

From National Consensus to Political Dissent: The Rhetorical Uses of the Masada Myth in Israel¹

Ruth Amosy
ADARR, Tel-Aviv University
amosy@attglobal.net

Abstract This paper explores the rhetorical functions of myth and of cultural analogies in the making of consensus and dissents in the public sphere. It shows how a founding myth, the Masada story – first used to elicit national consensus and build a collective identity – has eventually turned into a reservoir of analogies fueling polemical discussions on the Middle East conflict. After a brief overview of the epideictic uses of the Masada myth, and of its progressive disintegration, the analysis focuses on the rhetorical uses of the analogies drawing on Masada in public controversies. Analyzing examples mainly borrowed from the media, it shows how these analogies are exploited by adverse parties in a contemporary debate characterized by polarization and passion. The breaking down of a unifying myth and its transformation into a tool of discord and divide is analyzed in the framework of a so-called *rhetoric of dissent*, in order to unveil the workings as well as the constructive function of public controversy.

Keywords: dissent, consensus, myth, analogy, rhetoric, polemical discourse, Masada

1. Introduction

In the framework of a *rhetoric of dissent* still to be elaborated and assessed, this paper focuses on the modalities and functions of polemical discourse in the democratic sphere. More specifically, it explores the role of an Israeli founding myth, Masada, in the making not only of consent, but also of dissent. Although the myth of Masada largely contributed to the construction of a national project and a collective identity in the founding years of the State of Israel, it eventually lost its status due to altered circumstances and renewed scientific investigation. First used in the epideictic mode as an *exemplum* eliciting strong identification, it is presently used on the deliberative level as a reservoir of multiple and often contradictory analogies. These analogies emphasize and sharpen dissent as they fuel polemical debates on foreign policies and competing approaches to the Middle East conflict.

¹ This work is part of a global research on polemical discourse in the democratic sphere sponsored by the Israeli Science Foundation (ISF, project 734/08).

Polemical discourse (cfr. AMOSSY 2010, 2011) is at the heart of a rhetoric based on dissent rather than on a common search for consent, and as such, it presents a peculiar way of conflict management in the democratic sphere. It will be here understood as a discourse implying an «antagonistic counter-discourse» and «aiming at a double strategy: demonstration of the thesis and refutation-disqualification of the adverse thesis» (ANGENOT 1982: 34; my translation). The opposition takes the form of a strong polarization between two stances mutually excluding each other: «dichotomization radicalizes the debate, making it difficult – sometimes impossible – to resolve» (DASCAL 2008: 27). In this dialogical and agonistic framework, each participant tries to appropriate the other's discourse in order to better attack it. Mostly

polemical discourse is a disqualifying discourse, meaning it attacks a target – and puts at the service of this dominant pragmatic purpose [...] all the array of its rhetorical and argumentative procedures (KERBRAT-ORECCHIONI 1980: 12; my translation).

As such, it is often (but not necessarily) accompanied by passion and verbal violence. The structure of a polemical exchange includes a Proponent, an Opponent, but also a Third party – each of which can be embodied by various actors (PLANTIN 2003: 383). These features provide the main criteria that can help us distinguish between polemical discourse and other forms of public debate, in order to examine how polemical exchanges are elicited and fueled by various analogies between Masada and the present Israeli situation.

I will first briefly summarize the outstanding research achieved by historians and sociologists on the role of Masada in the Israeli collective memory, and on the construction of a national identity. I will then discuss their illuminating analysis of the progressive fading away of the myth, accompanied by a disintegration of national consensus. The main purpose of my research is, however, the investigation of what happens once the mythical story of Masada turns into a polemical tool, and the epideictic mode is replaced by the deliberative one. I will show that once criticized and demystified, the Masada story provides arguments by analogy through which the original narrative, far from uniting the audience, gives birth to polemical exchanges and deepens an unbridgeable gap between opponent parties, thus constructing polarized political identities.

2. Mythmaking and national unity

First of all, let us recall in a few words what is meant by the *Masada myth*. The prevailing Israeli version of the Masada episode, based on Flavius Josephus *History of the Jewish Wars*, proposes the following narrative: when the Roman imperial army crushed the Jewish revolt and conquered Jerusalem, destroying the Second Temple, the surviving Zealots opposing the Romans fled to the fortress of Masada, on the top of a steep cliff near the Dead Sea. The fortress was surrounded and put under siege by the Romans. After a heroic battle led by a small group against a huge army, the Zealots, realizing there is no more hope, were convinced by their leader, Elazar Ben Yair, to choose a heroic death and commit collective suicide rather than be enslaved and dishonored by the conqueror. When the Romans entered the place, they were met only by dead bodies and silence. Josephus mentions that the Roman soldiers could

not but admire the fortitude of their enemy. This happened in 73 A.D, a few years after the beginning of the Jewish Great Revolt against the Romans in 66 A.D.

