Political myth: the political uses of history, tradition and memory

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Appendix 2

Masada as 'Invented' Tradition
Masada as ‘Invented’ Tradition.

The symbiotic relationship between tradition and collective memory is well illustrated by analyzing Israel’s use of Masada as an ‘invented’ tradition. Masada, the site of the Zealots’ last stand against the Romans in A.D.73, became a focus for the Zionist reconstruction of Jewish collective memory. It emphasised the values of heroic struggle to replace the Zionist conceptualisation of Exile as passive submission. The way tradition is used to impose normative values on collective memory concentrates on how Zionism ‘invented’ the Masada tradition to mobilise support for its program of national revival. The Masada tradition represented a cluster of values that both defined Zionism and validated its claim to legitimacy by invoking the sanction of a carefully constructed image of the past. The relative ‘transparency’ of the Zionist process of creating an ‘invented tradition’ to reframe Jewish collective memory and invest it with new political meaning makes the Masada tradition a good example for analysing the concept of tradition as the second component of political myth.

To understand how Masada, as ‘recovered memory’, became a powerful legitimating Israeli tradition, it is necessary to analyse how Masada was given normative meaning by Zionism. Most importantly, the significance of Masada to Israeli collective memory must be understood in terms of the Zionist periodisation of Jewish history. Zionism emerged as a direct response to the increasingly insecure
situation European Jews found themselves in towards the end of the nineteenth century. The rise of antisemitism and the faltering prospects of Jewish emancipation were clearly displayed during the Dreyfus Affair in France\(^1\) and more dramatically with the pogroms in Russia during the 1880's. Antisemitism, combined with a fear of assimilation and loss of Jewish identity, created a recognition amongst some Jewish intellectuals that Jews had to assume responsibility for their own destiny. In defining this destiny Zionism sought a fundamental reframing of Jewish collective memory.

The process was well expressed by Robert Alter. During the debate that ensued following suggestions Israeli policy-makers suffered from a 'Masada Complex', he wrote:

Israel was born out of a national myth. If Herzl and his immediate heirs created the machinery for the national movement through their organisational and diplomatic activity, it was still new literary versions of the age-old myth of Zion that generated the necessary motor force. The Zionists were in part able to create a heroic present because they had first discovered a heroic past that could serve as a psychological platform for a new mode of Jewish existence, a new relationship to ongoing history. This sense of the past is still, I believe, a positive if problematic energising force in Israeli consciousness.\(^2\)

The Zionist creation of a collective memory that framed a heroic present in terms of a re-found heroic past to provide the energising motor force for a national revival, is

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\(^1\) Zeev Sternhell also stressed the Zionist reaction in terms of the failure of liberalism. "Zionism was a natural response to the failure of liberalism as a rational and an antihistorical system, to its inability to neutralise tribal nationalism, or at least to keep it within reasonable bounds. The Dreyfus Affair dramatically highlighted the crisis of liberalism and of modernity. Where the Jewish people were concerned, the Dreyfus Affair placed an enormous question mark over the future of emancipation in Europe. In the liberal circles to which Theodore Herzl (1860 - 1904) and Max Nordau (1849 - 1923) belonged, France was not only the accepted model of a liberal society but also an example of future developments in Central and Eastern Europe. That is why this rebellion against modernity shocked them so profoundly and brought them to such radical conclusions." Sternhell, Z. *The Founding Myths of Israel : Nationalism, Socialism, and the Making of the Jewish State*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1998. P. 12.

close to Sorel’s conception of political myth as the ‘pouvoir moteur’ for action. Sorel viewed political myth as an enabling image that gave the necessary cohesion and drive for heroic action. It is precisely what the Zionists set out to achieve with their periodisation of Jewish history. The resulting Zionist periodisation of Jewish history provided the foundation for reframing Jewish collective memory.

Zionist collective memory recast Jewish history into three periods: Antiquity, Exile and National Revival. It established a symbolic continuity between Antiquity and the modern National Revival by disparaging and discrediting the long period of Exile. A duality between the two main periods of Antiquity and Exile was constructed. Both periods centred on the importance of Zion, the ancient Jewish homeland, to create a sense of Jewish nationhood. In effect, Zionism imposed normative values on each of these periods to create an underlying tradition that would legitimate its vision of a national revival.

