בס״ד

The Jewish Historian and the Israeli Student

The father of history, Herodotus, begins his book with the words, “These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes.” The aspiration to present the results of their research to the public is something all historians have in common. But what does the history *teacher* aspire to? To present someone *else’s* findings? In the last hundred years, various and contradictory answers have been given to this question. So when we come to examine how Josephus has been taught, we must first examine what the goals of teaching history were.

With the rise of public schools at the end of the 19th century, the study of history was perceived to be the primary means of forming a national identity. One of the first to undertake this task for the Jewish nation was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who published a textbook calledדברי הימים לבני ישראל, *The Chronicles of Israel*. At the very beginning of the story of the Great Revolt, Ben-Yehuda makes who was responsible for its failure. According to him, John of Giscala was a loyal Zealot who could have erected an “iron wall” against the legions of Rome. But the appeasers succeeded in appointing Josephus, who was “fainthearted, hypocritical, degenerate, always looking out for himself, a loyal ally to the Romans and a traitor to his people” (166). According to Ben-Yehuda, it was Josephus who advised Titus how to conquer Jerusalem. In fact, Ben-Yehuda mentions Josephus more than he does Titus or Vespasian. The description of the revolt concludes with the following evaluation of Josephus’s literary activity: “In order to find favor with his masters, the destroyers of his people, he himself recounted how had he betrayed his people and made fools of the holy martyrs.”

After the First World War, Jacob Naftali Hertz Simchoni set out to write a comprehensive history of the Jews. It was Simchoni who gave us the first translation of Josephus’s *Jewish War* from Greek into Hebrew, and he was among the few to write positively about Josephus. The first mention of Josephus in Simchoni’s book is when he accepts the appointment as commander of the Galilee. Simchoni describes Josephus as “hardworking and savvy.” Nonetheless, he observes that it was a mistake to appoint Josephus as commander of the Galilee, because “he was not an expert in military tactics.” In an attempt to defend Josephus’s good name, Simchoni keeps the description of what Josephus did at Jotapata very short. By contrast, John of Giscala is described as a tyrant, someone who led a “corrupt regime” in Jerusalem. As a rule, Simchoni fully accepts the description of Josephus, both with regard to factual details and with regard to his evaluation of the various personalities. Simchoni’s own description, therefore, stands in stark contrast to that of Ben-Yehuda. Simchoni died at the tender age of 42, and Haim Nahman Bialik eulogized him with these words: “I expected that he would be the first to stamp the seal of nationalism on history.” What Simchoni wrote about Josephus tells us that patriotism combined with in-depth factual knowledge and intellectual honesty makes it possible to put forward a complex and balanced picture of Josephus the writer and the military man.

The new educational system was thus presented with two quite different approaches to Josephus, approaches that to a considerable extent still exist today in various sectors of Israeli education. One of the central personalities in the Israeli educational framework was Michael Ziv, who headed the Department of Secondary Education in the Ministry of Education and wrote the main history textbook. According to Ziv, “Learning history, the student must be made aware, not by rhetoric but by facts, that the main source of all our tragic weakness in the long exile was the absence of this elemental tool [ = a Jewish state] to ensure our national existence, and in many cases even our individual existence.” On the face of it, Ziv might have been expected to adopt the same basic approach as Ben-Yehuda, but in fact the textbook takes a cautious and complicated stance. The appointment of Josephus as commander of the Galilee is presented this way:

Josephus may not have been well-suited for the role that was thrust upon him. He held moderate views, like those of the Pharisees, and after having spent a long time in Rome and having been impressed with its military strength, he knew quite well that the Jews had no chance of winning the war. Some would emphasize his profound faith in the redemption of Israel, nourished by the messianic awakening of the early days of the revolt. But his being a descendant of the Hasmoneans, and his expertise in things Roman, were of great benefit.