The inquiries into the Masada narrative show that its memory has been repressed for two thousand years by the orthodox Jews, and was no part of the Jewish religious tradition because of the choice of suicide that sharply contradicts the supreme value put by Judaism on life and survival. The Masada episode and the character of its leader, Elazar Ben Yair, became the center of attention only in the secular Zionist culture, in search of models of military bravery as well as Jewish historical roots in the land of Israel. Ben-Yehuda emphasizes the role of Shmaria Guttman, who acted as a «moral entrepreneur» (BEN-YEHUDA 1995: 235): he brought Masada to the fore in the 30s and the 40s by modeling it into a heroic and exemplary tale, while establishing a series of rites (such as the famous treks to the top of the mountain), that created a strong experience. He eventually convinced Yigal Yadin, who had been Chief of Staff of the IDF under Ben-Gurion before devoting his time to archeology, to excavate Masada. Ben-Yehuda shows how Guttman as well as Yadin made important changes in the original narrative through a series of meaningful omissions and additions that created the mythical version summarized in the previous paragraph.

Thus, the nature of the defenders of Masada was altered: they actually were a sect called Sicarii (from *sica*, the small knife, they used to murder people) described by Flavius Josephus as fanatics killing and robbing other Jews, and eventually forced by the Jewish population to flee Jerusalem long before the siege of the city. It is in these circumstances that they found refuge in Masada. They carried out a raid in the village of Ein Gedi, close to the mountain, where they massacred the inhabitants to plunder the settlement. The siege of Masada by the Roman army took between 4 and 8 months - and not three years, as is generally said. Moreover, there seems to be no traces of fighting. Elazar Ben Yair had to pronounce two speeches to convince the group of the necessity to commit collective suicide, and not one, as is told; the fact that other choices were possible (fighting until the bitter end, concentrating forces at one point to allow for escape of the others, etc.) is ignored. The main point here is that the story has been rewritten so as to fit a heroic tale nowhere to be found in Flavius Josephus, the sole and exclusive source of the event. Thus the Zionist revival of the memory of Masada changed the original text in order to endow it with an exemplary mythical dimension at the service of a national project: to unite the Jewish settlers around a shared identity rooted in antiquity, and to insure that they will be willing to defend their fatherland until death - «never again shall Masada fall» (according to the famous 1927 poem of Lamdan, an oath taken by the soldiers sworn in at a solemn Masada ceremony).

All the studies on the Masada myth (among which ZERUBAVEL 1994, 1995), insist on its function as a model of heroic resistance (rather die than surrender) contrasting with the figure of the Diaspora Jew and moreover, of the Jews as sheep led to the slaughter in the pogroms and, mainly, during the Shoah. It contributed to reinforce the identity of the new Jew as proud and brave - ready to fight and die in order to preserve his autonomy and freedom. No wonder it was taught in youth movements, in schools, in guided tours and at the army (with an impressive swearing in ceremony at the top of the mountain). It became part of a process of socialization through which the settlers and immigrants could integrate into the new nation by identifying with a consensual model.

Zerubavel (1994) distinguishes however between this *activist* tale and the tragic commemorative narrative of Masada that developed mainly after the Yom Kippur

War and the realization by the Israelis of their vulnerability. This version does not oppose the Shoah's paradigm, it rather draws an analogy between the two situations of besiegement and persecution. Suicide testifies here to a «situation of utter helplessness and despair» (Ivi: 193). The myth of Masada «as a model to emulate becomes a historical metaphor for a major national trauma that should be avoided at all means» (Ivi: 194). Zerubavel considers that the two narratives coexist in contemporary Israeli culture, and are called upon according to varying circumstances.

3. Conflicting interpretations of the myth and the rise of public controversy

It seems, however, that the polysemy of the narrative and the various interpretations it can elicit put at risk the nature and the functions of the myth. In order to be endowed with a mythical value, a story has to be presented in fixed, simple terms (it is stereotyped and dichotomized), conferring upon it a shared symbolic significance and making it into a model to be emulated. As such, the myth of Masada participated in epideictic discourses (official speeches, educational discourses of youth movements, guides' stories, school textbooks, etc.) where praise and blame reinforce the audience's communion and prepare it to act in the future upon the enhanced common values. The myth of Masada thus appeared as a locus of general consensus and identification. Of course, there were discussions from the very start about this univocal message. But as a whole, the massive reliance of the dominant discourse on the Zionist version of Masada allowed for its consecration as a myth calling for various forms of rituals. The opening up of the historical analogy to divergent and competing interpretations was the first step to the demythologizing of Masada. This can be seen in the public debate that both Zerubavel and Guttman document, from the 70s to the middle of the 90s.

This debate raged in the academic as well as in the political sphere. I will briefly expose some of the debates mentioned by the specialists of the Masada case to show what points of divergence they displayed, and how the breaking down of the myth's hegemony gave way to multiple uses of the historical example that nourished a public controversy, thus contributing to map the political field.

