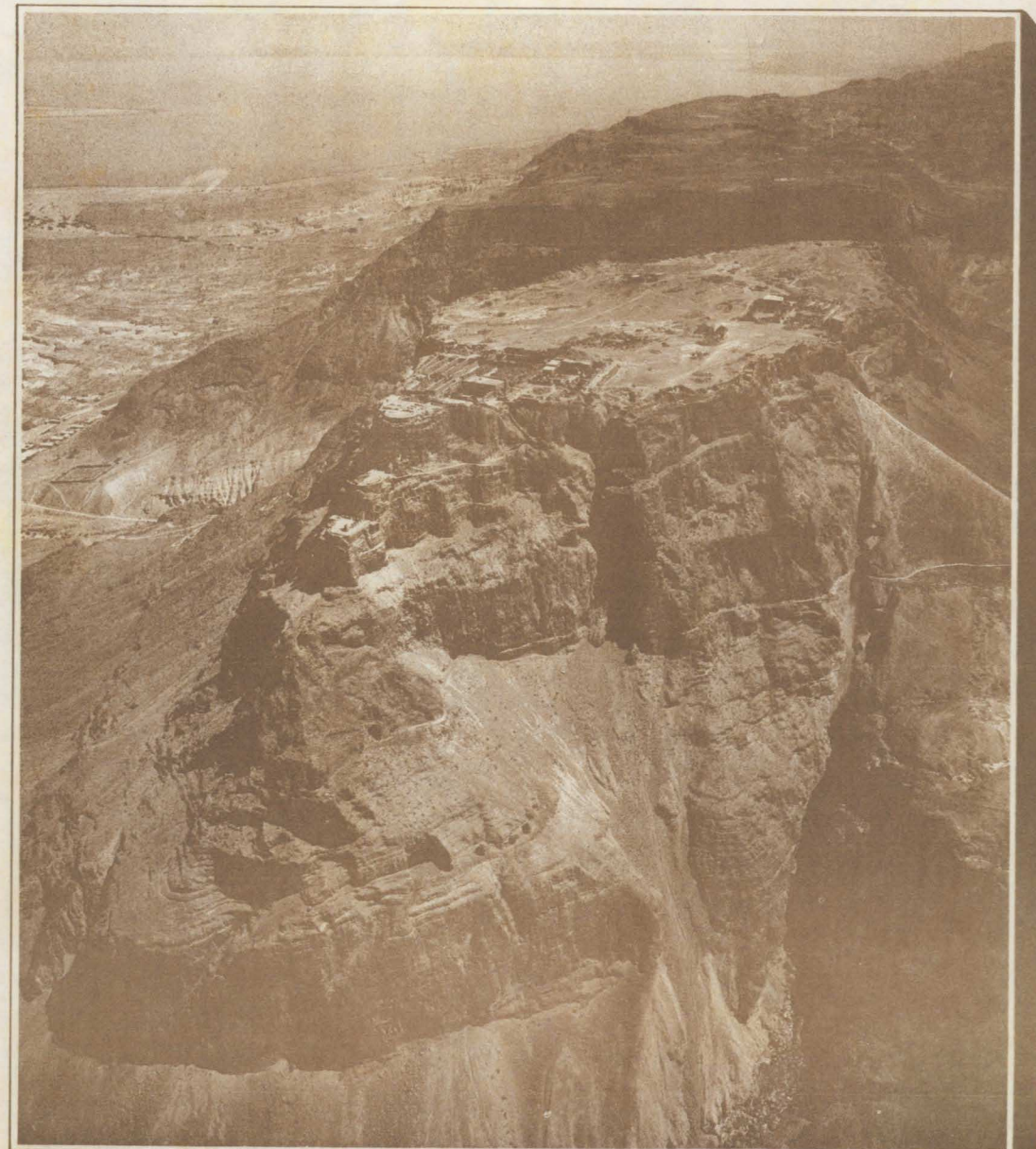


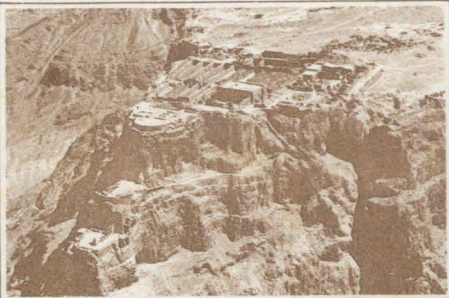
# MASADA

Symbol of Jewish Freedom



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# MASADA

## SYMBOL OF JEWISH FREEDOM

Masada is a mountain-rock that rises in splendid isolation from the Judean Desert. Located on the western shores of the Dead Sea, the lowest and one of the most desolate regions on earth, Masada is a place of stark majestic beauty. It is also the site of one of the most dramatic episodes in history. Nineteen centuries ago a group of freedom fighters, entrenched on this gaunt plateau against the might of ancient Rome, decided to kill themselves rather than submit to the yoke of foreign oppression.