Ziv refrains from any decisive characterization of Josephus. More importantly, students are immediately presented with contradictory perspectives. Unlike Simchoni, Ziv asserts explicitly that Josephus deceived the other fighters in the cave at Jotapata, but he explains this by saying that Josephus understood that the responsibility “to transmit to future generations the history of the Jewish war with the Romans” had been thrust upon him. So did Josephus really betray his people, or did he render them valuable service? The book emphasizes that Josephus wrote the history of the war as a response to Roman books that showed the Jews in a negative light. To counteract them, Josephus “zealously defended the honor of his people and wrote the history of the war with the aim of recounting the heroic deeds of the Jews.” It goes without saying that the writers deliberately use the word “zealously” with regard to Josephus to counterbalance the Zealots who were responsible for the disaster. The most highly regarded of Josephus’s works is in fact *Against Apion*, where Josephus “writes persuasively in defense of his people … this book bestowed upon its author a place of honor in the history of Israel.”

At first glance, it was Simchoni’s approach to Josephus that was accepted in the educational system, yet here we must consider the complexity of the Israeli educational system. Before the State of Israel came into existence, each group sought to educate its students in line with its own ideological values, so there were textbooks and syllabi specifically for workers, the middle class, religious Jews, and others. After the state came into being, the separation between the state educational system and the national-religious system was left in place. The first textbooks for the national-religious system were written by Jacob Katz, one of the most prominent Jewish historians ever.

Katz’s book *Israel among the Nations*, written during the 1940s, was used in national-religious schools until the end of the 1980s. I myself had it as my textbook. The book certainly underwent some changes in the course of time (like the addition of pictures, maps, and questions for study and review), but the basic text remained almost unchanged.

Right at the beginning of the section on Josephus, students are told that when he visited Rome, “He fell in love with the great Italian city.” It is not, therefore, surprising that when he was appointed commander of the Galilee “he did not take up his duties wholeheartedly” (152). Josephus is censured for not committing suicide like the rest of the fighters after the siege of Jotapata, but instead “succeeding by his glib tongue in winning the good favor of the commander [Vespasian].” Although Katz’s language is not as harsh as Ben-Yehuda’s, his characterization of Josephus is quite similar. Katz explains that Josephus defended Judaism and the Jews in his later books because “he wanted to atone as a writer for his sins as a fighter.” The writing of *The Jewish War* was personal for Josephus, an aspect of the conflicted soul of a man whose contemptible military record left him living in a gilded cage. In a later edition, Katz softened a bit, concluding, “As a fighter Joseph did not add cover himself with glory, but let him be remembered favorably as a defender of the honor of Israel.”

In the middle of the 1970s there was a significant change in the syllabus. In line with new approaches developed in the United States, it was decided that the goal of education was not the memorization of facts, but the acquisition of one’s own unique method of structuring knowledge, and so the goal of learning history was not information about the past, and certainly not identification with it. The teacher of history must bestow upon his students the skills needed by a historian.

*Jewish Society in Second Temple Times*, published in the middle of the 1980s in accordance with the guidelines of the new syllabus, is an in-depth, comprehensive textbook. It makes extensive use of excerpts from primary sources (mostly from Josephus, but also from rabbinic literature and archaeological evidence), and cites a variety of scholars. The book is particularly noteworthy for offering different and even contradictory points of view. The book abandons the use of a clear, authoritative voice, instead enabling students to enter the historian’s workshop, to learn the sources, and to come face to face with the opinions of the historians. Despite the scientific tone, the authors do not refrain from making value judgments about Josephus. The book has a “Teachers’ Edition” with suggestions for discussion; one of them is to put Josephus on trial. The authors note what the purpose of the trial must be:

The purpose of the discussion is not to arrive at extreme conclusions, completely negative or completely positive. It is important that students understand the complexity of the man and the problematic nature of his book and get used to seeing that there are a lot of gray areas in life. It’s not just black and white.

This assessment is not only related to the necessity of scientific objectivity. It is to a large extent a reflection of Israeli society. The Yom Kippur War and the quagmire of Israel’s involvement in Lebanon had largely quenched the nationalistic ardor of the first decades of the state.