For Zionists the period of Antiquity extended from the Israelites’ conquest of Canaan to the failed revolts against the Romans during the first century A.D. The period of Exile represented the dispersal of the Jewish people and “embodie(d) the loss of both physical bond with the ancient homeland and the Jews’ collective

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3 The Zionist representation of Antiquity was highly selective and imposed an artificial unity on the period that did not exist historically. As Zerubavel comments, “it ignores the exile of the ten tribes of Israel from their land, which occurred within the period of Antiquity (722B.C.), and the long stretches of time during that period when the Israelites lived under Babylon, Persia, Greek, and Roman rule and their political freedom was severely curtailed.” Zerubavel, Y. Recovered Roots : Collective Memory and The Making of Israeli National Tradition. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, p. 17.
experience as a unified nation."^4 Zionism defined itself against a discredited and
negative representation of the period of exile. "Zionist collective memory ... 
construct(ed) Exile as a long, dark period of suffering and persecution. Jewish life in
exile constituted a recurrent history of oppression, punctuated by periodic pogroms
and expulsions, of fragile existence imbued with fear and humiliation."^5

Zionism not only repudiated the period of Exile, but disparaged those Jews
who lived in exile, it contended that, "life in exile turned the Jews into oppressed,
submissive, weak, and fearful people who passively accept their fate."^6 In marked
and exaggerated contrast to the period of Exile, Antiquity was represented as the
paradigm for national revival. This selective representation is well summed up by
Yael Zerubavel.

The Zionist collective memory constructs Antiquity as a period in which the ancient Hebrew
nation flourished, enjoying an autonomous political, social and cultural life. Antiquity is thus
seen as the nation’s golden age, the period to which the Zionists wished to return to recover
their lost national roots: the national spirit, the Hebrew identity, the Hebrew language, their
homeland, and the social, economic, and political structures of an independent nation.^7

The "golden age" of Antiquity provided an important source of legitimation for the
Zionist vision of a national revival. Not only were the Hebrews represented as
drawing their strength from the land, but they were willing to fight in defense of that
land. Zionism placed emphasis on Judaea’s wars of liberation for they “represented
the ultimate commitment to national freedom, which the Zionists were so eager to

^4 ibid, p.16.
^5 ibid, p. 18.
^6 ibid, p. 19.
revive. They provided examples of the ancient Hebrews' readiness when oppressed, to stand up against a more powerful enemy and to sacrifice their lives for the nation.' In resurrecting the memory of such symbols of ancient heroism, Zionism constructed 'historical' models to be emulated by the National Revival. As Zerubavel noted, "the reawakening of a dormant 'national memory' was thus seen as an expression of triumph over Exile and a means of obliterating its influence.'

Antiquity and Exile were therefore represented as binary opposites: two contrasting periods that articulated Zionism's ideological periodisation of Jewish history into the golden age of Antiquity with the 'dark age' of Exile. In this sense, "the selective reconstruction of Antiquity was part of the historical mission of reviving the ancient national roots and spirit. Antiquity became both a source of legitimation and an object of admiration." The period of Antiquity provided the unifying and enabling images for revitalising Jewish national culture. Zionism thereby invented a tradition for national revival based on a collection of normative values ascribed to the period of Antiquity.

The normative values were given focus by the Masada narrative which also served as a 'pouvoir moteur' for heroic action. In the Zionist narrative, the heroic struggle and sacrifice at Masada that marked the end of Antiquity was woven into the

7 ibid, p.22.
8 ibid, p. 23.
9 ibid, p. 25.
10 ibid.
equally heroic battle of Tel Hai that marked the beginning of the modern national
revival. There was no place for the exilic Jews in this narrative. As Zerubavel notes,
the Zionist reconstruction of symbolic continuities and discontinuities in Jewish history was
clearly designed to support the ideology of national revival. The dramatic contrast between
the repudiation of Exile and the glorification of Antiquity accentuated the appeal of the future
national era and highlighted the notion of a new beginning.\textsuperscript{11}

The development of a Zionist collective memory based on a selective representation
of the past thus provided the ideological framework for National Revival.

