yadin himself, like another former chief of staff, Moshe Dayan, represents the integration of the military and the archeological. Both men belonged to the "Palmaḥ generation" educated by the prestate national Hebrew schools; both reached the highest rank as the Israeli Defense Forces' chief of staff and had an intense interest in archeology, Yadin as a professional archeologist, Dayan as an aggressive amateur. Both men also ended their careers as politicians. Indeed, Yadin's embodiment of the "Palmaḥ spirit" is visually represented in the photographs included in his book, displaying him wearing the Palmaḥ's famous wool hat (*kova gerev*) as he examines unearthed artifacts from the Bar Kokhba period.

The symbolic dimension of Yadin's career was later used by others as a way of enhancing the direct continuity between ancient and modern Israel.

> Bar Kokhba's army was the last national Jewish army, and Bar Kokhba was the last chief of staff of the historical armies of Israel. And he wrote letters, some of which survived hidden in a vessel, and the vessel was hidden in the Judaean desert and there they waited for 1830 years until they were discovered and deciphered. And by whom? By the one who in effect served . . . as the first chief of staff of the new army of Israel, Yigael Yadin . . . And is it not the act of God that the Bar Kokhba letters reached Yigael Yadin's hands as letters from one chief of staff to another?[47]

Yadin himself concludes his narrative with a personal statement imbued with a strong nationalist flavor.





> Archeologists are also human beings, and as human beings they are often emotionally attached to the history of their own people.
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> Descending daily over the precipice, crossing the dangerous ledge to the caves, working all day long in the stench of the bats, confronting from time to time the tragic remains of those besieged and trapped—we found that our emotions were a mixture of tension and awe, astonishment and pride at being part of the reborn State of Israel after a Diaspora of eighteen hundred years. Here were we, living in tents erected by the Israel Defense Forces, walking every day through the ruins of a Roman camp which caused the death of our forefathers. Nothing remains here today of the Romans save a heap of stones on the face of the desert, but here the descendants of the besieged were returning to salvage their ancestors' precious belongings. (253)

Archeology thus becomes a national tool through which Israelis can recover their roots in the ancient past and the ancient homeland. The excavation itself symbolizes the historical continuity between Antiquity and National Revival, which the Zionist collective memory constructs and the archeologist's narrative reinforces. To participate in the archeological excavation—whether in person or symbolically, by reading Yadin's account—is to perform a patriotic act of bridging Exile to reestablish the connection with the national past and authenticate national memory.

# Five

## THE FALL OF MASADA

Masada is the site of an ancient fortress, a high plateau overlooking the Dead Sea and the Judaean desert. A dramatically elevated rock that is far from the center of the country, the site offers a sweeping view of its surroundings and an excellent place of refuge and seclusion. It is, therefore, not surprising that King Herod chose to use these natural qualities to build a palace that would serve as both a place of retreat and a defense post at the end of the first century B.C.[1] But Masada owes its present fame to a later event that took place at the end of the Jewish revolt against the Romans. Although the Roman emperor Titus celebrated his grand triumph over Judaea following the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, three outposts continued to hold out against the Romans: Herodium, Macherus, and Masada. Having conquered the former two, the Romans turned to Masada, which had been the first site of attack on the Romans and the rebels' last place of refuge.[2]

The story of the fall of Masada was recorded by Josephus, a Jewish historian who was a contemporary of the people whose end he described. Since this is the only ancient narrative about the fall of Masada in 73, it is particularly significant for the examination of the collective memory of that event. Josephus reports that the Roman army besieged Masada and began an ambitious plan of construction to enable its machinery to destroy the fortress's walls. An estimated eight to ten thousand Romans, aided by thousands of Jewish slaves, engaged in this enormous undertaking.[3] When they finished this task, they discovered that the Jews had erected a second wall, better designed to stand the pressure of their machines. The Romans attempted to burn that wall down and, having set it on fire, prepared for the final attack the following day. At this point the unfolding events at Masada reached their dramatic peak.

When the leader of the Jewish rebels, Elazar ben Yair, realized that there was "no other way of escaping, or room for their further courage," he gathered his men to offer them what he considered the best possible alternative:







to slay their wives and children and then kill themselves so as to die as free people rather than be enslaved by the Romans.

> Since we long ago, my generous friends, resolved never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God himself, who alone is the true and just Lord of mankind, the time is now come that obliges us to make that resolution true in practice . . . We were the very first that revolted from them [the Romans] and we are the last that fight against them; and I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God hath granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom . . . (7.8.6)

Elazar continued his speech, arguing that it was God's will that the Romans succeed and that Jerusalem's fate had proven that true. When some of his followers objected to his idea of collective suicide, he persisted in a long speech about the immortality of the soul, the importance of life in the other world, the doomed fate of the Jewish people, and the grim prospects of slavery, torture, and death by the Romans (7.8.7).