One of the main attacks on the message of the Masada myth was its reformulation in terms of Masada complex or syndrome. The latter refers to the feeling of being besieged by hostile forces and is at the center of both public and scientific discourse. In psychological terms, Bar Tal has defined the Masada syndrome as «a state in which members of a group hold a central belief that the rest of the world has negative behavioral intentions towards that group», meaning they believe «that they are lonely in the world, that there is a threat to their existence, and that they cannot expect help from anyone in time of need» (BAR-TAL 1983: 5). In a scholarly article entitled «Siege mentality in Israel» (cfr. BAR-TAL 1992), Bar-Tal and Entebi explain through these concepts the Israeli way of managing the Middle-East conflict, and emphasize the necessity to take it into consideration in any negotiation toward peace. The political uses circulated in the media exploit the notion of a *Masada complex* as a tool of polemical criticism rather than as an analytical tool. Sticking to the symbolism of the Masada story is described as an attitude rejecting compromises and leading to suicidal politics. This critical use dates from the 70s and is well documented: it was launched by *Newsweek's* journalist Stewart Alsop who talked, in 1971, about a Masada spirit contrary to compromises and quoted Joseph Sisco accusing Golda Meir of having a Masada complex that prevents any settlement of the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict (GUTTMAN 1995: 244). The opponents claimed that this Masada complex indeed existed, but that it was rooted in facts and conforms to reality- it is a «national neurosis; and it is, in some measure at least, a fairly reasoned response to the facts of the outside world» (Yaacov Reutal in GUTTMAN 1995: 245). This discussion was accompanied by a conflict between the image of Masada as a model of heroism, and as an anti-model promoting, or leading to, suicide – e.g. what Israel does not want to become (cfr. SHARGEL BAILA 1979). The conflicting interpretations put the emphasis either on heroic and uncompromising self-defense, or on the suicidal nature of uncompromising attitudes. Two conflicting positions thus developed: the one, justifying the Masada complex as the only way of self-protection – it is roughly the claim of the right wing; the other one, calling the Israelis to free themselves from the Masada complex and siege mentality in order to achieve peace – it is the claim of the left wing in its attacks upon the *hawks* (already to be found in Boaz Evron, Yediot Aharonot in GUTTMAN 1995: 245).

4. The use of Masada in the current polemical debates

Let us see now how these contradictory uses of the mythical narrative participate in the current debate on Israeli politics in the media and on the internet in the recent years. First of all, it appears that the references to Masada are exploited in various discussions bearing on official circumstances - the visit of President W. Bush to Israel and Masada in 2008, Netanyahu's speech to the American Congress in 2011 – or at moments of crisis – the battles of Jenin (2002) or of Gaza (2008), the episode of the Turkish Flotilla (May 2011), the Palestinian initiative to be recognized by the UN (June 2011). *Diversely interpreted and mobilized, the former Masada myth becomes a reservoir of analogies at the service of political argumentations* - argumentation by analogy being, with syllogistic argumentation (or rather the use of enthymemes), one of the two main categories distinguished by Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Analogy is generally considered logically weaker than syllogistic reasoning, as the connection between the terms – A is to B as C is to D – cannot be very strict and is liable to varying interpretations. The nature of analogy with its inherent lack of accuracy is actually what secures both the argumentative nature of the polemical uses of Masada and the variety of claims it can support on both sides of the controversy.

This is clearly illustrated by the diverse reinterpretations of Masada in the comments elicited by President Bush's visit to Israel and to Masada with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2008, at the occasion of Israel's 60th anniversary celebration. In his solemn address to the Knesset on May 15, 2008, Bush elaborated on the famous quote accompanying the official version of the myth:

And earlier today I visited Masada, an inspiring monument to courage and sacrifice. At this historic site Israeli soldiers swear an oath: «Masada shall never fall again». Citizens of Israel: Masada shall never fall again, and America will be at your side.²

As could be expected, this declaration won President Bush vibrant applauses at the Knesset. He takes the official myth of Masada on its face value, and uses it to make a strong commitment – playing on the ambiguity of the *and*. Is the connective intended

² <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbushknessetaddress2008.htm>; all quotations from President Bush's speech are borrowed from this website.

to link two discrete elements – the defense of Israel by its army that will prevent its fall, and as a supplement, the engagement of the United States to stand besides Israel? Or is it introducing an argument of causality – Masada (Israel) shall not fall because the US will not let it happen? The ambiguity allows for enhancing both the glorious image of a valiant army capable of self-defense, and the indefectible support of a mighty friend and ally. It pays tribute to what Israel has achieved on its own while reiterating the American promise to stay at its side (those are the last words of the speech: «and you have built a mighty democracy that will endure forever and can always count on the United States to be at your side»). Interestingly enough, it relies on the myth of heroism while altering the image of the isolated few, forced into a dead end situation: with the US at its side, uniting with its goals of self-defense, Israel is no more an endangered minority doomed to end in collective death:

Israel's population may be just over seven million. But when you confront terror and evil, you are 307 million strong, because the United States of America stands with you.

