

# Recollecting Masada

## Archaeology, Nationalism and Symbolism at the Yigael Yadin Museum at Masada

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May 2007 heralded the opening of the Yigael Yadin Museum at Masada, Israel. This private museum was conceptualized and funded by the Shuki Levy Foundation. Levy, an Israeli-born producer and musician, best known for his involvement in the *Power Rangers* franchise, spearheaded the creation of the museum to stand as a “tribute to the Jewish Rebels who gave their life in the name of freedom”<sup>1</sup> and to house the archaeological materials uncovered at the site, which was excavated in 1963-64 by Yigael Yadin, a notable Israeli archaeologist and politician. Levy, inspired by the “dedication and passion in [the] eyes” of the volunteers that he had seen at Masada while visiting a few years prior, further promoted his ideals of Masada in his musical, “Imagine This.”<sup>2</sup> Initially, Levy composed a musical score entitled “Masada,” and was later approached by Beth Trachtenberg, an American producer, who wanted to use it for a musical. One of the writers working on the proposed musical’s story suggested the Masada story be framed within a more recent narrative involving the

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<sup>1</sup> The Yigael Yadin Museum at Masada, “About the Museum,” Shuki Levy Productions, [http://www.imaginethismusical.com/masada\\_about.shtml](http://www.imaginethismusical.com/masada_about.shtml) (accessed November 28, 2007; site now discontinued). Please note that as of March 2008, the “Imagine This” website only advertises the musical, which reopened in November 2008 on Broadway in New York. While the museum is still open, little online presence can be found besides a brief note on Shuki Levy’s personal website ([www.shukilevy.com](http://www.shukilevy.com)).

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Freeman, “New Masada Museum Launched at Desert Fortress Site,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 5, 2007, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1178198616282&pagename=JPost%2FJPostArticle%2FShowFull> (accessed November 28, 2007).

Warsaw ghetto during World War II.<sup>3</sup> Says Levy, “I wanted to write the Masada story but everyone said we needed to bring it up to modern times. But then the more I thought about it, the more parallels I saw between the Romans and the Nazis. It could have happened this way.”<sup>4</sup> Levy’s personal motivations were, as he related them to journalist Norman Lebrecht, to demonstrate the continuity of evil and “stop the world repeating the mistakes of the past.”<sup>5</sup>

Levy’s interest in the commemoration of the events at Masada is only the most recent attempt in a series of nationalistic narratives developed around this ancient tragedy. Yigael Yadin’s excavations at Masada supported the dramatic account, as told by Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, of the rebellion of Jewish zealots against Roman occupation and their subsequent suicide in the face of defeat. Masada was thereupon heavily promoted as an Israeli national symbol, to the extent that recruits to the Israeli army, standing atop the Masada Mountain itself, swore to prevent another such occurrence.

The celebration of Masada as “a symbol of courage, a monument to great national fighters, heroes who chose death over a life of physical and moral serfdom,”<sup>6</sup> is an example of the power of psychological symbols rooted in physical objects for the creation of a national identity. Following the 1963-64 excavations of Masada, the site’s status as a national symbol has grown, yet to understand this growth it is necessary first to discuss the impact of archaeology on the formation of national identity. The enduring resonance of Masada sheds light on the ways through which such symbols are circulated over time and through institutions. Symbols are not static. They are developed in ways that redefine the past for use in the present,<sup>7</sup> and they must change in order to meet the needs of their present holders or they become meaningless. The messages of Masada have been shaped through the scientific

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<sup>3</sup> Norman Lebrecht, “This is One Musical Too Far,” *The Lebrecht Weekly, La Scena Musicale*, November 5, 2008, <http://www.scena.org/columns/lebrecht/081105-NL-musical.html> (accessed March 18, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Lebrecht interviewed Levy four days before the Broadway opening of “Imagine This.”