This time, convinced by Elazar's arguments, the men hurried to carry out his plan.

> [H]usbands tenderly embraced their wives and took their children in their arms, and gave the longest parting kisses to them with tears in their eyes. Yet at the same time did they complete what they had resolved on, as if they had been executed by the hands of strangers, and they had nothing else for their comfort but the necessity they were in of doing this execution, to avoid that prospect they had of the miseries they were to suffer from their enemies [. . .] Miserable men indeed were they, whose distress forced them to slay their own wives and children with their own hands, as the lightest of those evils that were before them. (7.9.1)

After the men completed their terrible mission, they cast lots to select the ten who would slay the rest, until the last one set the palace on fire and fell on his sword. The next morning, when the Romans entered the fortress, they found the place engulfed by complete silence. According to Josephus, the sight of 960 bodies denied them the pleasure of victory, and they could not but wonder at the courage displayed by the dead. Although Elazar ben Yair and his followers wanted to ensure that no one would fall alive into the hands of the enemy, two women and five children who had managed to escape the collective death were later found by the Romans (7.9.2).

Josephus himself was hardly aloof from the events he reported. The commander of the Jewish army in Galilee, he had held a leading position in the Great Revolt against the Romans. According to his own testimony, when Vespasian succeeded in conquering some main posts in Galilee, Josephus chose to surrender to the Romans, thereby betraying his comrades who followed their agreed upon plan of collective suicide, similar to the one carried out later at Masada.[4] Whereupon Josephus joined the Roman court and devoted his life to historical writing, leaving behind a most important source on Jewish history in Antiquity, including a detailed account of the Jewish revolt from 66 to 73.

Although Masada is mentioned in two Roman sources, they do not relate the episode described by Josephus but rather mention the site itself.[5] The Talmud, which often relates historical events, makes no reference to the fall of Masada. As for Josephus's works, they were neglected by the Jews, who perceived their author as a renegade, and the original Aramaic version of his *Wars of the Jews* has not survived. In fact, its Greek translation was preserved because the church regarded his works an important source on the rise of Christianity. During many centuries, therefore, Jews were unfamiliar with Josephus's account of Masada's last days.[6]

Yet Josephus influenced Jewish historiography through another chronicle, *The Book of Jossipon*, which drew on his work. Written by an anonymous author around the tenth century, *The Book of Jossipon* became during the Middle Ages the most popular chronicle of Jewish history.[7] Jossipon's version of the fall of Masada differs from Josephus's version in one significant detail. Whereas Josephus reported that the men killed themselves after having slain their wives and children, Jossipon's version recounts that they went out to fight the Roman soldiers and encountered their death in that last battle.[8]

If the Jewish rebels at Masada entered later annals of Jewish Antiquity, it was largely through *The Book of Jossipon* and according to its version.[9] The story of the fall of Masada thus did not vanish from the records of Jewish history, yet it did not play a major role in Jewish collective memory. Even if Masada served as a historical model for medieval Jews, it represented to them an expression of extreme religious devotion leading to death for Kiddush ha-Shem.[10] In the absence of any explicit reference to Masada in this context, however, this possibility remains speculative.

## *The Rediscovery of Masada*

The roots of Masada's contemporary symbolic significance lie in the emergence of a secular scholarly interest in Jewish history during the nineteenth



century. No longer satisfied with traditional Jewish memory, the liturgical and philosophical works about the past, or popular chronicles such as *The Book of Jossipon*, Jewish scholars began searching for other historical sources and rediscovered Josephus. The first Hebrew translation of Josephus's works appeared in 1862.[11]

The new secular interest in the ancient Hebrew past prepared the ground for Masada's odyssey from the periphery of historical chronicles to the center of modern Jewish historical consciousness. The Zionist interest in the ancient national past encouraged the fascination with the Judaean wars of liberation. When a modern Hebrew translation of Josephus's *Wars of the Jews* was published in Palestine in 1923, the pioneers and the New Hebrew youth hailed it as a major text of historical and national significance. This reacquaintance with Josephus's account of Masada eventually led to its reconstruction as a major turning point in Jewish history, a locus of modern pilgrimage, a famous archeological site, and a contemporary political metaphor.

While the historian's task clearly calls for a careful examination of Josephus's story, Israeli popular culture does not question the validity of this account and the historicity of the event.[12] Moreover, selected paragraphs from Josephus's text are often reprinted in educational materials about Masada or read during visits to the site.[13] In analyzing Israeli collective memory of Masada I will therefore refer to Josephus's text as the historical narrative and focus on its relation to the Masada commemorative narrative.