Textbooks for the secular schools have in recent years mostly been characterized by a watering-down of the earlier books, telling the story succinctly, without substantively changing the balanced picture of Josephus established in the 1980s. But in textbooks for the religious schools, some fascinating changes have taken place.

In 2019 a history textbook was published by the Har Bracha Institute. The Institute, in a settlement just south of Nablus, was founded with the goal of demonstrating that *historiah* is really *hester-yah* — God behind the scenes. God’s leadership, and His intentions, are revealed through history. The chapter on the destruction of the Second Temple begins this way:

In contrast to members of other nations, most of whom were integrated into the great Roman Empire and indulged in its delights, the Jewish nation launched an out-and-out war for its freedom and its national identity. This desperate war was commemorated throughout the Roman Empire as no other battle ever was.

Against this background, the words of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda sound remarkably restrained. In light of this, it is surprising to discover that the book asserts: “The decision to revolt against the Romans was not an informed decision taken by the Jewish leaders, but was forced on the nation by the radicals.” The book condemns the Sicarii for murder and the Zealots because they did not agree to accept the moderate leadership of the revolt. And what about Josephus? The book notes without any reservations that he led the fighting in the Galilee, and only “when the situation seemed hopeless did he try to convince the rebels to submit.” As for the Jotapata episode, they say just that “he persuaded his companion that instead of killing each other they should give themselves up to the Romans.” It’s true that students are asked directly, “Do you think Josephus was a traitor?” But given the negative image of the Zealots and the reasonable way Josephus is presented, they have no reason to call him a traitor. The book goes on to describe the wars of the Zealots at length and in fact blames them for the disaster. On the other hand, the book refrains from saying anything negative about Vespasian and Titus.

Paradoxically, the Har Bracha people actually accept Josephus’s own story, apparently for two complementary reasons. First, if God does indeed reveal Himself in history, then the revolt against the Romans was a moment in history when God clearly revealed that He was opposed to the Zealots and to all who committed murder in His name and for His sake. Josephus understood this at the time. But for the authors of this book what was certainly more important was that even Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, the subject of extensive discussion here, understood this, so submission to Rome was not treason but victory, a fulfillment of God’s will.

None of this, however, is sufficient to explain the gap between the contents of the chapter and the nationalistic assertions with which it begins. It could be that the explanation for this gap is to be found in the contemporary pedagogical climate. In recent years, teaching history has ceased to be about training “historians,” turning its attention instead to the uses that can be made of history. The teacher need not teach what happened, but how history can be used to say something about contemporary issues, and thus to identify how various contemporary actors use history for their own needs.

In the 17 pages that deal with the war, three are about Masada. The reason for this is that Masada is the site most identified with the revolt. Masada is still viewed in Israeli public memory as an expression of heroism and the impossible struggle for freedom. But the path of R. Yohanan b. Zakkai and the Judaism he represents was the precise opposite of this. How can one “use” Masada in a way that fits the values of the authors of this book? Josephus has the solution. On the one hand, Josephus praises the heroism of the people at Masada to the skies, quoting the speech of Eliezer ben Yair at great length. On the other hand, the personal example of Josephus (like that of R. Yohanan b. Zakkai) is exactly the opposite. So the author of the book asks the students this question: “In your opinion, why did Josephus describe the last moments at Masada so movingly? (Think about some particular event that Josephus might have been picturing as he wrote these words.)” The author recommends that when the students themselves are visiting Masada, they attempt to feel the dilemma that faced the rebels. The unmediated encounter with Masada and its meaning for Israeli society, along with the necessity of understanding history theologically, oblige them to use a dual strategy. On the one hand, the book is suffused with nationalism; on the other hand, there is an obvious recognition of the guilt of the rebels and an adoption of the way of Josephus and R. Yohanan b. Zakkai.

In conclusion, Josephus is the litmus test of the Israeli educational system. The upheavals of his life turned him from a historian into a man through whom history speaks. To paraphrase Cicero, *Josephus magistra vitae*. I do not know whether this is praise worthy of the historian, but I have a feeling that Josephus himself would view it as his most important victory.