The Zionist program of national revival rested on three foundations: the
revival of the ‘new Hebrew’ individual, the revival of the Land of Israel, and the
revival of the Hebrew language. The central element for this national revival was the
land. Zionism maintained that direct contact with the land through pioneering
settlement would create the new redeemed Hebrew. In the Zionist vision, “national
redemption is intimately linked to the idea of redeeming the land. The Zionist settlers
believed that in the process of settling in and working the land they would find their
own personal and collective redemption.”\textsuperscript{12} Zionism therefore always referred to the
settlers as Hebrews to imply continuity with the golden age of Antiquity, while using
the term Jew to describe the experience of Exile. The redeemed land of Israel was
also important to the revival of the Hebrew language, for Zionism equated Hebrew as
the language of the ancient Israelites before the period of Exile. With the loss of the
land of Israel and the scattering of the Jews, Hebrew ceased to exist as a unified

\textsuperscript{11} ibid, p.33.
\textsuperscript{12} ibid, p.28.
national language and only survived as the sacred language of religion. For Zionists, the redemption of the land of Israel would therefore revive Hebrew on its territorial base and once again Hebrew would articulate the national spirit of the golden age of Antiquity. This conscious refashioning and reframing of collective memory to serve the specific legitimating needs of the Zionist movement gave rise to Masada as an 'invented tradition'. The Masada tradition was ‘invented’ to impose normative values on this carefully constructed collective memory.
Before examining the specific meaning given to Masada within the Zionist paradigm of a periodised Jewish history, it is first necessary to examine the historical 'raw material' upon which such a complex collective memory is constructed. Until its recovery by Zionism, Masada played no part in Jewish collective memory. Historical knowledge of Masada was confined to one source only, Josephus' *The Jewish War*\(^{13}\) which was ignored in traditional Jewish accounts of the revolt of A.D. 66 - 73\(^{14}\) and which focused on the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. Josephus' account did not enter Jewish historical consciousness until a modern Hebrew translation was published in 1923. Josephus' account of the fall of Masada, a fortress overlooking the Dead Sea in the Judaean desert, focused on the final dramatic act of mass suicide by the defenders. Masada had held out after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but when the Romans finally breached Masada's defences after a long siege in A.D. 73, the leader of the rebels, Elazar ben Yair resolved on mass suicide rather than falling into the hands of the victorious Romans.

Josephus placed into Elazar ben Yair's mouth a moving speech about how it was better to die as free men than die as slaves.

At this crisis let us not disgrace ourselves; we who in the past refused to submit even to a slavery involving no peril, let us not now, along with slavery, deliberately accept the irreparable penalties awaiting us if we are to fall alive into Roman hands. For as we were the

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13 Josephus, F. (Thackeray, H.St. J. Trans.) *The Jewish War, Books IV-VII*. The Loeb Classical Library, William Heineman Ltd, London, MCMLXI. No mention of the siege and fall of Masada is made in any known Roman sources or in the Talmud. The only other account of the fall of Masada (which was based on Josephus) was 'The Book of Jossipon', written anonymously during the tenth century.
first of all to revolt, so are we the last in arms against them .... We have it in our power to die nobly and in freedom – a privilege denied to others who have met with unexpected defeat. Following a further speech the men then killed their wives and children before killing themselves. According to Josephus the final act of courage denied the Romans the pleasure of victory for, on “encountering the mass of slain, instead of exalting as over enemies, they admired the nobility of their resolve and the contempt of death displayed by so many in carrying it, unwavering, into execution.”

Josephus’ account of the mass suicide which is central to the early development of Zionist collective memory, cannot be verified and is suspect. Edward Bruner and Phillis Gorfain argue that not only did Josephus “epitomise the unreliable narrator” but his account of the mass suicide was written to “expiate his own guilt” for betraying his pledge in an earlier suicide pact and in betraying his people by defecting to the Romans. From a historical point of view the speeches of Elazar ben Yair cannot be taken as “authentic”, but in Israel’s ‘recovered’ collective memory these speeches are often quoted as truth.

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14 One reason that Josephus was ignored was that his defection to the Romans during the war deeply compromised his account for later generations of Jews. Josephus had also participated in a suicide pact when his forces had been defeated at Jotapata, but he had reneged on his pledge once his comrades were dead.
15 ibid, p. 595-96.
16 ibid, p. 619.
18 ibid.
19 After 40 of his comrades died at Jotapata in a procedure similar to the one Josephus describes at Masada, he chose not to take his own life; he betrayed his pledge and turned himself over to the Roman conquerors. The contrived plan for suicide, the casting of lots to determine the last suicide, appears in both cases. Josephus
The historical authenticity of Josephus' narrative was irrelevant to the Zionist 'recovery' of Masada as collective memory; what was important was the image of heroic resistance to oppression. The image was given literary rather than historical meaning in 1927 with the publication of Yitzhak Lamdan's poem 'Masada' which brought Masada into Jewish collective consciousness. The poem's immense popularity gave added impetus to the Zionist reconstruction of Jewish collective memory. It was reinforced by Lamdan's famous catch-phrase, 'Never again will Masada fall', which became a national slogan and an oath never again to submit to Israel's enemies. This was the meaning of Masada.

