

THE RECOVERY OF MASADA: A STUDY IN COLLECTIVE MEMORY*

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The battle of Masada in 73 A.D. was one of the least significant and least successful events in ancient Jewish history. Our concern is to understand why, after almost two thousand years of obscurity, this event was suddenly remembered and commemorated by Palestinian Jews. Precipitating the 1927 recovery of Masada was the appearance of a very popular poem which used the ancient battle as an allegory of the Jewish settlers' struggle. By restoring this poem to its social context, and by analyzing both in terms of George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolically reconstructed pasts, this article explains the modern appeal of Masada, then brings it to bear on our general knowledge of collective memory.

It is not the literal past that rules us, save, possibly, in a biological sense. It is images of the past. These are often as highly structured and selective as myths. Images and symbolic constructs of the past are imprinted, almost in the manner of genetic information, on our sensibility. Each new historical era mirrors itself in the picture and active mythology of its past or of a past borrowed from other cultures. It tests its sense of identity, of regress or new achievement, against that past. The echoes by which a society seeks to determine the reach, the logic and authority of its own voice, come from the rear. Evidently, the mechanisms at work are complex and rooted in diffuse but vital needs of continuity. A society requires antecedents. Where these are not naturally at hand, where a community is new or reassembled after a long interval of dispersal or subjection, a necessary past tense to the grammar of being is created by intellectual and emotional fiat.

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Memory of the past is preserved mainly by the chronicling of events and their sequence; however, the events selected for chronicling are not all evaluated in the same way. To some of these events we remain indifferent; other events are commemorated—they are invested with an extraordinary significance and assigned a qualitatively distinct place in our conception of the past. This article is about the social roots of one highly unusual commemorative process, a process that took place in Palestine during the 1920s.

Like other nation-building movements, Zionism has always been aware of the need to establish a sense of continuity with the past through commemoration of great heroes and events. Yet, this “need” does not explain how such mnemonic enterprises are actually accomplished, or explain why some heroes and events are selected for commemoration while others are ignored. The defense of Masada is a case in point.

In 73 A.D., two years after Titus’s Roman army devastated Jerusalem and its Temple, Flavius Silva (Titus’s son) moved against the last remnant of Jewish resistance. The object of Silva’s campaign was Masada, a mountain fortress captured and occupied by a band of about 900 “zealots” after the fall of Jerusalem. The Roman siege was strongly resisted, but defeat was inevitable. To deprive Rome of a military victory, and to save themselves from the humiliation of captivity, Masada’s defenders entered into a suicide pact, which they carried out just before the last walls were breached.

Information on the battle of Masada is based exclusively on Josephus’s (1959) *The Jewish War*. Although written in Aramaic (the language common to the Jews of the period) as well as Greek, this chronicle was for many centuries almost unknown outside the Christian Church. A new version of the war, written by Jossipon in the tenth century, engaged the attention of many individual Jews, but it was not until the twentieth century that the battle of Masada would have a significant impact on the Jewish collective consciousness. No mention is made of Masada in the Talmud, or the Midrash, or in any other sacred text. No holiday has ever commemorated the event. As an object of collective memory, the defense of Masada was “forgotten” for almost two thousand years (Lewis, 1975).

The first manifestations of widespread Jewish interest in Masada coincided with the rise of Zionism during the early decades of the twentieth century. That the memory of Masada was “in the air” at this time is evidenced by the formation of a Masada Society in London, and in Palestine by the translation of Josephus’s chronicle into modern Hebrew. However, the event that most effectively mobilized interest in Masada was the publication in Palestine of a poem by a Ukrainian immigrant, Yitzhak Lamdan. This poem, titled “Masada,” enjoyed immense popularity when it first appeared in 1927, and its many reprintings were accompanied by great fascination with and pilgrimages to the fortress itself (Zerubavel, 1980:27~35). Later, after spectacular archaeological excavations “confirmed” Josephus’s history (Yadin, 1966), Masada was transformed into a state-sponsored cult.

That Masada was suddenly remembered and commemorated is certain, but in light of other nations’ commemorative preferences, there is no obvious reason why it should have been. The events that most nations remember and commemorate are often associated with their origin, a time regarded as sacred because it establishes basic values and institutions (Eliade, 1961, 1963; Shils, 1975; Schwartz, 1982). Sometimes the mature phase of a nation’s history, a time when it is at the peak of its political and economic power, becomes the focus of commemorative activity (Warner, 1959). Sometimes a

nation may choose to give prominent place in its collective memory to eras and events of a negative character, like military defeats, captivity, even catastrophe (Van Woodward, 1960). An ascribed “historical significance” seems to be the one element that these three classes of events have in common. Origin, rise, and fall are remembered and commemorated because they are believed to conspicuously affect the subsequent experience of a people, and because knowledge of these events is deemed essential to making its current situation historically intelligible.