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod Fortress and the Zealot’s Last Stand* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Schwartz et al., “The Recovery of Masada: A Study in Collective Memory,” *Sociological Quarterly* 27 (1986): 150.

discourse of archaeology and by dramatic narratives in order to resonate in the “collective memory” of the Israeli people. Maurice Halbwachs defines collective memory as the memories of a shared past that are preserved and experienced by a specific group; these memories are socially constructed to meet the needs of different groups within a society.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the revitalization of the Masada experience through the construction of a new museum at the site is an attempt to stem Israel’s growing disillusionment with its national identity by refurbishing the Masada narrative in collective memory.



*Masada from the east. Photo by Avinoam Michaeli.*

### **Events at Masada: Past Meets Present**

The site of Masada was originally a mountaintop fortress built by Herod early in the first century CE. It was designed as a potential refuge for the royal family during times of political upheaval. During the Great Revolt of 66 CE, a Jewish uprising against Roman rule, 967 members of the Sicarii sect took over Masada and resisted the Roman forces for three years. The members of the Sicarii sect were considered assassins and garnered their name, “Sicarii,” from the particular type of knives that they carried, a *sica*. Josephus Flavius, a contemporary Jewish-Roman historian, recorded the events of the siege, in his work *The Jewish War*, around 75 CE. His moving narrative of the fall of Masada in 73 CE has

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<sup>8</sup> Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 272.

resonance in the psyche of Israel's national cause today. All but seven of the Sicarii chose death over defeat at the Romans' hands. Men put their own families to death and then killed one another down to the last man.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the dramatic imagery of Josephus' account, the events at Masada were nearly forgotten for the next two thousand years – no mention of it is made in the Talmud or in any other sacred text, nor have the events been commemorated in a holiday.<sup>10</sup> Josephus' account is the only source that records the events, and even it may be apocryphal. More importantly, since Josephus' account does not portray the events at Masada in a heroic light, why then has it become such a positive history? Today, Masada captures the essence of Israel's national values and has an identity that has been carefully shaped to meet the sociopolitical needs of the state.

One of the most important moments in Masada's creation as a national symbol was the archaeological excavations of 1963-64, overseen by Yigael Yadin.<sup>11</sup> These excavations were a part of the increasing popularity of Israeli-run archaeology since the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. Philip Kohl outlines certain features of Israeli archaeology that made it distinct, namely: the high state significance accorded to it, the popular interest surrounding it, and the selectivity of the excavations, which focused on reconstructing continuity from the Iron Age to Roman times.<sup>12</sup> In order to better understand the importance of archaeology to the State of Israel, we must consider the implications of archaeology on identity, both politically and culturally. For Kohl, the process of nationalism requires the elaboration of a real or invented past that is often rediscovered or invented through the use of symbols, myths, and material remains.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 32-38.

<sup>10</sup> Schwartz et al., 148.

<sup>11</sup> For an inspiring personal account of the excavations, see Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealot's Last Stand*.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Kohl, "Nationalism and Archaeology: On the Constructions of Nations and the Reconstructions of the Remote Past," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27 (1998): 238.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 225.

Demands for national independence generally involve the assertion of the right to sovereignty based on ethnic or cultural distinctiveness and historical precedence.<sup>14</sup> The importance of a naturalized culture is apparent, as Margarita Diaz-Andreu's study of the events following the French Revolution has shown. France's conception of itself as a group transformed from a body under the control of a sovereign to that of a body united by a shared culture.<sup>15</sup> Yet, a unified group, defined by culture, has a more powerful claim to self-government when it is based on pre-existing historical and territorial models. National archaeology possesses the power to define a culture and establish the continuity between past and present manifestations. Early archaeology theorist Gordon Childe argues that the essence of culture, which preceded the group and defined its character, is condensed in a concrete form – that is, material culture.<sup>16</sup> When a cultural identity is portrayed as a whole, with a linear and continuous history stretching from the distant past to present day, the group identity, now established as an innate part of the nation, is used as an arbitrator in discussions of the political autonomy and territory.<sup>17</sup> Material culture does not necessarily define a group's identity inasmuch as the group reinterprets the symbolism of the material culture. Other disciplines outside of archaeology can interpret the significance of objects within their social context; archaeologists, however, work with a limited view of the social context, and in the case of the complete lack of literary sources explaining the significance and context, they must recreate these things for the objects.<sup>18</sup> The interpretation of the archaeological record can then be seen as a process of creative interpretation.

