

MASADA



Basic facts about Masada

- ✧ Masada is an ancient fortification in the **Southern District of Israel**, situated on top of an isolated rock plateau, on the eastern edge of the Judean Desert, overlooking the Dead Sea.
- ✧ **Herod the Great** built palaces for himself on the mountain and fortified Masada between **37 – 31 BCE**.
- ✧ According to Josephus, the **Siege of Masada** by troops of the Roman Empire towards the end of the First Jewish–Roman War ended in the **mass suicide of the 960 Jewish rebels** and their families hiding there.
- ✧ To many, Masada symbolizes the determination of the Jewish people to be free in their own land.

The Story of Masada

The only written source telling the story of Masada is Josephus Flavius' *The Jewish War*. Born as Joseph ben Matiyahu into a priestly family, Flavius was a young leader at the outbreak of the Great Jewish Rebellion against Rome (66 CE) when he was appointed governor of Galilee. Calling himself Josephus Flavius, he became a Roman citizen and a successful historian.

At the beginning of the Revolt of the Jews against the Romans in 66 CE, a group of Jewish rebels overcame the Roman garrison of Masada. After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple (70 CE) they were joined by zealots and their families who had fled from Jerusalem. There, they held out for three years, raiding and harassing the Romans.

Then, in 73 CE, Roman governor Flavius Silva marched against Masada with the Tenth Legion, auxiliary units and thousands of Jewish prisoners-of-war. The Romans established camps at the base of Masada, laid siege to it and built a circumvallation wall. They then constructed a rampart of thousands of tons of stones and beaten earth against the western approaches of the fortress and, in the spring of 74 CE, moved a battering ram up the ramp and breached the wall of the fortress.

Once it became apparent that the Tenth Legion's battering rams and catapults would succeed in breaching Masada's walls, Elazar ben Yair - the Zealots' leader - decided that all the Jewish defenders should commit suicide; the alternative facing the fortress's defenders were hardly more attractive than death.

Flavius dramatically recounts the story told him by two surviving women. The defenders – almost one thousand men, women and children – led by ben Yair, burnt down the fortress and killed each other. The Zealots cast lots to choose 10 men to kill the remainder. They then chose among themselves the one man who would kill the survivors. That last Jew then killed himself.

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The heroic story of Masada and its dramatic end attracted many explorers to the Judean desert in attempts to locate the remains of the fortress. The site was identified in 1842, but intensive excavations took place only in the mid-1960's with the help of hundreds of enthusiastic volunteers from Israel and from many foreign countries.

Elazar ben Yair's Final Speech

Since we long ago 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, and we are the last to fight against them; and 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.

What should our approach to strife be?

Story: How Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai Established a Yeshiva in Yavneh

Yochanan ben Zakkai has been called the “father of wisdom and the father of scholars” because he ensured the continuation of Jewish scholarship after Jerusalem fell to Rome in 70 C.E.

According to tradition, ben Zakkai was a pacifist in Jerusalem in 68 C.E. when the city was under siege by General Vespasian. Jerusalem was controlled by the Zealots, people who would rather die than surrender to Rome (these are the same people who controlled Masada). Ben Zakkai urged surrender, but the Zealots would not hear of it, so ben Zakkai faked his own death and had his disciples smuggle him out of Jerusalem in a coffin. They carried the coffin to Vespasian’s tent, where ben Zakkai emerged from the coffin. He told Vespasian that he had had a vision that Vespasian would soon be emperor, and he asked Vespasian to set aside a place in Yavneh where he could start a small school and study Torah in peace. Vespasian promised that if the prophecy came true, he would grant ben Zakkai’s request. Vespasian became Emperor within a year, and kept his word, allowing the school to be established after the war was over. The school ben Zakkai established at Yavneh became the center of Jewish learning for centuries and replaced Jerusalem as the seat of the Sanhedrin.

Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust: Chanukah in Bergen Belsen

In Bergen Belsen, on the eve of Chanukah, a selection took place. Early in the morning, three German commandants meticulously dressed in their festive black uniforms and - in visibly high spirits - entered the men’s barracks. They ordered the men to stand at the foot of their three-tiered bunk beds.

The selection began. No passports were required, no papers were checked, there was no roll call and no head count. One of the three commandants just lifted the index finger in his snow-white glove and pointed in the direction of a pale face, while his mouth pronounced the death sentence with one single word: “Come!”

Like a barrage of machine-gun fire came the German commands: “Komme, komme, komme, komme, komme.” The men selected were marched outside. S.S. men with rubber truncheons and iron prods awaited them. They kicked, beat, and tortured the innocent victims. When the tortured body no longer responded, the revolver was used...

The random selection went on inside the barracks and the brutal massacre continued outside of the barracks until sundown. When the Nazi black angels of death departed, they left behind heaps of hundreds of tortured and twisted bodies.

Then Chanukah came to Bergen Belsen. It was time to kindle the Chanukah lights. A jug of oil was not to be found, no candle was in sight, and a Chanukiah (menorah) belonged to the distant past. Instead, a wooden clog, the shoe of one of the inmates, became a Chanukiah; strings pulled from a concentration camp uniform - a wick; and the black camp shoe polish - pure oil.

Not far from the heaps of the bodies, the living skeletons assembled to participate in the kindling of Chanukah lights.

The Rabbi of Bluzhov (Israel Spira) lit the first light and chanted the first two blessings in his pleasant voice, and the festive melody was filled with sorrow and pain. When he was about to recite the third blessing, he stopped, turned his head, and looked around as if he were searching for something.

But immediately, he turned his face back to the quivering small lights and in a strong, reassuring, comforting voice, chanted the third blessing: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has kept us alive, preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season.”

Among those present at the kindling of the lights was a Mr. Zamietchkowski, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Bund. He was a clever, sincere person with a passion for discussing matters of religion, faith and truth. Even here in camp at Bergen Belsen, his passion for discussion did not abate. He never missed an opportunity to engage in such a conversation.

As soon as the Rabbi of Bluzhov had finished the ceremony of kindling the lights, Zamietchkowski elbowed his way to the rabbi and said, “Spira, you are a clever and honest person. I can understand your need to light Chanukah candles in these wretched times. I can even understand the historical note of the second blessing, ‘Who did miracles for our fathers in days of old, at this season.’ But the fact that you recited the third blessing is beyond me. How could you thank God and say, ‘Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has kept us alive, preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season?’ How could you say it when hundreds of dead Jewish bodies are literally lying within the shadows of the Chanukah lights, when thousands of living Jewish skeletons are walking around in camp, and millions more are being massacred? For this you are thankful to God? For this you praise the Lord? This you call ‘keeping us alive?’”

“Zamietchkowski, you are a hundred percent right,” answered the rabbi. “When I reached the third blessing, I also hesitated and asked myself, what should I do with this blessing? I turned my head in order to ask the Rabbi of Zaner and other distinguished rabbis who were standing near me, if indeed I might recite the blessing. But just as I was turning my head, I noticed that behind me a throng was standing, a large crowd of living Jews, their faces expressing faith, devotion, and concentration as they were listening to the rite of the kindling of the Chanukah lights. I said to myself, if God, blessed be He, has such a nation that at times like these, when during the lighting of the Chanukah lights they see in front of them the heaps of bodies of their beloved fathers, brothers, and sons, and death is looking from every corner, if despite all that, they stand in throngs and with devotion listening to the Chanukah blessing ‘Who did miracles for our fathers in days of old, at this season’; if, indeed, I was blessed to see such a people with so much faith and fervor, then I am under a special obligation to recite the third blessing.”

What is the difference between these two perspectives on dealing with difficult situations - when it seems like there’s no way out?