The battle of Masada exhibits none of these features. It possesses no formative significance, as did the Exodus; it does not represent a political peak in Jewish history, as did the kingdoms of David and Solomon, and does not distinguish itself as a negative event. Masada fell in a mopping-up operation that followed an occasion of far greater significance: the defense, fall, and destruction of Jerusalem. Masada’s loss cannot even be regarded as a last gasp in the history of ancient Israel. To the 132-135 A-D. revolt and defeat of Bar Kochba belongs this distinction. Thus, the recall and commemoration of Masada is an exception to the tendency of societies to remember in a way that maximizes collective dignity or that dramatizes significant turning points in the past.

THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF COMMEMORATION

Our concern is to understand why the defense of Masada was remembered and commemorated after two thousand years of obscurity, and why other more heroic phases of the Jewish past were ignored in its favor. As a special case of what Bernard Lewis (1975) calls “recovered history,” the reclaiming of Masada is important to us for what it might add to our general knowledge of collective memory. We take our theoretical departure, therefore, from assumptions first articulated by the two most influential students of collective memory: Maurice Halbwachs and George Herbert Mead.

Society’s understanding of its past, Halbwachs (1941) believed, is always instrumental to the maintenance of present beliefs and values:

If, as we believe, collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past, if it adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present, then a knowledge of the origin of these facts must be secondary, if not altogether useless, for the reality of the past is no longer *in* the past (p. 7. Italics added).

In other words, historical events are worth remembering only when the contemporary society is motivated to define them as such (see also Halbwachs, 1952, 1980).

George Herbert Mead worked independently of Halbwachs, but his theory of the past includes statements that are similar to Halbwachs’s in that they posit a close alignment between historical understandings and present concerns. The direction of emphasis, however, is different. While Halbwachs seeks to show how the present situation affects our perception of the past, Mead’s aim is to understand the use of historical knowledge in interpreting the present. “[T]he significant content which historical research reveals” is in Mead’s view not “the past object as implied in the present [but] a newly discovered present which can only be known and interpreted in the past which it involves” (1935:94). Therefore, a “person has to bring up a certain portion of the past to determine what his present is, and in the same way the community wants to bring up the past so it can state the present situation and bring out what the actual issues themselves are” (Mead, 1938:81).

Mead's second, corresponding, point is that new pasts are most likely to emerge during periods of rapid change. The situations occasioned by this kind of change are destabilizing, but they can be routinized if the past is reconstructed in such a way as to assimilate them into a meaningful flow of events. "The past which we construct from the standpoint of the new problem of today," says Mead (1929:353), "is based upon continuities which we discover in that which has arisen, and it serves us until the rising novelty of tomorrow necessitates a new history...." "Indeed, no society would go to the trouble to reconstruct its past had not some significant problem disrupted its normal pattern of living. As one of Mead's interpreters puts it, "there could be no awareness of any past or the history of anything, if it were not for the sake of understanding how to account for some present experienced phenomenon that obstructs effective action" (Miller, 1973:76; see also Lee, 1963).

Mead's formulation of the past, as David Maines, Noreen Sugrue, and Michael Katovich have recently (1983) shown, comprises other dimensions: a "social structural past," which conditions the experiences found in the present, an "implied objective past," whose obdurate reality is inferred from evidence available in the present, and a "mythical past," purposely created to manipulate present social relationships. This article touches only indirectly on these concerns; its main topic is Mead's formulation of the "symbolically reconstructed past," which involves "redefining the meaning of past events in such a way that they have meaning in and utility for the present" (Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich, 1983:163).

In their effort to explicate the sociological relevance of symbolically reconstructed pasts, Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich consider the "use value" of history in the context of present-day power struggles. As reform groups challenge the policies of local authorities, for example, they "consistently use the tactic of legitimizing their group interests through past accomplishments and then using these accomplishments to frame their present appearances." If there is no such history to draw upon, then it is a simple matter to create one. "Partisan groups that represent community interests and that are not materially powerful can become organized around their own myths that elites take seriously." Utility (of the instrumental sort) is once again brought into the picture: "Elite groups attend to these myths when community organizations establish a past of accomplishment" (1983:170). The construction of a mythical past and the reconstruction of an objective past are thus animated by identical pragmatic interests.

