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I Love a Mystery, 1967.

I LOVE A MYSTERY

The Temple
Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

December 10, 1967

#214

As the manpower needs in Viet Nam have grown, the government has limited the numbers who are exempt from military service. Some months ago Washington announced that the blanket deferment of graduate students would be ended. Recently a Federally appointed commission suggested that this exemption be continued for students in Engineering, Health, Science, and Mathematics. Presumably, the nation has greater need for men who can build the missiles, form the complicated equations which track the missiles on their course, and sew up again bodies which have been shattered by their burst than it does for infantrymen in southeast Asia; and, by implication, these men who are essential to our security, many who are preparing themselves in other fields — the philosophers, classicists, the humanists, the historians are not so essential to our security that their education cannot be interrupted.

The last twenty or thirty years has seen a constant upgrading of the pure sciences and technology and these disciplines and a consistent erosion of the importance attached to the social sciences and even more so to the liberal arts. There is a National Science Foundation; there is no national foundation for the humanities. In many universities, there is one pay scale for the men in technical fields and another for men in philosophy or the classics. It is as if we were saying to ourselves we need men who can build and engineer, men who can build for us the complex, intricate urban life which is ours, but that we can delay our concern with the quality of that life — its esthetics, its beauty, and all

questions of values and disciplines.

I can imagine this commission saying to itself, "After all, the past can stay buried; what we don't know yet about the past we obviously don't need that urgently to know. So, these men can be taken from their desks and their books and put to other use."

My first inclination is to agree, but I wonder. I look about me and see the Negro minority desperately seeking to create its own history, to recreate a past which had been erased and lost. Apparently, unless a people is proud of its background and aware of its roots - an awareness which history alone permits - it cannot find the pride and dignity which it requires for balance.

Of course, all of us will agree that these tend to be narrow. Yet, though we may agree that the world can do for another year or two without another avalanche of papers on this or that minor incident in world history, I wonder if we have recognized sufficiently that these researches are the bones on which neophyte historieans sharpen their teeth and master their art, which requires that they gain the perspective which is uniquely that of the historian. It is the historian's task to look behind; he will not accept the surface meaning, the immediate justification, the superficial explanation. He knows that all life is ambiguous, that every history represents a complex of causes - social, religious, political and idiosyncratic. He learns that there are no neat explanation; and so, eight and ten years ago many of these historians were among the first to tell us that the simple and neat explanation of our involvement in Viet Nam were far too pat to explain and to justify. These men were among the first to raise the flag of caution, and this caste of mind is increasingly important to a nation which tends to look for simple answers or to changes in leadership for the solution to complex problems.

I am, by graduate training, an historian, and as a Rabbi I draw the subject matter of my history from our Jewish tradition. I would like to illustrate the historian's caste of mind by taking as my text a place many of you have seen and that, God willing, all of you may see — the impressive table top fortress of Masada in Israel. It is a magnificently thrilling sight. You stand on the floor of the Dead Sea shore; above you towers two thousand feet of sheer rock cliff; nature at its most primitive and its most powerful. From the top, you can cast your eye through 360 degrees of horizon. To the west you will see the desolation of the Judean hills; to the north and to the east you will see the depression, the silence, the head of the Dead Sea. To the south you will see the continuing emptiness of the Wadi Arabah. You sense that you are seeing the world as it was before the children of men entered upon it.