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<sup>14</sup> Sian Jones and Paul Graves-Brown, "Introduction: Archaeology and Cultural Identity in Europe," in *Cultural Identity and Archaeology: The Construction of European Communities*, ed. P. Graves-Brown, S. Jones, and C. Gamble (London: Routledge, 1996), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Margarita Diaz-Andreu, "Constructing Identities Through Culture: The Past in the Forging of Europe," in *Cultural Identity and Archaeology: The Construction of European Communities* (see note 14), 48-53.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Sian Jones, "Discourses of Identity in the Interpretation of the Past," in *Cultural Identity and Archaeology: The Construction of European Communities* (see note 14), 62.

<sup>18</sup> Shaun Hides, "The Genealogy of Material Culture and Cultural Identity," in *Cultural Identity and Archaeology: The Construction of European Communities* (see note 14), 25.

It was Yadin's explicit goal to uncover support for Josephus' account of the events at Masada, which indeed the excavations did.<sup>19</sup> This scientific confirmation of Josephus' account consolidated the mythical narrative of the events at Masada. The appeal of Masada was suited to the ideological movement of the time. Against the backdrop of internal and external conflicts, archaeology not only provided the proof of a Jewish presence in the past, but it also supplied the symbols used to help consolidate the state.<sup>20</sup> In a discussion concerning the development of Israeli archaeology over time, Israeli archaeologists Ofer Bar-Yosef and Amihai Mazar highlight the fact that the practice of archaeology has flourished since the state's formation in 1948.<sup>21</sup> Although they attest to the undeniable role archaeology has played in state formation, strengthening Israel's claim to a heritage rooted in the land, they do not mention the violent conflict and opposition to the consolidation of an Israeli state, which made such acts like highly nationalized archaeology – emphasizing the historic right of Israeli occupation – not only important, but crucial to the young nation's longevity.

The declaration of Israel as a state was followed by what the Israelis call the War of Independence, and what the Palestinians refer to as “the disaster.”<sup>22</sup> On account of this war, Israel was less of a “young nation searching for its origins”<sup>23</sup> and more of a nation seeking political legitimacy on the world stage. In many respects, the excavations established the birth of the Jewish nation in Palestine during the ancient past, a nation destroyed by war but now reconstituted in present day. What is more, Nachman Ben-Yehuda, one of the most prominent voices questioning the legitimacy of the Masada narrative, mentions that the final results of the excavations were only published in 1991, suggesting that the importance of

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<sup>19</sup> Yadin, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Ben-Yehuda, 236.

<sup>21</sup> Ofer Bar-Yosef and Amihai Mazar, “Israeli Archaeology,” *World Archaeology* 13 (1982): 322.

<sup>22</sup> Kirsten Schulze, *The Arab Israeli Conflict* (New York: Longman, 1999), 13.

<sup>23</sup> Bar-Yosef & Mazar, 310.

archaeology at Masada was to promote the ideological meanings of the symbol, rather than the objective scientific findings.<sup>24</sup>

Yadin cultivated the symbol of Masada and often emphasized emotional motifs, downplaying archaeological facts in his public lectures in favour of reinforcing vivid images. His excavations have been considered as much an exercise in “patriotic inspiration” as scientific research.<sup>25</sup> An illustrated account of the excavations, containing personal memories and anecdotes, was published almost thirty years before the actual site analysis. Moreover, the attention Yadin garnered from his promotions of the Masada message helped him to enter the world of politics, reaching the position of Deputy Prime Minister in 1977.<sup>26</sup>