In 1927 the publication of a poem entitled *Masada* by Yitzḥak Lamdan provided an important stimulus to the reintroduction of Masada to the Yishuv's collective memory. The contribution of this literary work to the rise of the Masada myth will be further explored in chapter 8. It is important to note here, though, that the popularity of the poem contributed greatly to the public's awareness of the historical event. Lamdan's *Masada* quickly became one of the "sacred texts" of the myth, second only to Josephus's historical narrative. The rising significance of Masada among Zionist circles can be attested by its adoption as a name of various Zionist organizations and publications from the 1920s on, both in Palestine and abroad.[14]

Three dramatic aspects of Masada contributed to its emergence as one of the most prominent national myths of Israeli society: a powerful story, a challenging site, and interesting archeological remains. The site too was discovered relatively late. Only in the middle of the nineteenth century did non-Jewish explorers identify and visit the Masada cliff. The first systematic archeological survey of the site was conducted in 1932 by a German archeologist who was more interested in the Roman camps than in the Jewish remains.[15] Masada began to attract Hebrew youth in the second decade

of the twentieth century and gradually emerged as a site of pilgrimage. Not until the mid-1950s, however, did professional Israeli archeologists turn to Masada. Masada's appeal as a historical site of national value thus preceded Israeli archeological interest in it.

Reaching remote Masada was a complex and rather risky undertaking during the prestate period. In earlier trips visitors would arrive by boat through the Dead Sea.[16] But getting to Masada through the Judaean desert or along the Dead Sea shore was extremely dangerous. Field trips often lasted a week or longer under difficult physical conditions.[17] Trekking to Masada had an aura of adventure that became increasingly popular among Hebrew youth. The site's appeal thus contributed to the development of special rituals that underscored the growing importance of Masada as a national myth.

Youth trips to Masada led by Hebrew teachers took place as early as 1912 and continued through the 1920s and the early 1930s.[18] When casualties occurred, schools were forced to stop these trips. But during the early 1930s small groups of Hebrew youth began exploring the Dead Sea area, including Masada.[19] When these efforts were resumed in the 1940s, field trips to the Judaean desert and Masada became a popular tradition among youth movements and the newly formed Palmaḥ underground. Hebrew youth refused to let accidents disrupt their tradition. Field trips provided them an important opportunity to perform a patriotic ritual that linked them to the ancient spirit of Hebrew heroism and the love of freedom. The high degree of physical fitness, strong willpower, and daredevil mentality that a trip to Masada required clearly contributed to their growing fascination with the site.[20]

In 1934 the Jewish National Fund attempted to purchase Masada and the areas surrounding it, because of its historic significance for the emergent nation, but it did not succeed.[21] In fact, when the British government issued the white paper of 1936, outlining a plan for the future division of Palestine, Masada remained outside Jewish territory. Jews' historic claim on Masada and its surroundings was later brought up again in both national and international discussions on the issue.[22]

While Hebrew youth's tradition of field trips to Masada continued during the 1950s, that period also marked the beginning of professional archeological interest in its ruins. The involvement of professional archeologists and the Israeli government followed popular sentiment and the initiatives undertaken by archeological amateurs from the youth movements and the kibbutzim.[23] The first systematic surveys of Masada by professional archeologists from the Hebrew University took place in 1955–56. To facilitate the transportation of equipment and supplies and make

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Masada more easily accessible, the Israel Defense Forces restored the ancient "snake path" that leads to the top of the cliff.[24] The construction of a new road that reaches the Dead Sea through the Judaean desert, the restored snake path, and the establishment of a youth hostel and a parking lot thus made Masada more easily accessible to the general public.[25]

Only in the mid-1960s did archeologists return to Masada for extensive excavation and reconstruction work. This expedition, which received much publicity and government support, marked the final stage in the transformation of Masada from a neglected cliff in the Judaean desert to a prominent archeological site and a major tourist attraction in Israel. Popular support and government backing joined forces here with professional expertise. The excavation was conducted on behalf of the Hebrew University, the Israel Exploration Society, and the Department of Antiquities of the Israeli government. The Israel Defense Forces took a major role in preparing the site, and the national water company (Mekorot) and the Naphta Oil company provided additional necessary aid. The project of excavating and restoring Masada was also supported by large donations and volunteers' work.[26]

Indeed, the response to the call for volunteers both in Israel and abroad was overwhelming. That Israelis, for whom archeology is of such national significance, would be eager to participate in this excavation is not so surprising, nor was it the first Israeli expedition to use local volunteers.[27] But the enthusiastic response of foreign volunteers, in spite of the rough conditions at Masada and the travel expenses involved, was unexpected and was taken as proof of the international appeal of Masada.[28]

From the early stages of preparation for this expedition, the archeological and national interests were closely intertwined. Professor Yigael Yadin, who headed this expedition, repeatedly emphasized the complementary nature of these two aspects. For him the excavation of Masada was not simply another archeological dig; it was the fulfillment of a national mission. In his earlier statements as well as in his book about the dig, Yadin's patriotic enthusiasm is evident and at times exceeds his professional restraint. Yadin admits that the decision to open the expedition to volunteers was partly economic, and then adds: "But the truth is that it would have never occurred to me to do this [call for volunteers] . . . if Masada hadn't been of such enormous significance. It is inconceivable that if we dig at Masada, people would not volunteer to take a part in this excavation, even for a short period only."[29] Similarly, Yadin justifies the unusual procedure of advancing with the excavation and the restoration simultaneously by the archeologists' obligation "to concern ourselves not only with our own immediate expedition but with the future—with the hundreds of thousands of visitors

drawn by the drama of Masada, who would wish to see something of the physical remains of Masada's past" (88). Thus, while the archeologist's impulse is typically oriented toward the past, Yadin's awareness of the national value of this project led him to focus on the future.