By documenting Mead's belief that pasts are remembered and constructed in ways that meet group needs, and that the kind of past events most useful in this respect are those associated with success, Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich achieve their goal of demonstrating the importance to sociology of Mead's theory of time. The demonstration is a convincing one, and it is convincing because it relies, as it should, on a body of data selected for the purpose of demonstration itself. As we contemplate this achievement, however, we recognize that its supporting data relate to only one kind of memory: the deliberate invocation of a successful past in order to gain or maintain ascendancy in a field of organizational conflict. Other questions, like the ones we now pose, necessarily remain unexplored. What are we to make of the spontaneous invocation of past failure? What is to be said of collective, rather than organizational, memory? Can these questions also be articulated within Mead's framework? As we take up these questions, we extend the scope of the discussion that Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich began.

Directing our attention to the actual conditions and problems of early Palestine, Mead's ideas do take us a long way in our effort to understand the way its Jewish inhabitants perceived their past. Certain aspects of that perception, however, suggest qualifications of Mead's theory. As a "constructive pragmatist," Mead convinced himself that intelligence is a *social* process. He believed that pasts arise in such a way as to enable "intelligent conduct to proceed" against situational problems (1932:xiii, 29). Faced with the topic at hand, therefore, Mead would have asked what it was about Jewish-Palestinian society that made the commemoration of Masada an intelligent act. But to pose the question in this manner is to assume what must be demonstrated, and such a demonstration would be difficult to make convincingly. The spectacle of a small and weak people dwelling fervently on an insignificant trauma in its past, and drawing from that memory as much anxiety as uplift, did not strike us as a very constructive way to "state the present" or to address its problems. This kind of historical mood evokes no image of heroic recovery, implies no positive model for progress, but directs attention mainly to the prospects and consequences of failure.

CURRENT MEANING OF MASADA

The defense of Masada did not appeal to the Palestinian Jews in the 1920s for the same reason that it does appeal to the present generation of Israelis. For this present generation, Masada is a symbol of military valor and national commitment. So far as it represents the determination to survive or die, Masada is a symbolic equivalent to the American Alamo. As Yael Zerubavel (1980:60-148) points out, however, Masada carries with it much more ambivalence. Some Israelis have been bothered by the fact that Masada's defenders did not fight to the death (as did the defenders of Jerusalem two years earlier, or Bar Kochba, 70 years later). Liberal critics, on the other hand, find in the "Masada complex" a stubborn, paranoid style of political thought that impedes prospects for peace (see also Alter, 1973). But these detractors are in a minority. Most Israelis somehow live with their reservations and interpret the mass suicide at Masada as a heroic affirmation of national dignity and will. In this connection, the geopolitical parallels are most salient. Like the besieged and outnumbered defenders of Masada, contemporary Israelis find themselves surrounded by hostile and numerically superior forces. The following statements, assembled by Zerubavel (1980:60, 62, 69), provide some representative perceptions of this analogy:

The courage and the force to fight for the liberation of the country, to live in it and to defend it, have been drawn from Masada.

Masada is first and foremost a symbol. It signifies the stand of a few against the many, the last fight of those who gave their life for political, religious and spiritual freedom and chose death rather than submission.

The above statements were made by men of strong ideological conviction. Popular understandings of Masada's symbolic meaning are expressed less articulately, but they dwell on the same point:

That if there is a war again, they [the soldiers] will prefer to die rather than be captured by others.

This can show the soldiers that this value is very important. To show that the ideal of these people was so important to them that they were ready to sacrifice their lives for it. like today for the country.

They take the story of Masada as an example for anyone who is ready to sacrifice himself for the country, like [the people of] Masada.

They want to show them [the soldiers] an example of heroism. They have to be loyal to their motherland, and to fight until the last drop of blood.