## Symbolism and Collective Memory

To borrow from archaeologist Nadia Abu El-Haj’s argument regarding the impact of archaeology on national identity, archaeology not only uncovers, but also creates, material culture, the context of which has been imagined through the concrete, and thus the narratives produced by archaeologists carry the weight of scientific discourse.<sup>27</sup> Material culture acts as proof of origin, it is the historical link of a people to a territory and it is manifested in tangible, concrete symbols. The key symbols of a society’s material culture speak to the feelings and emotions of the group. In her discussion on symbols in Israel’s national identity, Middlebury University geography professor Dr. Tamar Mayer typifies the symbolism of the State of Israel into two categories: religious images and artifacts, and images that represent the

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<sup>24</sup> Ben-Yehuda, 61. See also Neil Silberman, *A Prophet from Amongst You. The Life of Yigael Yadin: Solider, Scholar, and Mythmaker of Modern Israel* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 288.

<sup>25</sup> Silberman, 288-9.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Silberman’s biography covers Yadin’s life from boyhood to death.

<sup>27</sup> Nadia Abu El-Haj, “Translating Truths: Nationalism, the Practice of Archaeology, and the Remaking of Past and Present in Contemporary Jerusalem,” *American Ethnologist* 25 (1998): 179.

experiences and accomplishments of the Zionist project.<sup>28</sup> These can be further broken down into representations of time and place, both of which are mythologized through the creation of a national narrative. Reviving heroes of the past and commemorating sites where heroic events took place can create a link between the memories of the past and experiences of the present day. Through archaeology, key symbols that speak to the feelings and emotions of a group have been developed selectively for the promotion of a unified Israeli nation.<sup>29</sup> Masada works as a symbol in both of Mayer's categories: Masada's striking physicality, a golden mountain that stands out against the Dead Sea and the surrounding desert covered by physical remnants of the Jewish occupation, and its emotive qualities, invoking the tragic narrative and the ultimate act of defiance – suicide over slavery. With this in mind, it is not surprising that pilgrimages to Masada became increasingly popular following Yadin's excavations, as pilgrimages to sacred sites throughout Israel became a particularly important way in which many Israelis reacquaint themselves with the land.<sup>30</sup>

It is useful to reflect upon this using George Herbert Mead's theory of the past, in which he argues that a society's conception of its past involves a redefinition of past events that have meaning in the present, as well as possessing a practical value for problem solving in the present.<sup>31</sup> In order to dispel various messages to the collective imagination, different political groups have used the symbolism of Masada. When Masada was first recalled to the public attention in 1927 with Yitzhak Lamdan's poem "Masada," it served as a symbol of a Jewish life, emphasizing solidarity, integration, and commitment in a period when emigration exceeded immigration by a ratio of almost 200:1.<sup>32</sup> During the period of state

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<sup>28</sup> Tamar Mayer, "National Symbols in Jewish Israel: Representation and Collective Memory," in *National Symbols, Fractured Identities*, ed. M. Geisler (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2005), 4-8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ben-Yehuda, 188.

<sup>31</sup> Schwartz et al., 160.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* Schwartz cites large selections of Lamdan's poem, including the now well-known maxim, "Never again shall Masada fall!" This, however, may have been an ironic statement by Lamdan. The heroic tone of defiance is followed by the line "Sober Awakening" – the harsh light of day, juxtaposed with the dreaming and fantasy of nighttime, fate cannot be



formation, Masada was revamped, with notably less emphasis on the suicide of the Sicarii in favour of highlighting the optimistic determinism that led the rebels to a patriotic death. In this way, the narrative of the events – imbued with mythic elements of heroic self-sacrifice – became an element of ongoing national rebirth.<sup>33</sup>

Alternatively, this commemorative narrative, which supports an active, heroic role, has given way in more recent decades to a markedly more tragic role, drawing similarities between the events at Masada and the Holocaust. Responding to the Yom Kippur War of 1973, in which Israel suffered alarming losses of life and military confidence, this narrative became a precautionary tale, invoking a need for future generations to prevent such traumas in the future.<sup>34</sup> Generally, Masada has become a symbol for Israeli national identity by forging a concept of Israeli values and place, and as a reference point from which to reflect present ideologies onto the past and back again.