Once you have managed the serpentine climb up the sheer face of the cliff, you find on the two plus acres of the flat top many of the most magnificent of the ruins of a land that is filled with ruins. In the last decades of the last pre-Christian century, the Idumean king of the Judeans, Herod, built here a fortress-citadel; and he filled this top with palaces, storerooms cisterns, barracks rooms, and an arsenal; and on the north space of the cliff, he hung down a three-tiered palace villa built by Judean architects who rivaled the imagination and skill of a Frank Lloyd Wright. The villa's three tiers hang down the godlest part of the mountain; and their balustrades, and balconies, and porches, and columns, and baths, and private rooms are among the most magnificent a man can imagine. The beauty of the surroundings and the extent of the buildings have drawn to Masada men and women, tourists and historians from all over the world. The Jewish heart particularly has been impressed by the history implicit in this citadel. In the debris that was found on the second tier of the palace ville of King Herod,

archaeologists uncovered three skeletons, the skeleton of a young man in his early twenties, of a young woman apparently his wife, and of a child. Near them they found her braids, the child's sandals, the link chain of the man's armors, and all manner of household equipment. These three were apparently among the 960 men, women, and children who held out on Masada's top for seven years between the years 65 of the common era and 73, during the Judean rebellion against the iron boot of Rome; and, if you look down, you will see on the floor of the Dead Sea Valley the neat square legion camps, seven of them. Ten thousand Roman legionnaires encamped against this fortress; and, all around this great fortress-citadel, you can see the circumferencial wall built there by the auxiliaries of these Roman legionnaires— to prevent escape. The historian Josephus tells us that ten thousand military auxiliaries - slaves - were used by the Roman military commanders to build this wall and to build high the great heap of debris and stone raised against the west wall in order to carry a shielded tower four stories high, from which the Roman hung the great battering ram whose iron-headed log ultimately breached the walls of the fortress. You see the Roman camp. You see the strategy by which the Romans took the citadel; you see where the skeletons were found and history comes alive - a history which is uniquely important to this generation. For Masada is a symbol that the Jewish people will not sit patiently awaiting the Messianic freedom. Masada is the statement that our people struck out and demanded their freedom. We are thirsty for freedom and will insist upon it now. Not surprisingly, the army in Israel uses Masada for many of its breveting ceremonies. At night, newly commissioned officers are brought to the top of Masada where they light their torches symbolically from the bravery and the courage of their ancestors.

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Herod, they were free. And they did not need, because they had their freedom,

Masada speaks to the Jewish soul; it is in a sense a sermon in stone - a very impressive place. Now one might be tempted to leave Masada alone; it speaks its message effectively - emphatically - but an historian cannot. And so one of the great soldiers of Israel, who happens also to be an archaeologist, Yigdal Yadin, some years ago, began the extensive excavation and concurrent rehabilitation of Masada. He could not leave Masada in its ruin, in its simplicity. The historian must know; even though there is danger that his knowledge will smudge or blur something of the effectiveness of the sermon. Yadin found many things at Masada. He found a new sermon. As he uncovered the great palaces - there are several at Masada's top - as he uncovered the lavish quarters of the generals of Herod's army, he discovered that those who, eighty years later, had defended Masada eschewed these luxurious places and built their humble dwellings in the casement, the double perimeter wall. Masada is defended in the first instance by a double wall which runs along the edge of the cliff. Inside that wall Herod built the barracks rooms, the storerooms, and the arsenals for his troops. But, when the defenders of Masada came there in the year 65, they did not build their homes in the palaces, they went to this casement wall; and they made the rooms even smaller. Here they built a dormitory, here a school room, here was a place where they washed their clothes, and here a kitchen where they cooked their food. Herod was rich. Herod had the great palaces; Herod was the master builder; but Herod, interestingly, was not a free man. Herod built Masada because he feared for his life. He was a puppet of Rome, and he feared that the complex of international policies would cause Rome to give over his dominion to Cleopatra or to another. He built Masada so that he would have a place to defend himself if that untoward event came to pass. These the last defenders of Masada were poor, and they were not noble; but unlike Herod, they were free. And they did not need, because they had their freedom,

to live in sumptuous surroundings - freedom surrounded them and encouraged their lives.