However, the trip to Masada and the reference to the myth elicited various polemical reactions in the media from the right as well as from the left. In the forum following the Ynet article on Bush's speech, many remarks of appreciation and gratitude coexist with comments linked to the rocket attacks on Ashkelon that took place at that very moment, and the bombings that plague the daily life of Shderot and other Israeli locations. These comments express irritation at the reference to the myth of Masada, to be replaced according to them by practical management of the problem on the ground.³ «Masada might hold, but many kassam (rockets) will continue to fall here». «Masada shall not fall, but the State is on its way», «Masada? Let's first care for Shderot and Ashkelon, it is more important», «Go to Ashkelon, and you will see people committing suicide every day». Besides the necessity to replace the myth by a response to current security problems, there are some demands for retaliation: «Let Bush give Olmert instructions to erase Gaza, instead of talking about Masada. Quit Masada, we have to erase Gaza». In short, the posts dismiss the reference to Masada as cut off from reality and superfluous, giving birth to hollow discourses instead of immediate action. Some of them also reject Bush's reinterpretation of the myth – the few that are now the many, insisting on the idea that the Israelis can rely only on themselves (or, in one post, on God). It is noteworthy that these comments are accompanied by some violent attacks on leftists: «The leftists will find a way to provoke Masada's fall even for the 9th time», «Bush here is a scoop, Masada is falling but not because of Iran or Syria, but because of enemies with blue IDs» (the Israeli ID). Trying to negotiate with the Palestinians, meaning here with the terrorists, is interpreted as treachery.

Alongside these reactions, we can find polemical comments coming both from the extreme right, and from the leftists. Among the first ones, Ezra Halevi deplors, in an article published on April 10, 2008 in Channel 7, a religious nationalist Israeli channel, that Bush was taken to Masada and not to the Western (the Wailing) Wall in Jerusalem, deemed too controversial. He quotes media analyst Dr. Lerner who estimates that

³ Talkbacks of “Bush at the Knesset. Masada will never fall again” on Ynet, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1324791>. All translations from the Hebrew are mine.

instead of visiting places associated with Israel's rebirth or ancient life – the idea is a photo op at a place remembered in history for the group of Jews who committed suicide rather than fall captive to the Romans.⁴

Heavily emphasized and depreciated, Masada as a suicide story is contrasted to life, understood as the ancient roots of the land of Israel exhibiting the historical continuity that is at the heart of the State's legitimacy. It is also contrasted with the rebirth expressed not so much in the creation of the State of Israel, than in 1967 conquered localities such as East Jerusalem or the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. The symbolic places of Jewish sacred life, and the territories deemed to be part of the Great Israel, are thus promoted at the expense of the secular Zionist myth that never conquered the heart of the orthodox Jews. The new messianic Zionism plays down the myth on which the State fed during many years, replacing it with its own mythology.

The suicide motif is also ironically used against PM Olmert, who was talking at the time about his plans to negotiate a peace treaty with the Palestinians – entailing territorial concessions concerning part of the occupied territories viewed by the religious nationalists as belonging by divine right to the Jews. «PM Olmert, whose critics warn he is following a suicidal path with the Palestinians, is going to visit Masada with Bush» (*Ibid.*) : this ironic comment is an interesting occurrence of the use of the Masada analogy to condemn a plan of peace to be achieved through negotiation and compromises. It shows how the suicidal dimension of the Masada story that provides many analogies for the argumentation of the left (the *doves*), can be used as a polemical tool against the peace process denounced as a major mistake leading to self-destruction.

This right wing article is echoed on April 15, 2008, by the leftist main columnist of Ha-aretz, Akiba Eldar, under the title: «Don't go to Masada».⁵ Eldar's criticism on the choice of Masada for Bush's official visit relies on completely different arguments. His main point is to present the Masada story as a tale of suicidal extremism. Suggesting to organize a tour of *Masada-Now*, he drily states:

If Olmert insists on providing a close-up examination of the legend of brutal and pointless Jewish radicalism, it is not necessary to drag Bush to the shores of the Dead Sea. (*Ibid.*)

Army officers can show the US President what is going on in the occupied territories, including settlers trapped in dangerous places they cannot leave for want of means, mortal gaps in the Separation Fence that are left open to accommodate the Extremists' annexation plans, segregated roads reserved to Jews that make them into easy prey for terrorist attacks, etc. The journalist thus uses the Masada analogy in an unexpected way: he attacks a faulty politics of occupation that has actually turned different places into a besieged Masada for the Jews. In other words, a new Masada situation has been created under the pressure of the extremist right wing settlers. The warning issued in this article makes an additional use of Masada: it strongly expresses the necessity for the Israeli government headed by Olmert to keep away from the extremists who bring about this suicidal situation:

⁴ www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/125856

⁵ <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/don-t-go-to-masada-1.243916>

A Prime Minister who believes that if we do not leave most of the territories, Israel is “done for”, should not allow himself to be led by a fundamentalist minority, whose belief in a supreme power ignores reality. There is nothing for Olmert at Masada. (*Ibid.*)

The conflicting uses of Masada show how two opposed parties promoting incompatible values and contradictory politics, can illuminate and exploit various dimensions of a quite malleable analogy. Following the example set by the 70s debates, the demythologized Masada story is, however, mostly used to denounce the uncompromising attitude of the right. This line of argument was maintained during the last ten years: many articles, blogs and talkbacks see in the stiff and stubborn attitude of Israel towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict an imminent danger to the State. The interpretation of Masada as a story of collective suicide deriving from faulty politics is used as an argument against the present government and its head, Benyamin Netanyahu. In our days, writes Uri Yzhar in his 2011 essay, some people reject the idea of Masada as an example of heroism and rather see it as story of «superfluous extremism that eventually led to a mass massacre without achieving any worthy political purpose» (YZHAR 2011: 6). For him, it is the right wing’s obstinate attitude of refusal that leads Israel to political isolation, to «a crazy Masada» (*Ibid.*) – a state of siege and a collective suicide, so that the vision of a new Masada is no more a fantasy (*Ivi*: 152). The analogy with Masada emphasizes here gratuitous and sterile political extremism, as well as suicidal behavior. Demythologized, Masada illustrates a mistaken attitude rather than an act of heroism or a threatening situation of besiegement.