Masada's potency as a symbol rests in its ability to evoke a response in the collective memory of Israeli citizens. This collective memory is shaped by shared experiences within the group. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argues that the modern nation-state grows more through these experiences, what he considers a shared "reading" of cultural symbols as media (à la Benedict Anderson's print capitalism), than through natural facts, such as language, blood, or race.<sup>35</sup> Masada is more powerful as a psychological symbol than as a physical one, yet the fact that it functions on both levels makes it a double-edged sword. In keeping with Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*,<sup>36</sup> Masada embodies a memorial consciousness. As an object of

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denied. The tone of Lamdan's reality is one of defeat. Critics point out that the poem makes no progression; Lamdan does not merge past and present, but leaves them to "gnaw at each other until they are both lifeless." See page 155.

<sup>33</sup> Yael Zerubavel, "The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors," *Representations* 45 (1994): 76.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>35</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 161.

<sup>36</sup> "A *lieux de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time, has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community." Pierre Nora, "From *lieux de mémoire* to Realms of

collective memory, it negotiates between extant historical records and current sociopolitical agendas.<sup>37</sup> If the collective experience is developed through receptiveness to media, Appardurai's shared reading of messages and symbols, then the messages disseminated through institutions such as archaeological museums have an impact on the shared experience through the interpretation of the material culture they house. Considering the role archaeology has played in creating a national identity and cultural heritage, it is not surprising that the word "national" is often added to institutions connected with archaeology.<sup>38</sup>

An understanding of the power of museums to define national identity has been developed by art historians and archaeologists alike.<sup>39</sup> Carol Duncan argues, in her discussion of museums as purveyors of identity, that those who understand the power of the symbols and how to manipulate them are better able to define a national identity in keeping with a political ideology. The objects displayed promote national identities or may come to represent the nation itself. Interestingly, the basis for a national archaeology museum coincides with declaration of statehood, not only in the case of Israel in 1948, but similarly upon the foundation of an independent Greek state in 1834, with the first archaeological law calling for the establishment of a "Central Public Museum for Antiquity."<sup>40</sup> Archaeological museums function as a site where the nationalistic narrative developed around the material remains can be disseminated. Just as archaeology acts as a means by which Israelis can become reacquainted with their past,<sup>41</sup> so too can museums negotiate a similar relationship

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Memory," in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, Vol. 1: Conflicts and Divisions*, ed. Pierre Nora and L. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xvii.

<sup>37</sup> Zerubavel, 73.

<sup>38</sup> Diaz-Andreu, 53.

<sup>39</sup> See Carol Duncan, "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship" in *Exhibiting Cultures*, ed. I. Karp and S. Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990); Magen Broshi, "Archaeological Museums in Israel: Reflections on Problems of National Identity" in *Museums and the Making of "Ourselves": The Role of Objects in National Identity*, ed. F. Kaplan (London: Leicester University Press, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> Maria Avgouli, "The First Greek Museums and National Identity," in *Museums and the Making of "Ourselves": The Role of Objects in National Identity* (see note 39), 254.

<sup>41</sup> Broshi, 324.

between people and their national narratives. Museums are a medium through which ideological messages can pass into collective memory.

## The Yigael Yadin Museum at Masada

In the light of archaeology as national symbols and museums as symbolic media, what questions arise regarding the new Yigael Yadin Museum at Masada? In what capacity is Masada functioning as a narrative and as a symbol? The joint website advertising both the museum and Shuki Levy's musical "Imagine This" makes blatant comparisons between the events at Masada the Holocaust.<sup>42</sup> In a promotional article published on Israeli tourism site "Go Israel," Masada Museum curator Gila Hurvitz and designer Eliav Nahlieli described the museum as an experience that "invites the visitor to become one with the amazing story of Masada."<sup>43</sup> Interplay between the background atmosphere, which conjures up the ancient fortress, architectural elements, and life groups enacting daily routines, the audio narrative that visitors listen to on headsets with songs from the musical,<sup>44</sup> and brightly lit artifacts from Yadin's excavations, the museum creates an emotional experience for its visitors. The self-proclaimed "theatric atmosphere" is designed to allow for the imagination to "take flight," however, upon examination, the museum's message is hardly unbiased.<sup>45</sup> I shall discuss how the Masada narrative that the museum furthers utilizes multiple interpretations of the symbol of the historic revolt on Masada, combining different types of commemorative narratives. This form of tragic/historic commemoration not only emphasizes the continuity between the past and present while arguing the Israeli's right to land, but also indirectly addresses the disillusionment present in many younger Israelis today.