Throughout his book Yadin expresses the awe stemming from the national historic significance of Masada and the excavators' identification with the ancient defenders: "Even the veterans and the more cynical among us stood frozen, gazing in awe at what had been uncovered; for as we gazed, we relived the final and the most tragic moments of the drama of Masada" (54). In the same spirit Yadin celebrates the continuity between Antiquity and the present, a theme evident also in the subtitle of the Hebrew edition of his book, *Ba-Yamim ha-Hem ba-Zeman ha-Ze* (In those days at this time), borrowing the phrase from the Ḥanukka prayer. The following passages demonstrate the importance he attributed to the national over the purely archeological:

> The site of the adjoining camps, Silva's and our own, was not without its symbolism, and it expressed far more pungently than scores of statements something of the miracle of Israel's renewed sovereignty. Here, cheek by jowl with the ruins of the camp belonging to the destroyers of Masada, a new camp had been established by the revivers of Masada. (21–22)

> [The Masada defenders] had left behind no grand palaces, no mosaics, no wall paintings, not even anything that could be called buildings, for they had simply added primitive partitions to the Herodian structures to fit them as dwellings . . . But to us, as Jews, these remains were more precious than all the sumptuousness of the Herodian period; and we had our greatest moments when we entered a Zealotian room and under a layer of ashes came upon the charred sandals of small children and some broken cosmetic vessels. We could sense the very atmosphere of their last tragic hour. (16)[30]

Indeed, thanks to Yadin's outstanding skills at organizing this large-scale expedition and giving it such publicity, the excavation and restoration of Masada became a national event in its own right. The preparation for the dig, the call for volunteers, their experiences, and new developments during the work on the site—all these became newsworthy topics that received ongoing coverage in the Israeli media.

Yadin's interpretation of the excavation as a patriotic engagement was not unlike other cases where archeology became a vehicle for legitimizing



nationalist ideologies.[31] The archeological work at Masada thus grounded the nation's collective memory in excavated ruins and objects. A heroic venture to the past for the sake of the nation's future, it became a cause for national celebration. The archeologists and the volunteers who took part in it thus carried out a historical mission on behalf of the Israeli nation. While archeology was mobilized to substantiate the collective memory of Masada, it also became part of the commemorative narrative of Masada: texts about Masada tell the story of the famous dig and reproduce pictures of the excavation process, side by side with Josephus's narrative of the historical event and photos of the ancient objects.[32]

The excavation of Masada marks a turning point in its development as a national symbol. Masada emerged not only newly restored but also visibly enhanced in the public eye. The findings and the restoration of the site were seen as tangible proofs of Josephus's nineteen-hundred-year-old account. The archeological excavation thus reinforced the link between the appeal of the site and the importance of the historical event.[33] In the interviews I conducted in Israel in the late 1970s, some of my informants' accounts of their visits to Masada confirmed the importance of those relics as tangible evidence.

> I was very impressed. It is my nature to be very emotional, and I like archeological sites and history. At the moment that I see something like this, I begin to imagine what happened there. This is something ancient and it relates to me. And these are *my* people. It made everything real to me.

> [The visit] really impressed me and made me appreciate them [the ancient defenders] more. You come to a place and you see how and where they lived. The basket and the shoes, and the scrolls that were discovered at Masada impressed me. This makes one realize that indeed there were people who lived there, even though this happened two thousand years ago.

As a result of the enormous publicity about the expedition, Masada's history became better known to Israelis and non-Israelis. Visits to the archeological site became important as educational experiences not only for Israelis but also for foreign tourists. As early as 1966 Yadin suggested that "through visits to Masada we can teach [our brethren from the Diaspora] what we today call 'Zionism' better than thousands of pompous speeches."[34] Masada became one of the key attractions for non-Jewish tourists too and an official stop on state visits to Israel: it provides not only

an interesting site but also an important lesson from Antiquity that could serve as valuable national propaganda for the State of Israel.

## *A Myth of Fighting to the Bitter End*

Masada is not just a historical site that researchers study; Masada is not simply an ancient fortress that one digs to find archeological remains through which one can learn about the past in order to support or refute theories.