An even more catastrophist use of Masada appears in a blog called «Crazy country», where Adam Keller writes on July 16, 2011: «From generation to generation, Jerusalem was not forgotten. But the Masada mentality wasn’t forgotten neither» (KELLER 2011). Denouncing the interpretation of any criticism as a sign of anti-Semitism, warning against the politicians who only care for their own rating, and against the settlers in the occupied territories who enjoy excessive rights, Keller announces the coming *tsunami* that will sweep everything away. He even evokes an apocalyptic vision of the land engulfed in an atomic explosion coming from Dimona (the Israeli atomic plant), and dryly finishes on the statement that «Masada number 2» is no touristic attraction. Masada thus refers to a *mentality* built on self-righteousness and arrogant disregard for the common welfare, culminating in self destruction and disaster.

In this perspective, an article called «Masada shall not fall again – indeed?»⁶ deals with the refusal of the Israeli government led by Bibi (Netanyahu), Lieberman and Ishay to comply with American demands to stop the building in the occupied territories and East Jerusalem. It also stigmatizes a politics that deepens the divisions among Israelis (as well as among Palestinians). Deploring these fatal divisions – namely, the so-called *lebanonization* of the area, and the growing disagreement between Israel and the United States - the author, Oded Regev, wonders: «What motivates these people to ‘commit suicide’? Is it the suicidal instinct proper to the defenders of Masada?». As we can see, the suicide is no more a heroic reaction to a desperate situation, but a politics of internal and external division freely adopted, and blind to the inevitable results of its mistaken choices.

⁶ <http://www.amitologit.mysay.co.il/articles/ShowArticle.aspx?articlePI=aaajtc>

We can find these polemical uses in comments on the episode of the flotilla and the subsequent crisis with Turkey. A blog on the same subject chooses the title: «Crisis between Israel and Turkey: are we going back to Masada?». ⁷ The author talks not only about the Marmara, but also about the fact that the government is not taking any political initiative to minimize Israel's isolation in the international arena.

We can call it a Masada policy, the bottom line of which is liberty or suicide. A country behaving as if the West was the Roman governor Flavius Silva and the Israel leader Elazar Ben Yair, leaves the Jews with only one possibility: the destiny of the thousand besieged in Masada. (*Ibid.*)

The author insists on self-inflicted siege – asking if Israel intends to solve the problem by closing up the sky with Iron domes (the new Israeli anti-missiles). Quoting Ben Yair's discourse about the dishonor awaiting Jewish women and the slavery to be imposed on their children, he deconstructs the historical analogy: Israel is not in the same situation and has quite other possibilities than the ones suggested by Ben Yair, so that political and economic suicide should be no option for the Jewish State. Thus Masada is also taken as an image of siege originating not from external imperatives, but rather from the crazy decision to lock oneself up. The besiegement is what the Israelis, and not the outside world, inflict upon themselves. When evoking uncompromising politics leading to disaster, Masada mainly refers to the Masada complex discussed from the 70s and later defined by Bar-Tal as the Masada syndrome or the besieged mentality. A paper entitled: «Gaza besieged – Israel under siege, from individual complex to collective psychosis» (6.6.2010) takes this psychological angle at the basis of Bar-Tal's research to blame Netanyahu, diagnosed as suffering from a persecution complex and as a result, imposing siege on Gaza – and on Israel. The Masada syndrome of some of the Israeli leaders expresses itself in bravery, on the one hand, and the feeling that everyone is against us, on the other hand – thus submitting Israel to personal hallucinations leading to a harmful political agenda. Hanan Nave (12.09.2011, Ynet), makes a more sophisticated reference to the Masada syndrome in order to criticize Israelis' obsessions rather than the leaders' psychology. The people of Israel feel as a tiny threatened country surrounded by enemies – as a famous Israeli song puts it, *The whole world is against us* – and, the author adds, we like it this way (it is the title of the paper). According to him, the perpetual fear of being isolated and faced by an existential threat can only lead to a hazardous policy since «there is nothing to lose». Instead of favoring moderate political decisions and compromises, it is pushing towards inconsiderate actions that can bring about a serious deterioration of the situation. This analysis is applied to the case of the crisis with Turkey after the episode of the Marmara flotilla, the main claim being that the Masada syndrome makes it difficult to give up, to compromise, or to apologize – an attitude that can only make things worse. This paper in Ynet, a widely read online news Website, was followed by abundant talkbacks (296 as of April 13, 2012) that displayed persistent dissensions around the interpretations and the uses of the Masada analogy. Some of the posts supported the author, claiming that «Bibi and Lieberman lead us to a second Masada» (meaning suicide and destruction). Other posts denied the very notion of a *Masada syndrome*, pointing out that the whole world being against us is a fact, and not a complex – a position already voiced in the 70s when Golda was accused of having a Masada