The Masada tradition was created within the paradigm established by Zionist collective memory. The normative values exemplified by Masada must be seen in terms of their binary opposites found within the experience of exile. For the Zionist settlers, Masada represented "a dignified alternative to the European Jews' response to the Nazi persecution; they hailed this choice as an important departure from the exilic tradition of submission." In contrast to Exile, Masada extolled active armed resistance and the willingness to fight and if necessary to die for freedom and the national cause. Masada "embodied the spirit of active heroism, love of freedom, and

invented this device at Jotapata, and the reappearance of this motif in his account of Masada suggests that he laminated his personal story over that of the Zealots. Ibid.


Zerubavel, Y. op cit, p.78.
national dignity that, according to Zionist collective memory, had disappeared during the prolonged period of Jewish life in Exile."22

The courage shown by the defenders of Masada therefore served as an alternative to the traditional passivity of Exile. For the Zionist settlers of Israel Masada "represented a highly symbolic event that captured the essence of the authentic national spirit and helped define their own historical mission as the direct followers of the ancient Hebrews."23 The image of courage and continuity glossed over the issue of the Masada defenders' mass suicide in the face of the final Roman assault. In the construction of Zionist collective memory the question of the mass suicide of the Zealots posed an awkward paradox. Early accounts of Masada avoided direct discussion of the issue of suicide and focused on the Zealot's willingness to fight and die a 'patriotic death'. The Zionist account sought to avoid any suggestion that suicide might have been an escapist solution or that suicide was an act of martyrdom for this would have linked the mass suicide at Masada with the Jews of Exile and the Holocaust. As Bruner and Gorfain explain,

authoritative tellings view the mass suicide at Masada as a courageous act, a symbol of freedom. But using the story to celebrate freedom and continued life, when the events end in death, produces a paradox. The meaning of death must be taken in the Masada narrative as a victory over death. Suicide is paradoxically hailed as a victory over external forces, as an assertion of determination. As Israelis tell the story of Masada, they manipulate the paradox .... The story is told in order to say, 'never again'.24

22 ibid, p. 75.
23 ibid.
Ambivalence towards the mass suicide and the Holocaust is a reflection of how persuasive Zionist collective memory is for even the reality of the Holocaust is represented within the duality of the Zionist periodisation of Jewish history. Although concerned for the fate of European Jews many Zionist settlers saw the Holocaust as a confirmation of the Zionist belief that acceptance of a life of exile would inevitably lead to the destruction of Jews and their culture.

The Holocaust was not unequivocally incorporated into Israeli collective memory until the 1970's. Akenson claims that Holocaust Day was not instituted until 1959 because it “memorialised the kind of behaviour that the Israeli myth makers wanted to obliterate: supine martyrdom before a Gentile enemy. Israel was to be the antidote for the holocaust.”25 Ambivalence towards the Holocaust was also displayed in the manner of its early observance. Holocaust memorial day was linked to the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto which accentuated the Zionist division of Jewish response to oppression into either passive or active. Active or heroic armed resistance to oppression was associated with Zionism and ‘Hebrew youth’; ‘nonheroic’ passive submission was associated with the Holocaust, with the victims being referred to as “Jews” As Zerubavel states,

the partisans and the ghetto rebels were thus separated from the ‘Holocaust’ to serve as a symbolic bridge between Exile and modern Israel. Along with the defenders of Masada and Tel Hai, they became part of Israel’s heroic past. Conversely, the rest of the Holocaust

experience was relegated to the period of Exile and associated with the ‘Other’, namely the submissive Diaspora Jew.26

The meaning of Masada must be understood within the essential dichotomy of heroic resistance or passive submission, established by Zionist collective memory.