Masada is a symbol. Masada is a guideline. Masada is longing. Masada is a loud cry. Masada is a tower of light . . . Masada is a symbol of Jewish and human heroism in all its greatness. A generation of youth was raised by Masada. This is the generation that created the state, the generation of defense in its various manifestations. Masada has been the source of power and courage to liberate the country, to strike roots in it, and defend its whole territory.[35]

The pathos underlying this introduction to a book on Masada for young adults clearly stems from the author's wish to impress the readers with Masada's role as a major national myth. In less flowery language other Israelis have articulated similar views regarding Masada's potency as a symbolic event that provides modern Israeli society with a source of legitimation from the past and a model for the future. For Jewish settlers in Palestine and especially for the first generation of New Hebrews, Masada was not simply a geographical site nor a mere episode from Antiquity. For them it represented a highly symbolic event that captures the essence of the ancient Hebrew ethos and helped define their own mission of national revival.

Thus, the meaning of Masada was first and foremost shaped by the urge to forge a sense of historical continuity between the modern-day Zionist National Revival and Antiquity, when Jews lived in their own homeland, and to heighten their divergence from Exile. The Masada episode, marking the end of the Jewish revolt against the Romans, was seen as the essence of the national spirit that made the Jews stand up and fight for their freedom. In the period in which the Zionist settlers and the first generation of New Hebrews wished to define themselves as the direct descendants of the ancient Hebrews, they portrayed the Masada people as the authentic carriers of the spirit of active heroism, love of freedom, and national dignity, which, according to the Zionist collective memory, disappeared during centuries of Exile. Masada was therefore presented as a positive model of behavior and an important patriotic lesson. To fulfill this role, the Masada com-



memorative narrative required a highly selective representation of Josephus's historical record. By emphasizing certain aspects of his account and ignoring others, the commemorative narrative reshaped the story and transformed its meaning.

The new myth narrative highlights the defenders' courage in rebelling against the Romans in the first place and in sustaining their resistance long after the rest of Judaea had been defeated. It stresses their heroic spirit, devotion, and readiness to fight until the last drop of blood but does not dwell on the specifics of the final episode of death. In so doing, the myth narrative elaborates where Josephus is silent and silences some of his more elaborate descriptions: the ancient historian does not mention a direct confrontation between the besieged Masada people and the Roman soldiers, yet he does provide a long and detailed description of the collective suicide.

Israelis, however, accept as given that the Masada rebels actively fought against the Romans to undermine the siege construction around the fortress. One of the early explorers of Masada among Hebrew youth, Shmaryahu Gutman, articulated this view: "[E]ven though Josephus does not explicitly tell about the Zealots' war, it is clear to us that they did not sit with arms folded in their laps and wait for the Romans to advance with their siege work."[36] Most of a children's story entitled *The Glory of Masada* is devoted to description of the continuing fight against the Romans. The author highlights children's participation in the defense of the fortress and goes on to explain that this was "a sacred duty that transformed the weakest woman and the most tender child into disciplined soldiers who do not back away from any fear and danger." In contrast to the elaborate descriptions of this fight, he allows much less space to the collective suicide, thereby inverting Josephus's original structure and molding the meaning of the historical event to fit the symbolism of an active fight for freedom.[37]

The commemorative narrative plays up the defenders' *readiness to die* as an ultimate expression of their patriotic devotion and highlights it as the core of their exemplary behavior. But it plays down or ignores the particular mode of death that they chose. In this context the suicide becomes a marginal fact, a small detail within the larger picture of an "active struggle" for national liberation. Indeed, by shifting the focus from the mass suicide to the war that preceded it and by offering a generalized reference to death, the commemorative narrative attempts to avoid the more problematic aspect of the historical account, the suicide, which could threaten its activist interpretation.

This approach, clearly rooted in the Zionist collective memory of Antiquity, emerged in both scholarly and popular discourse. The historian and literary critic Yosef Klausner wrote as early as 1925 that the people of Ma-

sada who "fell in battle" were "the finest patriots Israel knew from the rise of the Maccabees to the defeat of Bar Kokhba."[38] Similarly, the geographer and educator Yosef Braslavsky wrote in 1942 that "in Masada, the fight until the very end was manifested in its most supreme and shocking meaning."[39] In my interviews informants repeatedly used phrases such as "fight until the bitter end," "until the last breath," or "until the last drop of blood" in discussing the fall of Masada and its symbolic meaning. This selective reference to the original account made it possible to commemorate the historical event as a symbol of uncompromising ideological commitment to national freedom that manifests itself in active resistance to the enemy.