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<sup>42</sup> As previously noted, the "Imagine This" website now only advertises the musical. While the museum is still open, little presence can be found online at

<http://imaginethisthemusical.com/>. For a candid opinion of the musical, see Lebrecht.

<sup>43</sup> Gila Hurvitz and Eliav Nahlieli, "The Masada Museum in Memory of Yigael Yadin: A Museological Experience Funded by the Shuki Levy Foundation," Go Israel, Attractions, [http://www.goisrael.com/Tourism\\_Eng/Articles/Attractions/The+Masada+Museum](http://www.goisrael.com/Tourism_Eng/Articles/Attractions/The+Masada+Museum) (accessed November 28, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> See <http://www.shukilevy.com> for clips of the Masada soundtrack.

<sup>45</sup> Hurvitz & Nahlieli, "The Masada Museum in Memory of Yigael Yadin."



*The Yigael Yadin Museum at Masada showcases artifacts amongst life groups to create a theatric atmosphere, allowing visitors to “imagine” what it would have been like during the revolt.*



*Photos by Avinoam Michaeli.*

## Messages at Masada

Zerubavel distinguished between two types of commemoration of Masada: activist and tragic.<sup>46</sup> The activist narrative emphasizes symbols representing the events at Masada, such as the rebels’ resistance and suicide, a fight for freedom, and a patriotic death. At Masada, the act of suicide was downplayed and instead the rebels were depicted as dying with weapons in hand, a key image in the ideology of the pre-State period. The tragic commemoration of Masada, however, developed after World War II with the

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<sup>46</sup> Zerubavel, 75-86.

commemoration and social healing following the devastation of the Holocaust. This narrative blurred the lines between “heroes” and “victims,” making the suicide at Masada an act of defiance. Both the Holocaust and Masada are symbols of death and destruction, an end but also a beginning. The heroic cry “Masada shall never fall again!” from Lamdan’s 1927 poem is engraved on medals struck by the Israeli government, written on stamps,<sup>47</sup> and heard (at least until 1991) from the mouths of soldiers from the Israeli armoured units during their swearing in ceremony atop Masada.<sup>48</sup>

The museum website describes itself as a tribute to those who gave their lives for freedom at Masada, effectively encompassing both commemorative narratives:

It is a symbol of the ancient kingdom of Israel, its violent destruction, and the last stand of Jewish patriots.... It is there, atop this mountain, that a group of Jewish rebels called the Sicarii took the ultimate stand against the Romans, choosing suicide over submitting to enslavement by the Roman army. The rebels’ choice for freedom resonates deeply with Jews today, and with their plight throughout modern history. To most Israelis, Masada also symbolizes the resolve of the Jewish people to live freely in their chosen homeland.<sup>49</sup>

The wording recalls both active and tragic styles, emphasizing the “last stand” and “the ultimate stand,” rather than “submitting to enslavement.” The suicide here is portrayed as a “choice for freedom,” an act that coincides with present Israeli’s desire to live in their rightful homeland. The suicide is a tragic symbol that negotiates between the past and the present, connecting the desires of present day Israelis with those of their ancestors. This dramatic description of Masada is in keeping with the mythologizing narratives. Even the museum designer, Nahlieli, points out that the narrative used in the museum is more like “storytelling” than educational instruction. He states that “good storytelling is the basis of the

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<sup>47</sup> Yadin, 203.