If these statements testify to the appropriateness of Masada as a political symbol for contemporary Israel, one would be hard pressed to draw similar parallels from the situation of Palestine in the 1920s. The Palestinian Jews did face many difficulties, but they did not find themselves in a state of military siege. With the exception of traumatic anti-Jewish "riots" in 1921 and 1929, the 1920s was, in fact, a decade of *relative* tranquility. The absence of significant military preparation or action during this period was ensured by Great Britain, whose power extended over not only Palestine but also those countries on which it bordered. (The exception, Syria, was under French control.) Conspicuous in this setting, it is true, was the emerging defense force, Haganah, and even a military hero (Joseph Trumpeldor [killed by Arabs in a pistol fight at one of the settlements]); but there was no preoccupation with the matter of general conflict. Because of the British presence, along with dominating pacifist sentiments within the Jewish community, early military activities were very small in scale and, in strategy, strictly defensive: they were concerned with the guarding of settlements against "robbery, theft, marauding, murder, and rape" (Allon, 1970:4). Calls for stronger and more aggressive defense units were largely ignored, if not condemned, until Arab enmity became more pronounced in the late 1930s (for details, see Luttwak and Horowitz, 1975:1-14). In short, the conditions of life in the "garrison state" of Israel bear little relation to the realities of early-twentieth-century Palestine. To these two sets of social circumstances correspond two different interpretations of the past.

METHOD

How was the collective memory of Palestine's Jewish settlers shaped by their immediate circumstances? To answer this question we will rely mainly on one source of data: Yitzhak Lamdan's poem, "Masada."² This poem is not a *via regia*, or privileged route, to the Jews' conception of their past. What the poem says about that conception would probably be qualified by what other sources, like a representative survey of attitudes, would say about it. In the absence of such a survey, however, the poem's value should not be underestimated. It can be relied on not only because it shows how one literate man felt about his community and his past but also because it describes, by design, the feelings and reactions of the community at large. And if the observation itself may be unique, plausible methodological grounds warrant its consideration. According to Lewis Coser (1963:2-3), the trained sensibilities of the literary artist provide an even better source of social insight than the impressions of untrained informants on which most sociological research depends. At the very least, therefore, literature is "social evidence and testimony"; it preserves for us the precious record of modes of response to peculiar social and cultural conditions" (for detail, see Berger, 1977). Bernard Lewis (1975:43

shares this conviction—and he bends it to our own research problem by indicating that “the earliest expressions of the collective memory of a community are usually literary” (see also Lipset, 1985). However, the warrant for using this one particular piece of literature, “Masada,” as a cultural document does not rest solely on its author’s “trained sensibilities”: it rests also on the quality and purpose of the poem itself. In this regard, we must recognize that “Masada” is more than a literary artifact, it is in itself an interpretive exercise in collective memory. Lamdan, like Mead, conceived the present in terms of the past. Using the battle of Masada as an allegory of the struggle of Jewish Palestine, he determines for us which aspects of the past event possessed immediate relevance, and the validity of his determination is evidenced by the tremendous enthusiasm with which his poem was received by Palestinian Jews. More than any other consideration, it is this positive reaction to the poem that justifies our belief that “Masada” reflected its readers’ feelings and concerns, and which justifies our use of the poem as a sociological datum.

MASADA AS AN ALLEGORY OF JEWISH PALESTINE

Jewish settlement in post-World-War-I Palestine was legally established by the Balfour Declaration and its promise of a national “homeland”; however, the most important stimulus to settlement, aside from the violent intensification of anti-Semitism throughout Eastern Europe, was the immigration restrictions imposed by most Western nations. Between 1885 and 1921, the United States had absorbed about 85% of the more than two million Jews leaving Eastern Europe. But within a period of four years, through two sets of immigration quotas, Jewish immigration was cut by 91%—from 119,036 in 1921 to 10,292 in 1925 (see Appendix). Similar restrictions were set in place elsewhere in the West, with similar effect. Thus, by the mid-1920s, Palestinian Jews had two choices: to remain where they were or to return to Eastern Europe.

The development of Lamdan’s poem is itself predicated on this dilemma. For Lamdan, a return to Eastern Europe would have meant a commitment to one of the three options he had already rejected: (1) revengeful violence that would lead not to a new order but to self-destruction; (2) rededication to Communism in the hope that its broken promise of equality would eventually be made good, and (3) passive accommodation to impending doom. These alternatives are set down at the very beginning of the poem and it is their rejection that gives that poem its apocalyptic quality.

Preferring the old hardships to the new, many settlers did return to their native countries; but for those who rejected the same alternatives that Lamdan did, there was no choice but to make a go of it in Palestine. Outside Palestine, as one observer explained, there were only two places for the Jew: places where he could not go, and places where he could not live. The situation is articulated in the introductory segments of “Masada”:

This is the frontier; from here onwards there are no more frontiers, and behind — to no single exit do all paths lead.

...

For all who abandon their lives on the wall [*Masada is*] a sign of “no more exit.”