The meaning of Masada was linked to, and reinforced by, the mythic narrative constructed around the battle of Tel Hai. The ‘battle’ of Tel Hai was also pivotal to the creation of Zionist collective memory. Yael Zerubavel gives a detailed account of how the relatively insignificant battle that took place at the Zionist settlement of Tel Hai in the northern Galilee in 1920 was turned into a Zionist founding myth. The courage displayed by the settlers of Tel Hai and the heroic death of Josef Trumeldor who reportedly died exclaiming that ‘it is good to die for our country’ became a central motif, along with Masada, in the Zionist reframing of Jewish collective memory. For the Zionists, “the battle of Tel Hai ... symbolised the emergence of a new type of Jew, tough, strong, and resourceful, who stood up to his enemies, a Jew who assumed charge of his own history and fate rather than depend(ing) on others’ will to provide him with security.”27

In representing Tel Hai as a new beginning, the start of the national revival, Zionists “thus constructed a paradigmatic text for a new age, creating a

26 Zerubavel, Y. op cit, p.80.
countertradition to the Jewish lore of exile.”28 For example, David Ben-Gurion used the twenty-third anniversary commemorations of the Zionist settlers’ defense of Tel Hai to draw a sharp contrast between those who would fight and die for freedom and those who would succumb in passive submission.

We had lived the life of exile, dependence, humiliation, slavery, and degradation. Not only that others brought upon us, but that we ourselves brought upon us, for we accepted our weakness, our lives in a foreign country, our exile .... We did not know how to live as free men and we did not know how to die as free men.29

In contrast to the perceived Exilic tradition of submission, the defenders of Masada and Tel Hai ( 'a second Masada' ) became exemplars for the type of active resistance required of the Zionist settlers.

Ben-Gurion challenged “the traditional image of the Eastern European Jews who maintained tradition through the Diaspora ...by means of prayer, study, accommodation, and retreat”30 and rejected the “honoured folk image of the Jewish male as Talmudic scholar, finding fulfillment through knowledge”31. In this Ben-Gurion was speaking within the Zionist paradigm of Antiquity and Exile for at the time of his speech “the Zionist movement did not accord the diaspora any intrinsic value (as) Zionism was based on a negation of the diaspora.”32 David Ben-Gurion

28 ibid, p. 110.
29 Ben-Gurion, D. Quoted by . Zembavel, Y. 'The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors', Representations 45, Winter 1994, pp. 72 - 100, p.79.
30 Bruner, E.M. & Gorfain, P. op cit, p.66.
31 ibid.
declared his generation to be the ‘comrades of Trumpeldor’” and for the first decades of the State of Israel, Tel Hai provided an enabling image to mobilise Israelis in defence of their land. Against a context of unceasing conflict and the polarisation of Israeli politics, however, the potent mobilising image of Trumpeldor’s heroic death has waned while the actual meaning of his death has been questioned.

The Masada tradition was firmly anchored to a memory site that not only ‘contained’ the memory of the symbolically important events that made up the Masada narrative, but also provided a significant setting for the renewal, reconstruction and revitalisation of the meaning of Masada. As a memory site Masada gave concrete realisation to the significance of Masada for “the elusive meaning of Masada is attached to the most solid of sites, to an immovable mountain, an eternal fortress.”

At a more abstract level the physical reality of the Masada site stands in marked contrast to the more diffuse memory of the Holocaust. As Zerubavel comments, “Masada offers a concrete image of a massive rock erected in the desert;

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34 “Tel Hai’s central legacy, expressed in Trumpeldor’s famous last words, was the importance of self-defense and self-sacrifice for the process of the Zionist revival of Jewish national life in Palestine. This was the prevalent ideological climate in Israel prior to the establishment of the state and during the first decades of its existence, when this call for sacrifice was associated with what was believed to be a transitory state. But the routinisation of sacrifice by repeated wars and military confrontations has evoked a new anxiety about a situation that puts a constant demand on human life and to which there is no apparent solution in the future. In this context, Trumpeldor’s excited embrace of death appears incongruent with contemporary Israelis’ growing frustration at being faced with a repeated call for patriotic sacrifice.” Zerubavel, Y. ‘The Historic, the Legendary, and the Incredible: Invented Tradition and Collective Memory in Israel’, op cit, p. 116.
35 Bruner, E.M. & Gorfain, P. op cit, p.70.
the Holocaust stands for a void, a symbolic abyss in Jewish history.\textsuperscript{36} The meaning of Masada was also reinforced and given concrete form by the archaeological excavations\textsuperscript{37} which began at Masada in the mid 1960's. As an archaeological site, Masada brought visually 'concrete' representations of the past into the present by providing powerful evocative symbols that had the capacity to authenticate and legitimise Masada as an ‘invented tradition’.