<sup>48</sup> Ben-Yehuda, 153

<sup>49</sup> The Yigael Yadin Museum, “About the Museum.”

visitor's curiosity,"<sup>50</sup> which suggests that historical criticism regarding the events at Masada is not on the agenda.

Not only are these two types of commemorative narratives suggested by the museum's own description on the website and in Hurvitz and Nahlieli's article, but also in Levy's musical, "Imagine This." The museological experience at Masada is enhanced with the "radio-play" of songs from "Imagine This," Levy's musical that tells the story of a group of actors who perform a love story set in Masada while interned in a Warsaw ghetto. While the story of Masada is doomed to an unhappy ending, the tale of the Jewish actors is an optimistic one, a message that the musical's tag line expresses: "Love grows in the most unexpected places."<sup>51</sup> The lyrics embody the same messages, both activist and tragic, as the museum's mission statement. In the song "Masada," ideals of freedom and making a stand for one's home are apparent in such phrases as "Masada! We'll not surrender/ You'll be our defender [...] You stand for freedom/ And we stand with you [...] We will live your lesson/ And our hearts will soar [...] We will leave no more." There is more of a tragic element in "I am the Dove," in which there are such images as the dove of peace searching for "[...] A place to call... home," a home "blood red and deathly still but for the smoke left from the battle." The memory of such defeat is implied as resonating ("I will never forget and the memory will live till the last has sun set").<sup>52</sup> The plot of the musical pulls together two episodes that have been commemorated and integrated into the collective memory of the Israeli people: the dramatic narrative of Masada as well as the oppression of Jews in World War II and the Holocaust.

Indeed, Hurvitz and Nahlieli assert that the goal of the experience at the new museum is for the visitor to "become one" with the Masada narrative. The on-line museum shop sells "genuine replica[s] certified by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem" of actual

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<sup>50</sup> Freeman, "New Masada Museum Launched at Desert Fortress Site."

<sup>51</sup> "Imagine This The Musical" home page, [www.imaginethisthemusical.com](http://www.imaginethisthemusical.com) (accessed March 20, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> "Imagine This The Musical," <http://www.imaginethisthemusical.com> (accessed November 28, 2007; lyrics for "Masada" and "I Am the Dove" now discontinued).

objects uncovered by Yadin's excavations.<sup>53</sup> Visitors can “wear a piece of history” with the mosaic scarf, light their way with an oil lamp, or keep their office organized with a miniature Masada mountain paper-weight emblazoned with the phrase “Let no man be another man's slave.” The marketing of the Masada image is ironic considering earlier ideological interpretations. Author Avarahm Yehoshua wrote in 1973 that Masada is a “mobile mountain which we carry on our back anywhere we go,”<sup>54</sup> and now, for \$14.99 USD, visitors can carry the mobile mountain away in their backpacks. Archaeological material is presented to museum visitors and stands as scientific proof that the events Josephus recorded are genuine. Certified replicas are then presented to the visitor upon leaving the museum (for a price) in an overt attempt to create a bridge between the physical mountain and the psychological symbolism, while also reinforcing the message of the past in order to impact the future.

The need for the tragic symbol of Masada was most apparent during state formation, particularly while Israel suffered from a siege mentality as it sought to constitute and consolidate itself as a nation. According to Ben-Yehuda, a healthy society does not require such frightening symbols, like the fall of Masada, for self-identity.<sup>55</sup> Recent attitudes in Israel suggest, however, similar demands in terms of symbolism. In July 2006, Israeli air raids launched against the radical Islamist group Hezbollah bombed many sites in Lebanon. These air raids set off a series of tensions that David Remnick documented in his 2007 interview with former Speaker of the Knesset, Avaraham Burg. Although now seen as a traitor and a wild card for radical leftist political views, Burg described Israel as “Holocaust-obsessed, militaristic, xenophobic, and . . . vulnerable to a minority.”<sup>56</sup> Some laud his ability to say what many are hesitant to say, that more and more Israelis are becoming disillusioned with

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<sup>53</sup> The Yigael Yadin Museum, Online Store, Shuki Levy Productions, <http://www.imaginethismusical.com/store.shtml> (accessed November 28, 2007; site now discontinued).