No more exit. With that metaphor, an identification with the inhabitants trapped in the historic fortress is made plausible. Lacking other choices, the experiment in Palestine is deemed the final choice, the last stand whose object is not the military foe that would plague later generations, but history itself. As one commentator (B.Y. Michal, 1949) puts it, Lamdan is describing a critical phase of Jewish history, not the extension of an old struggle. "Masada" demands a resolution. "It is not a return to or a continuation of this struggle but rather a final chapter." Like the battle fought by the old zealots, the new struggle involves the same opponent, fate, and admits of but two outcomes:

I was told
 The final banner of rebellion has been
 unfurled there....
 Against the hostile Fate of generations,
 an antagonistic breast
 is bared with a roar:
 "Enough! You or I! Here will the
 battle decide the final judgment!"

The anguish of hatred shrinks us into one
 clenched fist that is brought down in
 all its fury on the skull of our Fate-Let either
 the fist or the accursed
 skull be dashed to pieces'

Such are the stakes of the final turning point. For Lamdan (1930), the outcome is uncertain at best, and in expressing this uncertainty he discloses a key premise of his culture. Ail is made explicit in a separate commentary:

This revolt against the Jewish fate—without any deliberation or preconception of who would be the winner—1 see as the essence of Zionism... a duel between two forces: our fate, the eternal torturer; and we, the eternal victims. It is no longer possible that these two would share the crown of eternity (p. 13).⁴

Lamdan makes use of a primordial symbolic opposition, day and night, to lay bare the sentiments occasioned by this contest. Day is associated with reflection, loneliness, and pessimism; night, with emotional fervor, solidarity, and optimism. It is at night when, in the glow of Masada's bonfires, collective effervescence takes hold and induces an orgiastic dance of hope. At night the last stand carries the promise of success:

The fire of our feet ignites stones, burns them. Where there are
 rocks, may they be diverted and ground' ...
 You are low. O heavens, for our heads. Come down. lie flat like
 carpets here at our feet!
 Surely we have grown big and tall! When the dance is sparked off—
 with our heads do we smite the firmament as with a drum!
 Smiting, smiting our heads against the skies—thunder is emitted!

Thus the dance of Masada is heard in the ears of the world!
A chant for the dance of the solution; "Let the 'no' to Fate
dare!"
Bolster the leg. strengthen the
knee. round and round increasingly!
Ascend, chain of the dance! Never again shall Masada fall!

It was probably passages like this one that induced some commentators (viz., Ovadiah, 1949; Meir, 1954-1955) to regard Lamdan's poem as a symbol of the *halutzim*—the most committed and confident of the early settlers.⁵ But if that is so, then the *halutzim* must have read the work selectively, for in the very next canto, titled "Sober Awakening," the mood abruptly changes. Nighttime, the reader is told, is the realm of dreams and fantasy; daytime, of realism and cold appraisal. In darkness, fate can be denied; in the light of day, it remains inexorable. Here we come upon the poem's dominant tone, a tone that conforms to the historical reality for which Masada stands:

total defeat. Here Lamdan offers the painfully real prospect that the centuries of wandering are not over, that fortress Masada provides no better protection for Jews in the twentieth century than it did in the first, that the fall of Masada will repeat itself:

It is the last watch for the night of wanderings in the world. Soon the invisible scissor blades will yawn open, and then close with a mocking creak on the chain of our dance...

Ah, kings for a moment. I already see the hand lying in wait to remove the crowns of night from our heads.

I already hear from our depths the howls of the end, already do rudderless boats wait in all the seas-

Everyone weeps, everyone. Woe that I weep about everything, and about you all.— Listen. Masada weeps too. Do you hear?

Surely Masada weeps too. and how should she not? All of us, with thirsty arms, are suspended about her neck, and seek motherly pity, protection and deliverance— and she knows that she can give nothing, that she can deliver no more!

She cannot deliver that consumed by the curse of generations; she cannot deliver that which Fate has commanded not to deliver.

And so we move from ecstatic optimism to utter despair, a sequence that led Shimo Zemach (1927) to complain that "the poet goes in circles and therefore does not make progress." For this poet, "the past and the present do not merge together" to compose a vital whole; instead, "they gnaw at each other until they are both left lifeless." But Zemach conceived poetry to be an inspirational tool: Lamdan, evidently, conceived it to be a mirror.