During the first century CE the land of Judea lay under Roman occupation. For some years there had been periodic rebellions by the country's inhabitants but these had quickly been crushed. Then, in 66 CE, the Jewish revolt against Rome became a full-scale, country-wide war. It lasted four years and, in 70 CE, the Roman General Titus conquered Jerusalem. He destroyed the Temple, sacked the city, killed many of its inhabitants and expelled most of the remaining Jewish survivors from the country. A number of Jewish warriors who managed to evade capture made their way to Masada, which had been taken over by the Jews at the start of the revolt.

### Last Stand

A century earlier, the summit had been fortified by King Herod the Great, who constructed a wall around the rock's perimeter, built defense towers, storehouses, huge cisterns to store water, barracks and a magnificent palace. For Herod, Masada had been a personal citadel: a refuge in case his Jewish subjects deposed him — and a haven from his enemy Cleopatra, who, it is said, spoke often to Mark Anthony of her desire to extend the kingdom of Egypt to Judea. Now it was held by a small group of Jewish fighting men and their families, augmented by the last desperate survivors of the fall of Jerusalem. Together, numbering less than one thousand souls, all told, these Jews resolved to continue the struggle against Roman tyranny.

For another two years, their control of Masada remained unchallenged. Then, in the year 72, General Flavius Silva moved up the 15,000-man Tenth Roman Legion, which made camp at the foot of the forbidding mountain stronghold and began to lay siege to the defending force entrenched on its plateau. A wall was built around the doomed garrison, as well as a massive ramp of boulders and earth, so that, in the end, the summit might be more easily stormed. The historian Josephus Flavius has told the story — much of it based on the testimony of the sole survivors of the final tragedy: two women who had hidden in a cistern to escape the common fate.

When the Jews' leader, Eleazar ben-Ya'ir, saw that the end was near, and the last defenses had been burnt down, he bade his followers be faithful to the cause for

which they had fought so long and so gallantly. "Let us die," he cried, "before we are enslaved to our enemies, and let us go out of this world, together with our wives and our children, in freedom!" Nine hundred and sixty men, women and children chose to die by their own hands. The men embraced their wives and children and put them to the sword. Next, lots were cast, and ten men thus chosen to take the lives of their comrades. At the dreadful climax the last surviving warrior set fire to the palace and then fell upon his own blade.

The Roman legionaries who climbed to a silent summit on the morrow beheld the carnage — and understood. The defenders had left untouched abundant supplies of food and water, so that the Romans might know that the Jews had destroyed themselves — not out of hunger or thirst, but in invincible allegiance to their faith and to their ideals.

### The Message of Masada

For many generations the story of Masada was considered a semi-legendary tale. In the 19th century, however, the site was visited by a number of expeditions, and gradually it became better known. In the years before the rebirth of the State of Israel in 1948, a new and intense interest arose among the youth of the country, themselves now compelled to fight an enemy sworn to their destruction. Many began to visit the area to pay homage. Eventually, in 1963, Masada was excavated by a large international expedition, including thousands of volunteers and headed by Professor Yigael Yadin. In a two-year dig they exposed the 'legend' to the light of history, revealing many hitherto unknown details of the epic. Since then the site has been a focus of international pilgrimage.

Much has been written about Masada. Some scholars have looked upon the death of its Jewish defenders as a mere act of suicide contrary to Jewish law. But more and more it has taken on a different kind of meaning altogether. For an old-new nation which had to fight for its existence even before it was able fully to reassert its nationhood, Masada has become a symbol of dignity and of the determination of a people to be free from tyranny in its own land. Two thousand years later the sacrifice of Eleazar ben-Ya'ir and his comrades has become a source of strength and inspiration in the rebuilding of the country; a poignant reminder of the love of freedom which burns as brightly in the soul of the nation today as it did in that bygone era.

The message of Masada is clear: when fighting units of the Israel Defense Forces today take their oath of allegiance on its summit and swear that "Masada shall not fall a second time!" the force of that oath is deep and binding. It stands as a lasting commitment that never again shall Jews have to kill themselves to avoid the yoke of foreign oppression.