The director of these excavations, Yigael Yadin, presented his task in terms of a patriotic mission to verify the memory of Masada. Yadin wrote that, “it would be one of the tasks of our archaeological expedition to see what evidence we could find to support the Josephus record.”\textsuperscript{38} Yadin found the evidence he was looking for and through an adroit media campaign, “kept Masada at the centre of Israeli collective consciousness for an extended period.”\textsuperscript{39} Martin Gilbert refers to the discoveries made by Yadin in 1963 as having “electrified the Israeli public,”\textsuperscript{40} to the extent that Yadin’s interpretation of his finds were received uncritically.

In effect, Yadin excavated for the artifacts to authenticate meaning ... The height of the site lends awe; the depth of the excavation supplies symbolic verification. Both are used to

\textsuperscript{36} Zerbavel, Y. ‘The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors’ op cit, p.85.
\textsuperscript{37} It should also be noted that in a state searching for roots, archaeology enjoyed a high profile in Israel. As Alter comments, “Archaeology, ... is Israel’s greatest natural resource, both in the strictly economic sense and in a figurative one, feeding into the tourist trade, on the one hand, and into the romantic myth, on the other hand, of return to a proud national independence that was cut off two thousand years ago.” Alter, R. op cit, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{39} Zerbavel, Y. ‘The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors, op cit, p.83.
enforce belief, finalise meaning, produce knowledge, and make knowledge itself appear as if an artifact.\textsuperscript{41} Josephus’ account of the siege and fall of Masada thus received scientific verification. However, as Bruner and Gorfain point out “it is not simply that scientific archaeology ‘proves’ Josephus correct ... but that the sheer materiality of the results of archaeology confer credibility to the authoritative interpretation, as if the story itself could be touched and handled.”\textsuperscript{42}

The sense of authenticity made the Masada site an ideal ‘sacred’ setting for the ritual induction of young Israeli soldiers. The meaning of such torchlit military ceremonies on the site of Masada is clearly expressed in a speech given by Yadin to recruits in 1963.

We will not exaggerate by saying that \textit{thanks to the heroism of the Masada fighters} – like other links in the nation’s chain of heroism – \textit{we stand here today}, the soldiers of a young-ancient people, surrounded by the ruins of the camps of those who destroyed us. \textit{We stand here}, no longer helpless in the face of our enemy’s strength, no longer fighting a desperate war, but solid and confident, knowing that now our fate is in our hands, in our spiritual strength, the spirit of Israel ‘the grandfather who has been revived’ .... \textit{We, the descendants of these heroes}, stand here today and rebuild the ruins of our people.\textsuperscript{43}

Yadin’s speech falls within the Zionist paradigm of national renewal with its emphasis on self-reliance and it draws a sense of symbolic continuity between the heroes of Masada and the heroes of modern Israel. The sense of continuity gained an even more concrete form with the exhumation of Masada’s defenders. The Israeli government made full use of the symbolic capital generated by the discovery of the

\textsuperscript{41} Bruner, E.M. & Gorfain, P. \textit{op cit}, p.72.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{ibid}.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{ibid}.
‘sacred relics’ of the Zealots of Masada by staging an emotionally charged state funeral.

The symbolism of continuity was ritually expressed in the official state funeral for the bones excavated at Masada and identified as the ancient fighters’ remnants. The State of Israel assumed the moral obligation to carry on their memory, and, in turn, the official burial ceremony reframed their death as a ‘sacrifice’ for the modern state. The state thus blurred the line separating the ancient Masada defenders and the fallen soldiers of the Israeli Defence Forces who died in contemporary wars. The Masada tradition was therefore ‘authenticated’ by Masada the memory site where collective memory was reaffirmed through rites, rituals and commemorations.