⁷ <http://davidmerhav.wordpress.com7>

complex. One of the internet users emphasized that «Masada and siege are not a syndrome but a bitter reality». Another wrote: «It seems to me that whoever is not experiencing a Masada syndrome nowadays is the insane one. Or that he is a perfect idiot – or a PhD in communication at Sapir College». In this *flame* typical of online exchanges, the erudite exploitation of the Masada syndrome is condemned as lack of realism and blindness, but it also expresses the irritation caused by harsh criticism upon Israeli politics. These reactions clearly come from the right wing – the first internet user bluntly accuses the left unable to digest the surrounding reality, and rejoices in the fact that most of the people who hardly finished school can read the map better than the learned writer obsessed with clichés such as «conquered territory» or «domination of another people». Thus the *Masada syndrome* as a denunciation of a siege mentality entailing wrong policies, is rejected as part of a leftist terminology stereotyping and thwarting the surrounding world. The leftists are in turn accused of developing a *Stockholm syndrome* (a reference to the Nobel Prize for Peace). Eventually, the leftists are defined as traitors: one of the internet users asks whether, «in order to get out of Masada, one has to collaborate with the enemy». Such is the polemical debate between the right wing denying the reinterpretation of Masada as a syndrome, and the leftists who see in the Masada story an episode of mistaken behavior leading to self-inflicted isolation and international hostility, and an intransigent and uncompromising policy the result of which can only end in disaster.

The same references to Masada as an example of intransigent, suicidal behavior are made at the moment of Mahmud Abbas' proposition to recognize the Palestinian State at the UN in 2011. In «Bibi's Masada complex», we can read:

Instead of trying to prevent the catastrophe awaiting Israel after the September vote at the UN through negotiations without prerequisites and the presentation of a real map, Bibi prefers to put the whole country into a state of Masada syndrome (everybody is against us as we already said)⁸.

Netanyahu, as prime Minister and head of the right wing party “Likud”, appears as a privileged target of the references to Masada. Thus we find violent attacks against his speech in Congress on May 24, 2011 when, following a period of tension with the Obama administration, Netanyahu addressed the American Congress to make the case for Israel and present his point of view on the conflict resolution. A paper entitled «Bibi's Masada Complex» by Ari Shavit in *Ha-aretz* depicts Netanyahu as a very gifted speaker, but as a politician who displays no generosity and does not know how to make a breakthrough: he stands before the world «like the rock of Masada». According to Shavit, he does not know how to defend the Jewish Israeli existence: seeing the coming downfall of Israel in the area of security and politics, he “delivers a grand Masada speech”. Here, the Masada physical rock serves as a metaphor for political inflexibility, and the speech of Elazar Ben Yair that brought about mass suicide as an analogy for Netanyahu's brilliant but lethal rhetoric.

The same blame comes from a Palestinian Israeli Parliament member, Mohamed Bracha from the Hadash Party who, on May 30, 2011, called Netanyahu's speech «the Masada speech of the head of the realm of Sparta». This means for him «a speech of conquest and a speech defying History. A speech of going with your head against the wall». If Netanyahu is a brilliant speaker and addresses the Americans in

⁸ <http://cafe.themarker.com/post/2263407/>

excellent English, «he is nonetheless an illiterate in all that concerns the language of the area». Here again, Masada and Elazar Ben Yair provide a paradigm of dangerous rhetorical speech, covering up a total misunderstanding of the situation. Moreover, Bracha connects Masada to Sparta, deliberately mingling two completely different references: a small group of besieged Jews fighting the powerful Roman army, and the tremendous military power of the Greek city of Sparta. The emphasis is not put any more on Israel's helplessness in a desperate situation, but on the contrary, on its strong military power characterized by a total lack of sensitivity?

For the left, one more element of the Masada story allowing for a severe denunciation of the present situation is the fanaticism of the Sicarii, to whom explicit references are made. In this analogy relying on the demythologization of Masada, the defenders of the fortress are no more (falsely) presented as worthy Jews or Zealots, but as the fanatic sect depicted by Josephus Flavius. They provide an analogy with contemporary groups who, by their national and religious extremism, are destroying the country. In an essay published online, Uri Izhar mentions

the people among us who have messianic expectations, the extremists and the Sicarii who will do anything, including violence and political assassination, in order to cause the failure of any attempt at political settlement with the Palestinians, at pacifying the area and improving Israel's status in the international community. (IZHAR 2012: 6)

A report written by a peace organization about the occupied territories and put online, denounces the so-called Judea and Samaria settlers and their blunt rejection of any kind of compromise: in their eyes, «each caravan is Masada» - meaning they are ready to defend to the bitter end each tiny illegal settlement made up of one or two caravans that the government wants to dismantle. Another example of such extremism can be found in Marzel's (a well-known extreme right activist) statement about Hebron: when the journalist Nahum Barnea asks him «what is Hebron for you?» he answers «for me, Hebron is Masada – the last station» (Barnea 1999 [1993]: 247).