<sup>54</sup> Zerubavel, 72.

<sup>55</sup> Ben-Yehuda, 291.

<sup>56</sup> David Remnick, “The Apostate: A Zionist Politician Loses Faith in the Future,” *The New Yorker*, July 30, 2007.

their government and are choosing to reside abroad. This statement is supported by a recent report indicating that emigration has exceeded immigration in Israel for the first time in twenty years and that a majority of young Israelis are considering life abroad.<sup>57</sup>

The new school of historians in twenty-first-century Israel supports a critical approach, while Masada has lost its impact as a symbol and now serves the commercial tourism industry.<sup>58</sup> It is possible that large-scale productions, such as the joint musical and museum in honour of Masada, are aiming for commercial viability, however, the honours awarded to Levy by the Israeli government for his contribution to the museum suggest something else. Levy has now become the “Guardian of Masada,”<sup>59</sup> taking up the torch Yadin once carried as “Mr. Masada” for publicly promoting ideological narrative through his excavations. Interestingly, the museum visit begins with a room dedicated to Josephus Flavius and ends with one dedicated to archaeologist Yadin, furnished with a sculpted version of the man hunched over a desk, busy at work. The experience at the museum, and of Masada itself, is framed by the two men who are responsible for furthering the Masada mythical narrative that exists today: Josephus, the only contemporary writer to record the events is often accused of creating or interpreting them for his own political purposes,<sup>60</sup> and Yadin, the archaeologist whose excavations offered proof that Josephus’ account was accurate and whose name publicly became so connected to Masada that Levy’s museum stands as a tribute both to Yadin and Masada.

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<sup>57</sup> *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, “Emigration from Israel exceeds immigration,” April 20, 2007, <http://stlouis.ujcfedweb.org/page.aspx?id=144274> (accessed March 18, 2009).

<sup>58</sup> Ben-Yehuda, 255.

<sup>59</sup> Imagine This The Musical, “Imagine This’ World Premiere Concert at Masada,” Imagine This News and Press, Shuki Levy productions, <http://www.imaginethismusical.com/news13.shtml> (accessed November 28, 2007; article now discontinued).

<sup>60</sup> See David Karl Gnuse, *Dreams and Dream Reports in the writings of Josephus* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 8. Gnuse sums up arguments on Josephus’ ideological agenda, which supported both the punitive actions by the Romans and Josephus’ own course of action as a Roman general in the war. According to Josephus, if God willed Rome to rule the world, then in revolting, the Jews were rebelling against God, and thus the calamity experienced was the fault of Jewish revolutionaries.



As the new “Mr. Masada,” how will Levy’s narrative, shaped both through the museum and the musical, affect Israeli collective memory? If Masada is nothing more than commercial tourism, a brand name printed on mosaic motif scarf boxes, then what can be said regarding the hundreds of thousands of tourists that ascend Masada every year? The numbers of tourists are increasing enough to necessitate a multi-million dollar investment from the Israeli Government and Nature and Parks Authority to increase accessibility to the site.<sup>61</sup> The Masada narrative has been shaped to meet the needs of the political ideology of the time by emphasizing the elements of optimistic determinism and fighting for one’s home. Israel has used these symbols to promote nationalism in the face of widespread disillusionment. However, Masada itself is a symbol of an end, and disillusionment with Masada may be indicative of experiences in the collective memory. Despite the story’s tragic climax, the fall of Masada is anything but climactic; it was considered a clean-up operation at the end of the Jewish War. The messages of Masada, whether activist, tragic, or a combination of the two, are still important to many people. Through visitors’ exposure to these messages, by means of institutions such as the Yigael Yadin Museum at Masada, the symbol may be reconstituted in a meaningful way.

**\*\*Media Editor’s Note:** Any errors of information omission that remain result from the original publication and not this transcription.

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<sup>61</sup> Freeman (see note 2).