The Masada tradition has not gone unchallenged and since the 1970’s the tradition has undergone significant changes. At one level the Masada tradition has been challenged as an impediment to the peace process in the Middle East. Suggestions in the American press that Israel suffers from a ‘Masada Complex’ were swiftly rebutted by the Israeli government. Robert Alter warns in 1973 that “to insist on an identity between Israel and Masada is... to adopt policies that may become self-fulfilling prophecies.” Alter challenges the validity of Masada as a suitable metaphor for Israeli policy for it suggests national suicide rather than national revival. Alter remarks that, “the Warsaw Ghetto uprising is thought of as a Masada, and in a double exposure of mythic imagery, Israel’s predicament is

43 Yadin, Y., quoted by Zerubavel, Y. *ibid*, p.84.
44 *ibid*, p.85.
45 See Robert Alter for details. Alter wrote “the Prime Minister (Golda Meir) seems to have been touched to the quick by the suggestion that through intransigence she might be the maker of a future Masada.” *Alter, R. op cit*, p.20.
46 *ibid*, p.23.
conceived as a ghetto surrounded by overwhelming hordes, a fortress besieged by the assembled might of imperial legions." According to Alter, and others, a 'Masada Complex' clouds Israel's perception and distorts its policies towards its neighbours by refusing to compromise.

Moreover, the traumatic experience of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the war in Lebanon and the Palestinian Intifada shifted emphasis from glorification of armed resistance to drawing an analogy between besieged Masada and besieged Israel. "In a society whose collective experience is punctuated by wars, Masada is no longer an abstract story from Antiquity but a vivid and powerful visual image that provides contemporary Israelis with a metaphor for their own situation." Israel's many wars provide more recent sources of collective memory that diminish the actuality of Masada

At another level the Masada tradition is challenged as no longer being of relevance to modern Israeli society. While serving both an integrative and mobilising function during the pre-state and transition periods, heroic images of armed struggle and sacrifice are not seen as suitable models for the future. As Feige comments,

in the last two decades, the power of the founding myths in Israeli life has declined sharply. Israel can be seen as a post-revolutionary state, with new generations undermining the sacred truths of the founding fathers. In the process of institutionalisation, the famed pioneers and

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47 ibid.
48 Zerubavel, Y. 'The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors op cit, p.88.
warriors became politicians, and their mythic legacy became tarnished through power struggles.\(^{49}\)

This judgement also extends to the State as the official custodian of national memory. Part of this shift in meaning results from a revival of interest in diaspora history and traditions that broke down the binary opposition between Masada and the Holocaust as defining historical metaphors. This is largely due to the impact of a religious revival\(^ {50}\) in Israel that directly challenged the secular Zionist meaning of Masada. Israeli political culture is also more willing to embrace the experience of the Holocaust and incorporate it within Israeli collective memory. Zerubavel comments that,

\[\text{Masada, as a metaphor for the situation Israeli's now find themselves in, incorporates the experience of Exile and the Holocaust within its meaning. Israeli collective memory has thus lost much of its initially oppositional stance to traditional Judaism and has become more ready to embrace a lesson deeply rooted in Jewish collective memory: the experience of the besieged struggling to survive against all odds.}^{51}\]

As a consequence, the Masada tradition, as constructed by Zionism to underpin its program of national revival has run its course.

My outline of the Masada tradition has illustrated the way collective memory is given normative value by tradition. The Masada narrative extols the values of


\[^{50}\text{Orthodox Jews placed more emphasis on Yavneh, the academy built to preserve Jewish traditions following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, as the real key to Jewish survival and national revival. The key memory site for Orthodox Jews and the nationalistic messianic groups that emerged in the 1970's was the Western Wall of the Temple destroyed in A.D.70. "The Western Wall has become associate with Jewish spiritual resistance and with a claim to the disputed city of Jerusalem. As a site it offers something different than the double-edged sword of Masada: it furnishes a more hopeful and optimistic symbol, better suited to the present government's expansionist claims based on both nationalistic and religious grounds." Bruner, E.M. & Gorfain, P. op cit, p.70.}\]
heroic armed resistance and the commitment to national freedom. Masada stands for individual courage and national dignity. Masada defines itself as a triumph over the negative values of Exile such as suffering, persecution, passivity and submission. Such normative values are not based on history but on a consciously constructed collective memory. The ability of a political community to have its interpretation of the past generally accepted is therefore an important source of its legitimacy. What Masada illustrates is that where a suitable past does not exist to provide a political group with its desired sense of historical continuity, then that past can be fashioned through collective memory and 'invented tradition'.

51 Zerubavel, Y. 'The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors', op cit, p.89.