Not only the prospect of failure but also its reasons can be articulated by the historical case. In the first century, the occupants of Masada comprised a small society of which most Jews were ignorant or indifferent. The twentieth-century Masada is likewise isolated. In overwhelming numbers, European Jews have ignored Zionism; they have sailed to America, not Palestine. Only a handful of people populate the new Masada, and their struggle is of no concern to those in whose name it is carried out:

No one has cast the burden of his Fate on the scales of battle that are suspended on the necks of a few despairing people.

No one would know if we were to fall here, as no one would know if we were to triumph...

—There is no one to substitute for the weary and stumbling amongst us; when one fails, there is none to take his place:

It is because they have forgotten us down below, it is because the people have scattered to their tents, and forgotten their fighters.

To the weakness of social bond between settlers and Jews situated elsewhere there was an internal parallel: a lack of commitment among Palestinian Jews to one another and to their new homeland. The problem is perhaps expressed most cogently in the essays of Ahad Ha-Am (1946), one of the early twentieth century's most influential Jewish observers. He commented often on the impracticality of many Zionist plans for the settlement of Palestine. These plans, he said, were essentially political; they ignored the cultural and motivational prerequisites for implementation. According to Ahad Ha-Am, a weakness of national consciousness, occasioned by the experience of the Diaspora and the attraction of European culture, was a distinctive trait of European Jews, including those who migrated to Palestine. Lacking an ideological commitment to Zionism, many new arrivals would grow despondent and withdraw from the homeland at the first sign of hardship.

Ahad Ha-Am was right. From the very beginning of the settlement period, retention of population proved to be a major problem.⁴ Not only was it difficult for Zionists to convince Jews to move to Palestine; a very large percentage of those who did make the move eventually gave up and returned to their homes in Russia, Poland, and other Eastern European countries. In the period 1922-1929, as the Appendix shows, the mean ratio for Palestine of emigrants to immigrants is 30, compared to only 5 for the United States. The situation reached crisis proportions in the recession years of the late 1920s. In 1926, 56 people left Palestine for every 100 who entered. In 1927, every 100 newcomers were offset by 187 emigrants. In 1928, the emigration-immigration ratio was 99.5: one person left the country for every person who arrived.

Lamdan's poem disdainfully refers to these emigrants as "peddlers":

—Daily do I look out from the heights of the wall, and see boats coming to Masada beach. Are they not our brothers in the boats? Are they not coming to us?

—They are our brothers, they are coming to us. But oh woe, they are peddlers'

They have heard that there is a crisis in Masada, that there is a battle, and they have come here as camp followers to store the spoil of the battle...

All the left-overs of food that were lost when we ascended, all the pieces of golden shields that roll down from the breasts of those that fall on the wall— are gathered in their hands.

And for money in deceitful scales, they sell everything... but if the battle should prove too tough, they would hasten to their boats, and sail to lands of safety...

The settlers' lack of commitment to the Zionist cause (of which emigration is but one symptom) appears in Lamdan's poem as a central theme, and for its expression he

reserves the most striking imagery. The immediate cause of Masada's fall in 72 A.D., the collective suicide of its defenders, is repeatedly used in the poem as a metaphor for noncommitment and spiritual surrender in modern Palestine. An interesting twist: yesterday's act of self-determination is prophetic of today's failure of will:

Did you see? Today, in the midst of battle, someone cast himself from the top of the wall into the abyss ... too weary to bear, exhausted.

- Today? Tomorrow and the next day as well will many cast themselves from the wall. For no more as in ambush- but openly does despair stalk the camp, and many are its corpses amongst the corpses of battle.

Ah, who knows if all of us here, one by one, will not slip away to the abyss...

Lamdan's choice of suicide as a metaphor may have been shaped by the historical facts, but the present realities gave that choice added salience. As Lamdan wrote his poem, and as his audience read it, both must have known that a high incidence of real suicide had given dramatic voice to disillusionment within the community (Alon, 1971:144). Perhaps Lamdan identified himself with his lost contemporaries as well as with his predecessors when he wrote:

Dumbly do my steps lead me to the wall, dumbly as all steps in which fear of the future is moulded ...

High, high is the wall of Masada, therefore does the ravine that crouches at its feet go deep ...

And should this voice have cheated me—then would I cast myself from the heights of the wall into the ravine that there be no record of the remnant, and nothing remain!

But the poet makes a second confession. The inhabitants of the first Masada, he realizes, dwelled in a prison, not a home. So too, the second Masada (Palestine) proves for him, as it does for his countrymen, an incitement for nostalgia rather than hope; not a homeland, but an occasion for homesickness:

I remember the nest of the motherland, upholstered with ancestral love. Day and night dropped balm on it. Gay mornings used to greet me when I rose, and laughing Springs would extend their arms to me.

