

NEWS & POLITICS

My Masada Moment

A childhood obsession with the tragic story led me to convert to Judaism. But finally visiting the mountain last month, I wondered what being a Jew meant in an age of surging anti-Semitism.

BY GRETCHEN RACHEL HAMMOND

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At three in the morning, I finally arrived at the front entrance of the David Citadel Hotel in Jerusalem. Hauling a backpack full of bottled water, I had spent nearly an hour walking from my more modest accommodations in every direction other than the one I was supposed to be going in while finding increasingly creative ways to verbally abuse my cellphone every time it told me to turn right and then promptly lost the signal.

The sensible hiking clothes I wore obviously came with the words “incompetent tourist” emblazoned across the back so inviting various taxicabs to pull up beside me, the drivers of each shouting emphatic declarations of help.

“No bloody way!” I mumbled.

After putting in a 12-mile walking tour on my first day in Jerusalem, I had taken one such offer up and a 15-minute journey from half way down the Mount of Olives to my hotel ended up costing 150 Shekels plus 40 for a set of fridge magnets from the guy who, with the utmost sincerity, informed me “Shabbat hard to find taxi. I find one for you.”



Despite operating on no sleep and with twinges of panic that I would never find the David Citadel in time for the rendezvous of my life, I refused to be a sucker twice in as many days.

Somehow, I arrived with half-an-hour to spare and so paced the entrance to the hotel obsessively checking the time and wondering if the price of 58 shekels I had paid to realize an over three-decade long dream was only such a bargain because there was a better than fifty percent chance of no one showing up.

It was with a delighted sigh of relief that I greeted a couple also dressed impeccably as tourists who arrived at the entrance with the same befuddled “is this the right place?” look on their faces.

“Masada?” I asked them.

They nodded, and we celebrated the fact that we were no longer alone by doing our best to cross small-talk language barriers while keeping an eye open for some form of transportation to pull up.

They were from Prague and celebrating their first anniversary with a few adventures.

My story was a little more complex; An 11-year-old obsessed with Masada ever since I saw the Boris Sagal-directed miniseries and grew an immediate affinity with the story of Eleazar ben Yair and his 900 followers who, even though they were surrounded, held off Peter O’Toole’s acting and the Roman Tenth Legion Fretensis forcing a siege ramp to be constructed to the summit of Masada.

When all hope was lost, they took their own lives rather than be captured. I never understood why they could not find some form of escape. Surely, they had not been so completely surrounded by their enemies. Nevertheless, it was a story which inspired me every single day of my life, and eventually led to my proud conversion to Judaism and the feeling that Eleazar was, in some way, an ancestor.

Now, 37 years after I first beheld the sight of Masada on the small screen, I was finally going to see and climb it for myself; to walk where Eleazar had walked, to be both an elated child and thoughtful adult with a few nagging questions.

This was my only available day to do the tour. The next three would be spent at the Global Summit on Antisemitism. So, I was as excited as I could be with the prevailing nervousness that maybe I should have booked such a momentous visit through a travel agent.

“Ohh. That’s...yes. Good.” My companions nodded politely after I finished my treatise. I think I lost them somewhere around age 13.

A white mini-van screeched to a halt beside us and a young man jumped out carrying a tablet and asking for our names which he had barely checked off before ushering us inside the van which was already carrying five tourists from its first stop in Tel Aviv, each in various stages of intoxication. I sat in the front seat and was still buckling my seatbelt when our driver accelerated through Jerusalem’s streets and onto the highway at close to 95 miles-per-hour. My fellow members of the Masada expeditionary force hooted with excitement. I clutched my backpack and buried my head in it every time our driver overtook a truck doing less than Mach 2. Like him, if there was any oncoming traffic, I was better off not knowing.

The first peeks of sunrise revealed the mountain in a looming shadow as the van bolted through the entrance of the Masada National Park and jerked to a halt in the first available parking space.

“You need to be back here at 7:50; seven-five-zero or I leave.” The driver emphasized as everyone scrambled out.

Wait. We had less than three hours to climb up and explore the top?

Suddenly, the cable car looked very inviting.

No. I'd waited a lifetime for this. I'd be damned if I was going up by any other route than the Sicarii had taken via the winding snake path. Wearing sandals or no shoes at all, they had hauled themselves to the top weighed down with goods, weapons and armor. I had a backpack and a pair of new sneakers. Eleazar would surely be ashamed of me if I took the easy way up.

Besides, the cable car was closed until 8 am.