This emphasis clearly made it possible for the Zionist settlers and the Hebrew youth to identify the Masada spirit with values promoted within secular national Hebrew culture. One of the students I interviewed said about Masada, "Thirty years ago they would have called this 'it is good to die for our country,'" thereby grouping Masada and Tel Ḥai in the same class of heroic historical events. Truly, within this commemorative context no major difference between these two prominent heroic myths emerged during the Yishuv period. Both provided positive models from the past, and both were used as patriotic lessons of loyalty to the national cause and readiness to die for it.[40]

The activist interpretation of Masada thus created an invisible bridge between this last heroic outburst that sealed the Jewish revolt in Antiquity and its reawakening by the Zionist settlers. This symbolic continuity was clearly important to underscore the distinction between both national periods and the discredited Exile period.[41] As one of my informants suggested, "Israelis are the continuation of Masada. Not in the sense of committing suicide, but in the sense of not giving up." Another informant articulated a similar reading: "The whole country is like Masada . . . We have to fight until the very end, not to yield and not to give up."

### *Masada and the Holocaust as Countermetaphors*

During the Holocaust Masada's significance as a model of active resistance to persecution and a countermodel to the passivity of Exile further crystallized within secular national Hebrew culture. The glorification of the Masada people in contrast to the Holocaust victims began as early as 1942. At the time when information about the Nazis' systematic destruction of European Jews reached the Yishuv's leadership, the Yishuv was preoccupied by its own survival in the face of the German army's progress in northern Africa. The likelihood of a British withdrawal from Palestine and Arab sup-





port of the German forces left little hope for the Yishuv for a successful defense.[42] At this critical historical juncture the Zionist settlers and the younger generation often articulated their commitment to self-defense against all odds. Their commemoration of Masada therefore focused on this dimension of the historical event.

The anxiety over the fate of European Jewry and the impulse to dissociate from them and from what they represented thus pulled the Jewish society of Palestine in opposite directions. Side by side with expressions of concern over the fate of European Jews was a tendency to criticize the victims' behavior by emphasizing that the Zionist settlers would choose a different course of action. Moreover, the belief that the Zionist enterprise in Palestine was at the center of Jewish history inevitably marginalized Jewish life in the Diaspora and served to legitimize the focus on the Yishuv's politics and survival for its future role in absorbing Jewish refugees.[43]

In this context the Zionist settlers and the Hebrew youth turned to Masada as a historical model presenting a dignified alternative to the European Jews' response to the Nazi persecution. During the debate on the Yishuv's preparations for the German invasion, the prominent socialist leader Yitzḥak Gruenbaum presented the following argument: "If the Germans had encountered a Jewish armed resistance in Poland, it would not have made our situation there worse, for it is impossible for it to be worse than it is; but our honor would have been much greater in [the eyes of] the world." Gruenbaum continued by urging preparation for a last stand if the Nazis invaded Palestine. Even if the Jews of Palestine died in this war, he argued, they would at least leave behind another "Masada legend."[44]

The significance of the Masada defenders' example was thus explicitly juxtaposed with the "disgrace" displayed by the Jews' behavior in Europe. This open condemnation of the Holocaust victims is even more shocking if we consider that Gruenbaum himself had been a leading Jewish politician in Poland prior to his immigration to Palestine, was a member of the Jewish Agency Executive, the most important governing body of the Yishuv at that time, and served as chair of its committee for dealing with Polish Jews' affairs during the war years.[45]

Another socialist leader, Yitzḥak Tabenkin, did not explicitly refer to Masada in this political context. But his vehement objection to the proposal that women and children would be evacuated if the Germans invaded Palestine cannot but bring Masada's example of communal death to mind. Tabenkin dismissed the evacuation ideas not only on tactical grounds but also as a moral issue. "There is no justice in this demand to save the women and the children," he asserted and later referred to it as a "disgrace." Even if they all died while opposing the Germans, this was a better solution, for other Jews would follow their nation-building efforts in the future.[46]

In 1943 David Ben-Gurion made references to Tel Ḥai as a "second Masada" and contrasted it with Exile's tradition of passivity in the face of persecution. "And a new death we will guarantee to ourselves," Ben-Gurion declared, "not the death of powerlessness, helplessness, and worthless sacrifice; with weapons in our hands we will die."[47] In the context of the news filtering from Europe, his speech had a particularly biting edge, and its implied criticism of the European Jews could not have escaped his listeners.

If the Yishuv leaders who came from Europe vacillated between their deep anxiety about the fate of the Diaspora Jews and their ideological commitment to dissociate from what it represented,[48] Hebrew youth, who had no personal recollection of life in Europe, were even more critical of the victims' behavior. Brought up in the nationalist Hebrew education, which promoted a highly negative view of Jewish life of exile,[49] they were critical of the Jews for "going like sheep to the slaughter." Instead, they were determined to follow Masada's heroic route of fighting to the bitter end. Thus, the Palmaḥ underground's plan for a last stand in the north against the Germans in 1942 was named "the Masada plan."[50] In the same vein a youth rejected the national call for a three-day mourning period in solidarity with European Jewry, claiming that his youth group's gathering at Masada was a more appropriate symbolic measure: "We achieved our goal . . . in the field trip to Masada and the gathering there. This was our symbolic expression of our solidarity with the fate of Jews, the fate of the generation, with those, since Masada, who did not choose servitude."[51]

Clearly, the youth found it easier to bond symbolically with the ancient Jews' heroic stand at Masada than to identify with their contemporary brethren who were suffering in Europe. In contrast to the European Jews Masada represented a historical example of Jews who, faced with a similar horrible situation, understood that they had only one choice, to die a *dignified death*.[52] A poem by a member of that generation, writer and critic of children's literature Uriel Ofek, articulates the admiration of the Masada defenders' death.