So what was the bad dream that uprooted me, and dragged me here?

In this passage, we have a nice exercise in selective memory: Lamdan seems to have forgotten why he came to Palestine in the first place. His native home is no longer described as it was in the beginning of the poem: an inferno of anti-Semitism, a "ravaged home... wallowing in the ashes of destruction." Nothing better attests to Lamdan's pessimism than this nostalgic reconstruction of his past, for the occasion of an individual's nostalgia, as Fred Davis (1979:15) tells us, is always the bleakness and wretchedness of his present.

Yet, in this pessimism is anchored Lamdan's "rock bottom" attitude, his determination to be or not to be—an outlook that Erik Erikson (1958:103) would liken to "Jacob's struggle with the angel, a wrestling for a benediction which is to lead to [a man's] conviction that he is an alive person, and, as such, has a life before him, and a right to it."

Despite everything, despite the abandonment of God Himself, Lamdan wrestles with his own angel: fate. He is inspired by a last hope: salvation through self-reliance and a break with the past. He takes Masada as an end—an historical dead-end—and seeks to turn it into a symbol of reassurance for the future. To effect this transformation, explains Ovadiah (1949), Lamdan makes use of a pun: *Masad* (“foundation,” in the original Hebrew), the symbol of a new beginning, replaces Masada, the symbol of an end:

“Finished!” (Finished, finished, and completed, though not “finished and completed with praise to God, creator of the world.” We have no praise for God, creator of the world)—
As from now, a new book of Genesis is opened on the wall.

And as did our fathers on finishing the book of the Law before starting it again, let us
roar with a new and last roar of the beginning.

Be strong, be strong, and we shall be strengthened’

This last phrase—“Be strong, be strong, and we shall be strengthened”—is traditionally called out when one finishes reading one of the books of the Torah. The context of the quote, then, is religious, and Lamdan plays on its meaning when he refers to the opening of a new era as the beginning of a new book. But there is also a hint in the poem of the phrase’s origin in the book of Samuel II, 10:12, where it relates to spiritual strength in war. The hint is provided by part of Lamdan’s imagery. His use of military metaphors, his designation of Palestine’s inhabitants as “fighters,” his complimentary reference to Ben Yair, leader of the Jewish garrison on Masada—these are to be regarded as inspirational devices that amplify, through personification, the poem’s positive sentiments. Yet, in the light of what precedes it, the poem’s ending seems a bit forced, it seems to imply the opposite of what it professes: not confidence, but fear. “Be strong, be strong, and we shall be strengthened” is an exhortation that can only be made to a weak people.

DISCUSSION

Lamdan’s “Masada” revolves around two sentiments: defiant optimism, on the one hand, and an almost morbid pessimism on the other. Between these two feelings coiled a tension that was never resolved. This portrayal, this shifting back and forth between hope and despair, strikes us as an expression of an underlying “manic-depressive” element in Jewish-Palestinian life. In using the expression *manic-depressive* we are thinking not of the way a psychoanalyst like Freud, might describe a clinical syndrome but of the way an anthropologist, like Benedict, might describe a cultural pattern. We are borrowing a term from psychology to describe a social trait, a pattern of collective sentiment that endures independently of alternating individual phases of elation and despondency.⁸

This pattern does not endure indefinitely, and there is nothing timeless in its characterization. What Lamdan depicts is the consciousness of a specific people living under specific social conditions. As these conditions change, his poem’s affective tone and historical vision lose their representativeness. That poem, once a prominent part of the curriculum, is in fact no longer routinely used in Israeli school textbooks.⁹ Yet, one

line of that poem— “Never again shall Masada fall!”—remains popular as an expression of national will and continues to be exploited for national demonstrations and observances, without regard for the context from which that line was drawn.

The reception of the poem in the 1920s was different. Not selected, optimistic portions but the entire work was read, admired, and reprinted. If the poem’s tone is partly bleak, then, we may assume that bleakness must have been in some way essential to its initial popularity. However, we are not entitled to assume that the people were fully aware of this implication. Among those otherwise committed to Palestine, it is improbable that many would have acknowledged consciously a reminder of their apprehensions. They may well have dwelt on the poem’s optimistic theme (strength through desperation) and ignored its pessimism. Yet we know that that pessimism touched on something real, something deep, in the society, if we can assume in conformity with the psychoanalytic literature, that disagreeable sentiments are more likely to be evoked subconsciously than in the conscious mind, we begin to understand better the poem’s impact. The positive affect expressed in “Masada” appealed to the collective consciousness because it supported its hope of what Palestine could become. The negative affect of the poem cut to the “collective unconscious” because it expressed what Palestine was.