Yadin found other things; he found that in the casement walls these people apparently had built for themselves one room slightly larger than the rest apparently as a synagogue. They had taken an assembly room, put four tiers of benches around its walls; and it was here they read aloud the Torah where God proclaims freedom unto the Land. And, in the floor of that room, Yadin's spades and the spades of those who worked with him came across ancient scrolls, part of the Book of Deuteronomy, part of a Prophecy of Ezekial, buried there by pious men and women who had come to Masada to defend what could be defended of Judean self determination.

He found in another part of the casement dwellings another scroll, a Hebrew scroll of the Wisdom of Ben Sirach. This book was written by a Jerusalem merchant as a literary testament to his sons some two centuries before the common era. It is a book very much like the Book of Proverbs in our Bible, and this particular scroll is important because until Modern times we had only Greek translations of the original; and this scroll is in the original Hebrew. We are closer now to the original text. The historian knows he will come across things which blur and make difficult the simple reconstruction of a place; in another casement room, Yadin came across another scroll. This scroll was a strange one - it was a collection of hymns to be sung to accompany the Sabbath sacrifice. What is strange about this scroll is its basic calendar, the chronology on which it is based, and the philosophy of pre-destination, which it teaches. It is nearly identical to a scroll found in caves some thirty miles up the Dead Sea above Qumram, found among the literary remains of the Dead Sea covenant people.

And so the question must be asked: "Who were the defenders of Masada?" Yadin believes that these defenders were the Zealots, the most militant, the most liberty loving, the most determined of the Judeans who fought against Rome during the first century. But here we have a sectarian scroll. Were Dead Sea covenants sectarians the defenders of Masada? If so, it would be strange for the doctrine of these people tended to be pacifistic. Perhaps we have here an indication that pacificism itself is a relative virtue to be set aside when the survival of the people and the nation is at stake, or that scroll may have simply found its way here in the knapsack of one who wandered down along the shore of the Dead Sea until he came to Masada, who had found this scroll and brought it with him; or was brought here by a lone survivor of this Dead Sea community which itself was reduced by the Romans. What happened is not clear. But the innocence of the history, its straight-forwardness, its neatness, has been sundered; and the question has been raised: "Who were the last defenders of Masada?"

Yadin believes that they were the Zealots. We know a good deal about the Zealots. They first began to rebel against Rome in the year 4 of the common era. They were in a constant state of revolt for some fifty years. They resented Roman tyranny, Roman taxes, Roman domination, Roman restrictions on the worship in the Temple; and they disappeared from history after the defeat of 70. After the destruction of the Temple, most of them were taken captive and brought as slaves to Rome.

A close reading of Josephus, the historian of this period, by Solomon Zeitlin, has led him to question the identity of the defenders of Masada. He disagrees with Yadin. He does not believe that the defenders were the Zealots, nor does he believe that they were the desert covenant people. He believes that they belonged to a small group of Judeans who were professional anarchists

and professional assassins. They are called the Sicari'i. The word Sicari'i is a Latin word which describes a small dagger, the kind of dagger which could be hidden in the sleeve of a toga. These men were not unlike the professional anarchists who abounded in Russia in the last days of the Czar, men who used their Grek Orthodox faith to say: "Only God may rule over Man, no man may rule over another;" and went about Russia sowing turmoil by assassinating a count here or a government official there.

And so it was in first century Judea; these Sicari'i were opposed to all dominion save the dominion of God alone. They took literally the text in First Samuel in which the priest-prophet berates the Jews for demanding a king and says: "Only God shall be your ruler." In the cause of untrammelled freedom, these people went out, not only to attack Rome, but to attack the High Priests and the Royal house, and Judean generals, and all who had authority over another. Zeitlin's argument rests on several interesting facts. He notes that whoever came to Masada came there in the year 65 and remained there until the year 73; and not once is it told that the defenders of this fortress went out to ambush a Roman garrison, to plunder a Roman camp, to sow confusion in the Roman ranks.