An article entitled «The Lords of the Land: the Masada Syndrome»⁹, drawing again on Bar-Tal's formula, develops a comparison between the actual occupiers of the conquered territories and the extremists who, 2000 years ago, were fighting not only against the Romans but also against the moderate Jews defined as collaborators. The new settlers are presented in sharp contrast to the Israeli citizens living in the 1967 borders. In this strong polarization (analogous to the conflict between the global Jewish population and the Sicarii in the 1st century AD), they are depicted as fanatics living by their own law and trying to impose on the whole country their nationalist and messianic program (meaning the adoption of a religious ideology linked to the Greater Israel, annexation of the Palestinian territories, refusal to negotiate with the Arabs...). They are thus said to lead the country to another Masada: if no government can stop them, the author states, they will bring upon Israel another 2000 years of exile. This discourse echoes various protests against a government too compliant towards the extremists who break the law and force their views on national decisions (we could already find it in Eldar's warning to previous Prime Minister Olmert). Thus the reference to Masada and the Sicarii unveils a fracture between the

⁹<http://www.reader.co.il/article/65587/%D7%90%D7%93%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%94%D7%90%D7%A8%D7%A5%D7%AA%D7%A1%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%AA%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%93%D7%94>

left and what the latter perceives as the extreme right, and fuels an internal polemics on the policy to be adopted in the territories conquered in 1968.

Another, less expected use of Masada is the analogy between the Masada fighters and the Palestinians, or between the Masada siege and the situation in Palestine. This is a complete reversal of the original analogy that gave birth to the myth, since it is applied to the enemy and inverts the roles of the besieged and the besiegers. It can be compared to the reversal of the mythical David-Goliath analogy in a situation where Israel has the military power. Interestingly enough, its source is to be found in the IDF operation against Jenin in 2002, when the city was under siege and dead corpses were lying in the streets. The Israeli officers called the fight «the Palestinian Masada» – a label at once reported by the much read Israeli newspaper *Ydiot Aharonot*.

The analogy between Masada and the Palestinians came back at the time of operation Cast Lead, a 3-week armed conflict during which the Israelis attacked the strip of Gaza governed by Hamas in order to stop rocket fire into Israel and smuggling of arms into Gaza. It started on December 27, 2008. On January 6, 2009, we can find in the Marker café a blog entitled «Masada/Gaza will fall again»¹⁰, developing the analogy between the two situations: the author, Neri, writes about a heroism in Gaza that reminds him of the heroic tale of Masada: «something inside us cries out a cry of a 2000 year old heroism and determination that we can find now in our beaten brothers in Gaza». Quoting Elazar Ben Yair's suicide speech, he proposes to remember the Israelis' self praise at the beginnings of the State so that they «can respect those whom they kill and lead to a heroic/stupid and painful suicide». In his mind, the Hamas is an image of both the human and the extremist inside the Israelis themselves. This is more than a simple reversal of the mythical analogy: instead of presenting the Israelis as the Romans and the Palestinians as the Masada fighters, the author puts face to face two adversaries linked by a strong resemblance to which he wants to draw our attention.

This post has been followed by talkbacks, some of them irritated («tell the people daily targeted by rockets»), some sympathetic («this point of view opens new venues for understanding»). One of the participants, Sarite1, however, engages in a long dialogue where the two internet users set out to analyze the relevance or the fallacious nature of the analogy and contrast their views on the argument's validity and the opponent's flawed logic. Sarite1 denies the analogy on the grounds that: Hamas cannot be compared to the Jews on Masada because it wants to free the whole of the sacred land of Palestine, whereas the Jews did not want to occupy Rome; their behavior is one of hatred and murder, they kill innocent children – the connection is not with the defenders of Masada but rather with the Nazis; they do not fight until death, they are running away (the Hamas leaders left or kept hidden). The Israelis cannot be compared with the Romans because the siege is not due to a desire to occupy the land and dominate a people, it is meant to put an end to terror and to arms smuggling aimed at destroying Israel; the Israeli soldiers do not behave like the Romans – if the Hamas attacked a much stronger enemy, it is because they believed the Jews are weak and merciful; Sarit quotes an article by Dershowitz explaining, «Israel should be commended for its self-defense against terrorism» at a time when there are nests of terror everywhere – which was not the case in Masada. In short, Sarite1 accuses her opponent of fallacy, due to his superficiality and ignorance of

¹⁰ <http://cafe.themarker.com/topic/819358/>

Hamas' true objectives. She considers that such an argumentation by fallacious analogy is the mark of a dangerous naivety.

