bs"d (With the Help of G-d)

**Josephus on the School Bench**

“Opinions are divided about the conduct of Yosef ben Matityahu in the Galilee front of the Great Revolt. Conduct a trial of his deeds, his conduct, and the manner of his management of the war.” This is a proposal for summarizing the teaching content of a mid-twentieth century history book’s history unit. I assume that there is no historian other than Yosef ben Matityahu – Josephus – whom students are asked to put on trial. In this article, I attempt to sketch the complex and changing attitudes to the personality, actions, and books of Josephus in the textbooks written in Hebrew and used in Israel from its pre-state days in the nineteenth century through the present. During this period, dramatic changes unfolded in both the status of the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel, including the founding of the State of Israel, and in the pedagogical approaches to history. The historiography of the Israeli educational system in general and of history teaching in particular attributes great importance to political changes as a highly powerful motivator of changes in the teaching of history. Have these changes also been expressed in the evaluation of Josephus’s character and books?

**The return of the historian: Josephus in Hebrew textbooks up to World War I**

The rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century in Europe breathed new life into the past. The events of the past created the nation and bestowed meaning and purpose upon it. A 1914 German guide for teaching history wrote: “In the first place, history education should strive for a real, decidedly German spirit. If this is not achieved, it has failed its most splendid goal.” These trends are also very evident in the first history textbooks written in Hebrew. Ze’ev Yavetz, the first to publish a history textbook in Hebrew in 1890, opened his book with the following declaration: “But I will clearly state that not only for its own purpose did I write it, but also to serve as a faithful means of fostering attachment in the Jewish nation toward its heritage and sacred traditions: to present it with the greats of the nation in all their splendor and glory, that they will serve as exemplary role models for the Jewish nation in all their ways; to impart to the nation that the Holy Land was always the heart’s longing of its fathers, who drew their eyes to the Land with pleasant and anguished yearning.” Yavetz managed to recount the entire span of all Jewish history up to his time in only 150 pages. Nonetheless, he devoted several sentences to Josephus. He notes both Josephus’s role as the commander of the Revolt in the Galilee and his writings, commenting that Vespasian was kind to him “because he saw in him that his spirit was loyal to the Romans, and that his soul was more precious to him than his people” (p. 40). With just a few words, Yavetz set the stage for the widespread description and evaluations of Josephus in the textbooks that followed.

During the years of the Second Aliyah (1903–1914), there the need and motivation to impart Jewish history to schoolchildren increased. The primary emphasis in history teaching was placed on the periods when Jews lived and were active in the Land of Israel, from biblical times through the Bar Kokhba Revolt. In this context, of course, great importance was placed on the loss of national independence during the Second Temple Period. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858–1922), who revived and modernized the Hebrew language, also dedicated himself to this drive to impart Jewish history. In 1912, he published a history textbook for elementary school. In the first lines of the book, he already explains that the book’s purpose is “to imbue in our children…the concept, found in the chronicles of the Jewish people, that it is a **national** people, that experienced days when it lived **a complete life**, loved its **national freedom**, and would risk its life for this freedom” (emphasis in the original). With his total commitment to nationalism, specifically in the form of political independence in the Land of Israel, Ben-Yehuda did not spare Josephus from his sharp pen. It appears that Ben-Yehuda did not miss a derisive word, whether in old and new Hebrew, with which to attack Josephus. Moreover, Ben-Yehuda accused Josephus of significantly changing the story of the Great Revolt to fit his ideological goals. According to Ben-Yehuda, the genuine leader of the Galilee rebels was John of Giscala; even before Yosef ben Matityahu reached the Galilee, John had already built fighting battalions. Ben-Yehuda had no doubt that if John had been the commander of the Galilee, then “they could have stood as an iron wall before Rome’s legions without allowing them to enter into the land (ibid.).” Ben-Yehuda describes Josephus as follows: “Cowardly, hypocritical, of low soul, seeking only his own benefit, a loyal lover of the Romans and a traitor to his people” (ibid.). Summarizing the Roman conquest of the Galilee, Ben-Yehuda writes: “Yosef ben Matityahu handed the Land into the enemy’s hand” (ibid.). Yet this did not conclude Ben-Yehuda’ treatment of Josephus; in fact, Ben-Yehuda mentions him more than he does Titus and Vespasian together. In Ben-Yehuda’s telling, Josephus is Titus’s advisor during the siege of Jerusalem and attempts to weaken the morale of the rebels through his speeches. According to Ben-Yehuda, Josephus’s *Wars of the Jews* is a work written by a traitor seeking to justify his own actions and slander the loyal zealots. Ben-Yehuda summarizes the matter as follows: “Yet the memory of these heroes shall not be forgotten among the people of Israel for all time.” The memory Ben-Yehuda attempts to instill is one that discredits Josephus’s descriptions and assessments.