> Under the swords they fell, the Masada heroes,
> For they had rejected eternal slavery.
> Their heroic act our hearts has filled
> Since the far days of our childhood.
>
> We stood still, the thunder roared,
> And we all knew so well:
> It is good to die and be ever free,
> Than become our enemy's slaves.[53]





In this commemorative context the meaning of Masada has slightly changed, although it remains firmly embedded within the activist framework. As before, the Masada commemorative narrative continues to emphasize the commitment to armed resistance and patriotic sacrifice, but it now acknowledges the theme of suicide. The suicide is defined as a heroic act and a patriotic choice that reveals the ancient Hebrews' national pride and moral integrity: when all was lost, the last rebels preferred to die free rather than suffer disgrace and humiliation, torture, or death at the Romans' hands. In this view the definition of their situation as that of "no choice" is not only accepted as unquestionable; it becomes an object of great pride and admiration. The rebels' courage to define the situation as such and act on that realization is seen as a symbolic departure from the behavior of the exilic Jews who, in Gruenbaum's words, "preferred the life of a 'beaten dog' over dignified death."[54] In this context suicide is not seen as an expression of despair but rather as *an act of defiance*.[55]

As we shall see in chapter 11, the definition of the Masada rebels' situation as having "no choice" other than suicide is clearly open to alternative interpretations. One can argue that the rebels could have yielded to the Romans like the people of Macherus before them and thus saved lives,[56] or that they could have decided to go on fighting until the last man, as the Jossipon version indeed has it. But the definition of "no choice" has become an integral part of the myth, and the glorification of the resolution to die free in that situation is often highlighted in commemoration of the historical event.[57] Moreover, since the theme of "no choice" as a rationale for activist stands is deeply ingrained in Israeli political culture, it is easily accepted as a satisfying explanation for past behavior.

At times the commemorative narrative incorporates the suicide metaphorically, ignoring its literal representation in the historical narrative. In these cases Masada represents a desperate ("suicidal") war in a situation that leaves no route of escape or hope for victory. For those who could only fear the fate they would suffer at the hands of their enemy, whether the Romans or the Nazis, death in a desperate war represented an act of defiance that combined a display of dignity with a desire for revenge. This was the symbolic meaning of Masada for Yitzḥak Sadeh, the Palmaḥ's commander, when he explained their Masada plan of 1942: "We knew only this: we would not yield, and we would fight until the very end. We would inflict many casualties on the enemy, as many as we could . . . We were a group of people . . . who decided to fight a desperate and heroic war . . . *to be a new edition of the people of Masada*."[58]

While Masada clearly fulfilled the function of presenting an alternative Jewish model of behavior at a time of catastrophe, its use as a countermodel to the Holocaust was conditioned on blurring the distinction between lit-

eral and metaphoric references to suicide. This blurring was the only way Masada could be defined as a symbol of fighting until the very end. But Sadeh's Masada also discloses a desire to avenge an inevitable defeat and thus suppresses a significant part of Josephus's account of the suicide. The "new edition" of Masada differs greatly from the "original edition": Elazar ben Yair did not call his men to continue to fight the Romans until they all fell in the battle, and conversely, Yitzḥak Sadeh did not allude to the idea that members of the Palmaḥ should kill Jewish women and children and then commit suicide to avoid submission to the Nazis.

In fact, the activist interpretation of Masada during the Holocaust, represented by Sadeh's statement, resembles more closely the biblical account of Samson's death than Josephus's historical narrative. Samson's outcry—"Let me die with the Philistines"—delivers the message of readiness to kill oneself while inflicting death on the enemy, a message that the activist commemorative narrative attributes to Masada but which is missing in the single historical narrative about that event. This selective reference and interpretation of the original Masada edition explains what Marie Syrkin insightfully calls "the paradox of Masada": "Though the outcome of the struggle at Masada was the suicide of its last defenders, only the heroic resistance of which it was the scene has registered in the mind of Israel, not the grim 'un-Jewish' finale. However illogically, what happened at Masada permeates the imagination of Israel as the ultimate expression of active struggle, the reverse of an acceptance of death."[59]