We know that the Zealots who defended other fortresses - Jotapata or Herodian - constantly attacked the Roman army and did what damage they could; but not the defenders of Masada. On the other hand, Josephus tells us that the defenders of Masada attacked Jewish settlements. About ten miles up the coast from Masada, there is the community of En Gedi, a beautiful oasis, rising in the middle of this wilderness. The defenders of Masada attacked En Gedi and carried off slaves and plunder even though it was a Judean settlement. Zeitlin also bases himself on Josephus's reconstruction of the last speech of Eleazer,

the leader général of Masada, in which he encourages his men to accept a compact of suicide so that they will die free men. For they did not defend themselves to the last. Rather, once the wall had been breached and they knew that the Romans would be through the wall in a short time, they chose lots. Each man whose lot was chosen slew ten of those who remained. Then in turn they chose lots until only a few remained. They committed suicide and Josephus has put into the mouth of Eleazer his rallying call to this compact of death, and in it again and again Eleazer insists that 'Man must be free and the soul which is not free is worse than a slave - it has bought for itself a living death. Far better that we die as free men than to be enslaved by any man' - and so they did die on the last night before the final assault.

Zeitlin argues: The Sicari'i early in the war, came down to Masada, remained there quietly during the entire revolt hoping to build their own community and to be forgotten about. The Romans could delay reducing Masada for three years after the end of the war because these men were no danger to them; they were simply a group of anarchist assassins who had withdrawn as it were from the world, and having no immediate overlords could remain quiescent. Ultimately, Rome reduced the fortress simply to remove a potential source of danger. Masada is a shrine to Judean courage. If this reconstruction be true, Masada is also a shrine to the folly of men dominated by a single minded idea - the funeral pyre of fanatics who found every reason, as men occasionally do, to violate every decency and every ethical principle on the argument that the means justify the end.

Zeitlin has not fully proven his case; Yadin has not fully proven his case - the mystery of Masada remains. But I think I've told you enough about Masada

to show how historians must go about their work, to illustrate to the skeptical mind, the mind that reveres facts and seeks to understand them, their quality and their meaning, the mind which cannot be satisfied with superficiality, with simplicity, the mind which know that the dominoe theory or containment or pratings about the sacredness of one's pledged word is too simplistic and too superficial.

I've said enough, I believe, to illustrate the point that this nation has need, not only for the builders of machines, the engineers of speed, the technicians of defense, but of men and women whose minds are trained to the ambiguity of events - men and women who can send up warning signals that things are not as clean, clear, direct, and simple as they seem to be; that this nation has need of trained minds of many kinds. Perhaps it is time to review the relative values we place on different disciplines. It is time to take stock of these values and to question whether we have vested too much power and too much importance in one discipline at the expense of others which can give us the balance and the perspective and the political understanding which are so desperately required.

The mystery of human action,
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justice

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 & to look of the H.P. people like us of modern city
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 & Rosen must do the anecdotes instead and to stand
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no part in the fight - WRHS
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WRHS

American Jewish Archives

המכון ליהודי אמריקה
The American Jewish Archives

and one of the banned subjects - the wrong side of
the historical document, evidence so far as questions
to take another look at the history of violence,

Kaddish

Friday

Dec 8

Sunday

Dec 10

Those who passed away this week

ABRAM M. KAPLAN
GLADYS LITTMAN
BURTON N. SANDERS

CARRIE KOBLITZ KOHN
KARL FORCHHEIMER
JACK M. SHEPARD
SAM H. MEISTER
HAROLD M. THORMAN
ABRAM KOVAL
JESS C. FISHMAN
HYMAN H. MANDELZWEIG
LOUIS LITTMAN
LOUIS K. SUGARMAN
BERNARD FIELDS
ERNESTINE BLUME DEGROOT
JEROME SANFORD ROSE
JEANNE TALLISMAN
LEOPOLD ARNSTEIN
DAVID C. HABER
DR. EDWARD J. GREENE
ROSA KOBLITZ
LESLIE JOYCE HAAS
LINDA JOAN HAAS

Jahrzeit