“Madada’s” negative tone moved Lamdan’s contemporaries because of its affinity with the conditions of Palestine during the 1920s. The reality of the historical Masada articulated (1) the settler’s sense of being in a situation of “no choice”; (2) their realisation that the Zionist cause was a last stand against fate; (3) their sense of isolation from the main body of the Jewish people; (4) their despair and the essential ambivalence of their commitment to one another and to their new homeland; and (5) the very real prospect that the second Masada would fall in the same manner as did the first—by self-destruction. Thus the effect of the poem was not only to make the situation in Palestine more hopeful, or to bolster the collective ego—its effect was also to make that situation meaningful.

“Whenever you get to the point of introducing what situations existed in the past,” said Mead (1938:81). “you are stating your present, the present of the community, in terms of the past.” Accordingly, by recollecting the fall of Masada, the Jews explained to themselves the precariousness of their own situation. The choice of this event over others may have been a necessary one. Perhaps no other event could condense so well the self-conception of a somewhat-tess-than resolute and optimistic people. Aware of their own vulnerability, these people did not see themselves as victorious survivors of past oppressions, did not regard their experience as exemplary. To these people the concepts of Manifest Destiny and City on a Hill would have made no sense. Not dominance, but survival—that was the settlers’ overriding concern. No wonder that in one of the bleakest and least significant events of their history, the settlers saw part of themselves.

What practical effects can be attributed to such a perception? Mead, of course, made no distinction between practical effects and perception, for perception, in his view, shapes meaning, and it is meaning that organizes practical action. But Mead did attribute to the meaning of the past an “intelligence” that leads to certain kinds of action—action which successfully adapts the individual to his social situation and, in the process, sets the direction for future development. “As actors establish the meaning of the past through the construction of social life in the present.” Mead’s interpreters (Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich, 1983:169) explain, “they establish parameters for

cation. But when the future is uncertain, when the very survival of society is doubted or, at best, problematic, a different kind of past is appropriated, one that matches and articulates the insecurity as well as the hopes of the present, one that provides revelation as well as inspiration. If this is so, then we may trace the content of collective memory to a congruence principle rather than a pragmatist version of the pleasure principle.

APPENDIX
Jewish Immigration and Emigration: United States and Palestine

Year	United States			Palestine		
	Immigrants	Emigrants	Ratio*	Immigrants	Emigrants	Ratio*
1908-	736,318	50,308	6.8			
1921	119,038	483	.4			
1922	53,524	820	1.6	7,844	1,603	19.2
1923	49,719	413	.8	7,421	3,466	46.7
1924	49,989	260	.5	12,856	2,037	15.8
1925	10,292	291	2.8	33,801	2,151	6.4
1926	10,267	341	3.3	13,081	7,365	56.3
1927	11,483	224	2.0	2,713	5,071	186.9
1928	11,639	253	2.2	2,178	2,168	99.5
1929	12,479	189	1.5	5,249	1,746	33.3
Totals 1,084,748		53,592	5.0	85,143	25,907	30.0

Source: Harry Schneiderman (1930:248).
Note: *Emigrants per 100 immigrants.

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NOTES

1. The Jews' inattention to Josephus's chronicle was probably deliberate, for Josephus was himself a renegade Jew who had sided with the Roman occupiers.
2. Literary commentary on the poem was drawn from a survey of all indexed newspapers and journals published in Palestine from 1927 (the year the poem appeared) through 1932 (by which time the Masada cult had taken root) to the present. This list includes *Haac'hdui*, *Mihelfnim*, *Niv-Hakvutsa*, *Hatkufa*, *Moznaim*, *Kunires*, *Hapoel Halzair*, *Yavne*, along with two English-language periodicals: *Hebrew Union College Annual* and *Jewish Quarterly Review*. One nonindexed publication, *Davar*, was also inspected. As it turns out, most of the commentary was found in two sources: *Hapoel Hatzair* and *Moznaim*. For information on Lamdan's own social and political views, we drew some materials from his own literary journal, *Ghionoi*, as well as from a number of secondary sources.
3. It is upon these same grounds that Wendy Griswold (1983:673) bases her use of Jacobean City Comedy for insights into early-seventeenth-century English society.

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