

The Masada complex

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View from Masada 311

In 1927, poet Yitzhak Lamdan wrote Masada, a poem glorifying the heroism and self-reliance of the early Zionist movement. The poem helped transform the remote hilltop fortress, largely forgotten since the writings of the Roman-Jewish historian Josephus, into an enduring symbol of the young State of Israel. Lamdan's most famous line, "never again shall Masada fall," became a rallying cry for a generation of Israeli soldiers who repeated these words in countless inauguration ceremonies. But there is another meaning of the Masada fable: that compromise is intolerable. Masada was

the last chapter in a bloody and self-destructive campaign that started during the siege of Jerusalem. The Zealots refused to negotiate with the vastly superior Roman Army, turned against those Jews who sought compromise and later burned the food stocks of their compatriots in a misguided effort to motivate resistance. At every turn, the Zealots refused to alter their course of action. As Jerusalem stood in ruin, its temple sacked, a handful of surviving Zealots, led by Elazar ben Yair, fled to Masada. They held out for three years as the Romans laid siege. When defeat was inevitable, ben Yair gathered the survivors. Josephus recorded his rousing words: "I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God has granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely and in a state of freedom." The account of the carnage that followed is quite vivid: husbands cut the throats of their wives and children and then proceeded to kill themselves. Nine hundred and sixty men, women and children died. But not all of ben Yair's followers were moved by the prospects of mass suicide. The seven survivors who provided Josephus with their accounts of the slaughter are a testament to this. According to Josephus, ben Yair "cut [debate] off short and made haste to do the work, as full of an unconquerable ardor of mind, and moved with a demoniacal fury." Despite dissent, ben Yair would not "think of flying away" nor would he "permit any one else to do so." Masada was a historical dead end for the Zealots, but not for Zealotry, which remains alive in Israel today. Netanyahu's hard-line policies undermine the wellbeing of the state and its citizens, much as Elazar ben Yair's actions did on the top of Masada. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's ceaseless policy of annexing Palestinian land to expand the settlements not only saps valuable state resources, which are desperately needed to provide good jobs and housing in

Israel proper, but also needlessly endangers the lives of Israeli soldiers who are charged with protecting the increasingly unprotectable. With every further encroachment into Palestinian land, the route of the separation barrier becomes more irrational, following neither internationally recognized boundaries nor those dictated by nature or security. While separation was its goal, today the barrier neither keeps Palestinians out nor Israelis in. But Netanyahu's determination to absorb ever-greater quantities of biblical land comes with an even greater cost. Israel cannot continue to exist as both a Jewish and democratic state as long as it occupies millions of West Bank Palestinians, who are rapidly approaching numerical parity with the Jewish population. To enfranchise them would mean the end of the Jewish state. To continue to deny them full participatory rights, the end of Israel's democratic character. Like ben Yair, Netanyahu is intolerant of dissent, both at home and abroad. Along with his coalition partners, he has managed to alienate important regional allies (Turkey), he has undermined relations with others (the EU, the US), and his government increasingly acts to sideline debate within Israel itself (such as proposed legislation to limit foreign funding for NGOs). The myth that there are no alternatives is easier to sustain when opposing voices are quickly silenced. Netanyahu's most recent pronouncement that Israel will not engage in dialogue with the Palestinians if Hamas joins the PLO is another in a long line of missed opportunities, this time the first chance to speak with a unified Palestinian nationalist movement. Whether with the Palestinians, Israeli civil society, or Israel's allies in the international community, Netanyahu prefers to dictate terms rather than engage in meaningful dialogue. Reminiscent of the Zealots, Netanyahu's refusal to compromise will inevitably lead to the destruction of the State of Israel as we know it. There are alternatives to Netanyahu's

THE STATE OF ISRAEL AS WE KNOW IT. THERE ARE ALTERNATIVES TO NETANYAHU'S stubborn path, just as there were on top of Masada. While the Zealots chose suicide, more pragmatic Jews survived and even thrived. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, for example, negotiated with the Romans, thereby obtaining permission to establish the Academy of Yavneh. It was there that the mishnah was written, the wellspring of rabbinic Judaism that sustained Jewish Diaspora life for two millennia. Israel, former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin once noted, must make peace with its enemies, not with its friends. Netanyahu must shake off his Masada complex, recognize that there is no nobility in self-destruction and open himself up to compromise. A lesser known-line from Lamdan's poem reminds us that Masada has nothing to offer other than mass suicide:

Listen. Masada weeps too. Do you hear? Surely Masada weeps too, and how should she not? . . . She knows that she can give nothing, that she can deliver no more!

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