It is important to note, however, that the activist interpretation of Masada and its elevation as the historical model of a dignified death in a hopeless situation was not unique to the Zionist settlers in Palestine. Indeed, this perception was rooted in the Zionist collective memory and was shared by its followers in Europe. Masada thus provided a historical model for those European Jewish youth who decided to organize resistance to the Nazis when the massive liquidation of the ghettos got underway. At the point when it became clear that life under the Nazi rule was likely to end in death, the youth were faced with the choice of either holding on to the small chance of survival or dying with weapons in their hands. For those who chose the latter, Masada served as a preferred paradigm of fighting a desperate war, motivated by pride and desire for revenge, and the Warsaw Ghetto revolt was also referred to as the "Masada of Warsaw."[60] Thus, in January 1942 the Socialist Zionist poet and activist Abba Kovner called the Vilna Zionist youth to organize self-defense, urging them "not to be led like sheep to the slaughter."[61] A similar call led to the organization of armed resistance in various ghettos, the most famous of which was the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, which broke out on Passover eve, April 19, 1943.





Ironically, the commemorative narrative praises the Masada defenders for dying with weapons in their hands, and this image, rather than Josephus's scene of mass suicide, provides the symbolic message of this text. The rhetorical use of activist expressions such as "they took their lives by their own hands" or "they preferred to die free" helps avoid the escapist dimension associated with suicide. Likewise, the tendency to quote Elazar ben Yair's strong statements favoring death over life in servitude, while glossing over Josephus's descriptions of the men's initial objections or their slaughtering of their wives and children and then themselves, similarly helps distance the image of that collective death.[62]

From the late 1940s to the 1960s, Israelis continued the prestate emphasis on the spirit of active heroism and displayed a strong trend of denial in relation to the Holocaust. The glorification of the Masada heroes' readiness to fight to the bitter end was intimately connected to the role of Masada as a counter-Holocaust model. The marginalization or suppression of the suicide within this activist commemoration thus went hand in hand with the suppression of the Holocaust in Israel during those years. Israeli writers avoided dealing with the subject. Israeli public schools devoted little attention to the discussion of the Holocaust.[63] Hebrew textbooks written during the 1950s and 1960s avoided direct condemnation of the victims' behavior, but their enthusiastic glorification of armed resistance contained clear expressions of their otherwise critical approach to the victims' behavior.[64] The Holocaust seemed to affirm what Zionist education had claimed, that the future belonged to the national revival in the Land of Israel; Jewish life in exile could lead only to death and destruction.

In the first decade following the foundation of the state, the reluctance to embrace the Holocaust as part of Israeli collective memory was clearly manifested in the commemorative domain. Only in 1953 did the Israeli parliament (the Knesset) pass a resolution establishing the Yad Va-Shem (Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority) and a fixed day for the Holocaust commemoration, and six more years elapsed before it passed a law making observance of this memorial day mandatory and thereby an integral part of Israeli public life.[65]

While the establishment of a special day devoted to collective commemoration of the Holocaust indicates a recognition of the special significance of this event, the double focus of this commemoration articulates the Israeli ambivalence toward the Holocaust during those years. Official references to the commemoration of "the Holocaust and the ghetto uprising," "the Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day," or "the Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day" (*Yom ha-Sho'a veha-Gevura*, as it was even-

tually called), maintained a dual classification that marked armed resistance to the Nazis as "heroic" and lumped all other aspects of the Jewish experience under the label "Holocaust." Holocaust thus became the "nonheroic" category.

During those years Israeli collective memory showed a clear tendency to commemorate the "heroic" aspects of the Holocaust and suppress the "nonheroic" past. The establishment of the memorial day on the twenty-seventh of the Hebrew month of Nisan (i.e. close to the anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising) made the uprising the focal point of the commemoration. The reference to the partisans and the ghetto fighters as the "Zionist" or "Hebrew" youth (while referring to other Holocaust victims as "Jews") reinforced this attitude.[66] Israeli society thus embraced the ghetto uprisings and the partisans' fight as part of the Holocaust past with which it identified and which it eagerly glorified. The partisans and the ghetto rebels were symbolically separated from the Holocaust and Exile to serve as a symbolic bridge to modern Israel. Along with Masada and Tel Ḥai they became part of Israel's heroic past. Conversely, the rest of the Holocaust experience was relegated to Exile and associated with the "Other," the submissive exilic Jew.

During the first years of the state, the commemoration of Masada as a model of active heroism and a countermetaphor for the Holocaust continued. Yet as Israeli society began to undergo major changes from the late 1960s on, its attitude toward the Holocaust and Masada has been transformed, as we shall see in chapter 11.

During the formative years of Israeli society, the memory of the suicide at Masada was silenced in the activist discourse. Much of the interest in the site and the propagation of rituals around it stemmed from the premise that Masada would reinforce the youth's patriotism and the value of active heroism. These rituals were instrumental in the activist interpretation of Masada and its emphasis on the spirit of active heroism and fighting to the bitter end, affirming the marginality of the suicide to this commemorative narrative.