Neri, in turns, sets out to justify his analogy in a systematic way, refuting the claim that it is a fallacy, namely, an argument that appears as logically valid on the surface, but is faulty. He points out that the Hamas militants, like the defenders of Masada, are fighting a much stronger power with the belief that God will help them. With their smuggled arms, they cannot destroy Israel – only hurt it, just as 2000 years ago, the Masada people could not destroy Rome. However, this vision of sacrifice can lead the people to fight until the bitter end – this is the model of Masada that can be repeated by the aggressive and violent Hamas at the expenses of the Palestinian people. The enemy does believe that the Palestinians robbed of their land will eventually re-conquer it through a strategy of sacrifice. He interprets this behavior as bravery, just as the new born State of Israel saw in Masada a tale of heroism and sacrifice. Neri suggests that Hamas does not decipher rightly the situation – just as the Masada defenders did not see the future awaiting them. Thus the Hamas leaders can lead their people to destruction and exile like in Masada: the Israelis can destroy them just as Rome destroyed the Jews (Neri exhibits the Roman bas-relief showing the destruction of Jerusalem and the enslaving of the Jews). As a whole, the proponent wants to bring his reader to a new awareness: the danger for the Jews to be like the Romans toward the Palestinians assimilated with the Masada defenders. He invites his interlocutor to perceive the humanity of the enemy by understanding that attacks on Israel are heroism in their eyes, just as Masada was heroism for the Israelis. By seeing the analogy between oneself and the other, one can reconsider one's attitude toward 1,5 million «unlucky people once more locked up in prison without having committed any personal offense». (*Ibid.*)

The adversaries try to present their arguments on the validity of the analogy in the forms of successive and reasoned points. It is, no doubt, an interesting polemical exchange engaging a discussion on the Masada heroic myth when applied to the Palestinians. It shows the objective of this inverted analogy: bring about a capacity of understanding the enemy. It also shows the violent reactions it can elicit among the Israeli audience. The latter is further illustrated by the indignant response made by a blogger to the growing uses of the inverted analogy between the Palestinians and the Masada freedom fighters: Rivka Berkovitz (6.6.2002), a writer for children, exclaimed that the heroism of the Masada Jews cannot be equated with the Palestinian suicide attacks, because the Jews did not kill the babies and innocent children of the Romans. In her eyes, those who draw such a thwarted analogy between the «Masada heroes» and the «Palestinian murderers» are «haters of Israel» and stupid and ignorant people. It is interesting to see how the use of the analogy for the Palestinian case revives the heroic tale of Masada by trying or refusing to apply it to the other side.

5. Conclusion

The debate around the meaning and present implications of the Masada story, as well as its various analogical uses, show how the disintegration of a shared myth feeds an ongoing controversy. Rather than an occasion of epideictic discourse reinforcing national identity and common values toward action, the Masada episode becomes a cultural reference exploited in political controversies. As a reservoir of conflicting analogies, it contributes to deepen the dissent: it sharpens the divisions between ideologies and parties, transforming the debate into a polemical exchange founded on

polarization, disqualifying of the adversary, and passionate stance taking. From this perspective, however, it is important to point out that even in raging controversies over the present and future of the State, the Masada myth keeps its capacity to provide the opponents with a common ground. It constitutes a platform on which they can confront conflicting views and fight for their own solutions. Thus, on the one hand, the rhetorical uses of Masada prevent conflict resolution by exhibiting incompatible premises and agendas, and by disqualifying the adversaries. On the other hand, they display an eagerness to discuss a common future on the basis of a common history and cultural imaginary, and to manage disagreements by verbal confrontation in the media, namely, by sharing the same national space without physical outbursts of violence.

Bibliografia

AMOSSY, RUTH (2010), «The functions of polemical discourse in the public sphere» in Smith, M. & B. Warnick (eds), *The Responsibilities of Rhetoric*, Long Grove, Waveland Press, Inc., pp. 52-61.

AMOSSY, RUTH (2011), «La coexistence dans le dissensus. La polémique dans les forums de discussion» in R. Amossy & M. Burger (eds), *Semen – Revue de sémiolinguistique des textes et discours. Polémiques médiatiques et journalistiques. La discours polémique en question(s)*, n. 31, pp. 25-42.

ANGENOT, MARC (1982), *La parole pamphlétaire: contribution à la typologie des discours modernes*, Paris, Payot.

BARNEA, NACHUM (1999), *The days of Netanyahu. Political Columns* (in Hebrew), Tel-Aviv, Zmora Bitan

BAR-TAL, DANIEL (1983), *The Massada syndrome: a case of central belief*, Tel-Aviv, The International Center for Peace in the Middle East.

BAR-TAL, DANIEL, ANTEBI, DIKLE (1992), «Siege mentality in Israel» in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, n. 16 (1992), pp. 251-275.

BEN-YEHUDA, NACHMAN (1995), *The Masada Myth. Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press.

DASCAL, MARCELO (2008), «Dichotomies and types of debates» in F. H. van Eemeren & B. Garssen (eds), *Controversy and Confrontation: Relating Controversy Analysis with Argun*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, pp. 27-49.

KERBRAT-ORECCHIONI, CATHERINE (1980), «La polémique et ses définitions» in *Le discours polémique*, Lyon, P.U.F., pp. 3-40.

PLANTIN, CHRISTIAN (2003), «Des polémistes aux polémiqueurs» in G. Declercq, Gilles, M. Murat & J. Dangel (éds). *La Parole Polémique*, Paris, Champion, pp. 377-408.

SHARGEL, BAILA R. (1979), «The Evolution of the Masada Myth» in *Judaism*, n. 28, 357-371.

ZERUBAVEL, YAEL (1994), «The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors» in *Representations*, n. 45, pp. 72-100.

ZERUBAVEL, YAEL (1995), *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.