Our guide settled in for a nap in the van and we set off as a group excitedly chattering to each other. Any apprehension that this dream would be scuttled either by rip-off or traffic accident disappeared and I ran to the foot of majesty with the kind of giddy energy I hadn't felt since childhood.

"Last one to the top is a Sean Penn!" I yelled, so beginning a footrace at first in haphazard directions since signs to the snake path weren't always easy to find.

I had been climbing for about fifteen minutes when I started to wonder how many followers Eleazar had lost to cardiac arrest. I was gasping for air. My legs called their shop steward and announced a strike due to lack of adequate training and I crumpled at a corner of the path against a narrow metal fence and gazed hopelessly upwards. The summit might as well have been somewhere in the upper atmosphere and what looked like miles of steep twists and turns stood between me and it. A pair of schoolgirls from a tour that had arrived thirty minutes after we did paused to ask if I was OK. I had barely caught my breath to answer before they were fifty feet above me.

I looked anxiously towards the horizon. Everyone had told me that to be at the summit when the sun rose was a truly magical moment and it wasn't waiting for me to catch up.

"Don't you dare give this bloody thing up!"

I've said that to myself at many moments throughout my life. With my heartbeat returning to a less apoplectic rhythm, I repeated my counsel again and, without a

thought to just how strong the metal fence was, I used it to pull myself to my feet and resumed the climb.

Deciding to let my body rather than my inflexibility dictate how I was going to reach the top, sometimes I would make another seven feet before dropping to catch my breath and gulp down water, sometimes more depending on how steep the path was.

When I finally reached the long metal gangway level with the top of the cable car, the sun was reflecting off a metal plate which read “Eventually, at the end of the ascent, when the traveler reached the plateau through this gate, Masada was revealed to him in all its splendor.”

“To hell with the time. To hell with our driver,” I thought. “I’ve still got 150 shekels left.”

I stood on the plateau and breathed it all in; a tear falling from my widened eyes. Maybe it was a combination of exhaustion and my adrenalin draining away leaving only the moment but it was almost dreamlike to roam slowly across the summit of Masada, trying to make sure I read every plate and stepped in every room; each time closing my eyes to imagine what happened in there almost 2,000 years ago. Since it was likely that these were not only rooms built by as the refuge for a king but final resting places, I paid a quiet homage.

When I reached the watchtower and the ground on which I had no doubt Eleazar once stood as the Romans began their assault, I fell to my knees again not in exhaustion but elated reverence.

I’ll make no apologies for sounding like a besotted fan girl. As I wrote in an earlier piece in *Tablet*, “It is [the] belief and the defiance of the Jews of Masada which is both responsible for the Jew I am today but for the responsibility I believe I have to honor my new heritage with their unyielding conviction.”

At the point where Silva and his tenth legion had breached the fortress, a metal plate quoted the historian Josephus Flavius; “The Romans, expecting further opposition, were at a loss to conjecture what had happened. Here encountering the mass of the slain, instead of exulting as over enemies, they admired the nobility of their resolve and the contempt of death displayed by so many in carrying it, unwaveringly into execution.”

It caused me to wonder just what my responsibility as a Jew was.

As a child watching the miniseries, I had devised numerous possible methods of escape for Eleazar; a happier ending than mass suicide.

But at the top of Masada, one can see the range of the Sicarii’s enemies no longer limited to the small screen; the remains of the Roman defensive wall and the extraordinary siege ramp still so imposing it wasn’t hard to imagine the feeling of sheer terror the rebel Jews must have felt as the end game rose inexorably to meet them.

Surrounded on all sides by their enemies.

If nothing else, the Global Summit on Antisemitism I attended a day after I took my reluctant steps down from Masada proved that nothing had changed. Panelists shared sickening stories of hatred for Jews on the left and the right, in Europe and in the United States. Surrounded on all sides by hatred, I wondered, again, what my responsibility was, or what, as Eleazar asked his followers, “is possible?”

After the summit ended, I took a decidedly cheaper taxi to Yad Vashem.

On a wall, there was a quote by Kurt Tucholsky. “A country is not just what it does, but what it tolerates.”

I wondered whether, in the end, we are all sons and daughters of Eleazar and thus we had a responsibility, when surrounded, to fight back no matter to what lengths that battle may take us. To do otherwise, to leave the summit of Masada and

capitulate to physical or mental exhaustion or an overwhelming force is a dereliction of our duty not to tolerance but defiance.

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#ANTISEMITISM #MASADA

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