A very different appraisal of Josephus can be found in another widely-used textbook in the Land of Israel at the time written by the Jewish-Russian historian Simon Dubnow. Along with his work as a professional historian, Dubnow also published a textbook translated from Russian into Hebrew by Aharon Libushitzky. Although Dubnow did not give Josephus’s character much attention, his analysis of Josephus in is nevertheless more complex than that found in Ben-Yehuda’s textbook. Dubnow describes Josephus as someone who, from a young age, had had a high opinion of the Romans’ military and diplomatic capabilities, and thus did not believe in the possibility of victory against them. Dubnow, unlike Ben-Yehuda, does not use derisive language toward Josephus. Dubnow describes the events of the Siege of Jotapata during the Revolt neutrally, and he concludes his discussion of the episode with the observation that, “the Jews of Jerusalem blamed Yosef for the city’s fall, and decried him as one of the traitors for falling to the enemy.” Dubnow does not explicitly reveal his position on the matter, but this silence should not be interpreted as approval of Josephus’s course of actions. Actually, Dubnow describes the zealots and John of Giscala very sympathetically.

The differences between the textbooks raise the question of whether the students were aware of the subtle differences among the different descriptions, and, more importantly, how they imagined the Great Revolt. Memoires of those who were schoolchildren during that time can give us a hint about their historical consciousness. Haim Keller, as a child, who studied at a school in Rosh Pina in the early twentieth century, retells his experiences as follows:

We lived the lives of the protectors and fighters of the Galilee, we breathed in the longing for freedom and the yearning for liberation. Afterwards, on the same mountains and hills surrounding Meron and Gush Halav, we walked with reverence and said: ‘Here, here, walked the heroes of the Galilee, Yohanan and Eleazar! We shall walk in their path until the redemption, this is how Wilkomitz taught us.’

**The second period: The British Mandate—Continuity and reassessment**

After World War I, the Jewish population in the Land of Israel grew significantly. The growing influx of immigrants with differing political and cultural views led to the creation of different educational streams. Although almost all the streams shared the Zionist vision, they differed in many cultural and ideological respects. Most of the children in the urban and semi-urban settlements studied in the general stream, which followed the curricula of the World Zionist Organization’s (WZO) education department. Religious students who did not study in yeshivot, preferring, instead, a modern education, studied in the religious education stream of the Mizrahi movement. Children of the kibbutzim, and from the urban population identifying with socialist values, studied in the socialist-leaning Workers stream. Each stream created its own curriculum and sometimes, even textbooks were written to reflect the values of a particular educational stream.

In the WZO’s first history curriculum (1923), it was determined that history should be taught in a way that “would awaken among the students a sense of participation in our nation’s fate.” With the introduction of the new curriculum, new textbooks were written both for lower schools (grades 1–8) and high schools. The first to be published were history textbooks written by Yaakov Naftali Simhoni in the 1920s, which were meant for high school students and teaching students. Simhoni was a young and promising scholar. One of his most important literary works was a translation of Josephus’s *Wars of the Jews* from Greek to Hebrew, and thus he certainly had a great interest in the character of Josephus in the context of the textbook as well. Simhoni’s Josephus was a young man with many talents, but one who should not have been sent to the Galilee because he lacked military experience. Simhoni does recognize that the revolt in the Galilee failed because of Josephus’s lack of faith in the possibility of victory, but in contrast to the textbooks of the previous generation, he does not accuse Josephus of treason. It is possible that the desire to “launder” Josephus caused Simhoni to almost completely skip over Josephus’s actions after the fall of Yodfat. Instead, Simhoni merely notes in short that he fell prisoner to the Romans. Simhoni also adopts the main elements of Josephus’s hostile position toward John of Giscala. According to Simhoni, John “ruled with extreme tyranny, maltreated the wealthy residents, and turned many over to killers. The cruelty of his rule engendered much hate against him.” In line with Josephus, Simhoni describes at length how the zealots’ wars harmed Jerusalem and how the Temple was burnt against Titus’s wishes. Moreover, Josephus receives Shimhoni’s praise for faithfully describing the last moments of Masada with admiration, notwithstanding his hatred for the zealots. Simhoni discusses Josephus’s books in detail, using this as an opportunity to praise the argument of the “glorious defense” that Josephus provided the Jewish people before the nations, and how Josephus described the “virtue of the people Israel above all the peoples of the land.” Simhoni even hints that Josephus may have been in contact with some rabbinic leaders while in Rome. In this manner, Josephus is portrayed as not a traitor, and even becomes as an active participant in Simhoni’s national project. Simhoni’s positive attitude towards Josephus cannot be separated from Simhoni’s close familiarity with Josephus’s writings and his translation of them to Hebrew. In his introduction to the translation, Simhoni goes to the trouble of justifying Josephus and his books. He is empathetic with Josephus’s difficult situation in Rome and claims that Josephus almost certainly wrote with historical precision and should not be described as or considered a traitor. Simhoni launched a new era in the attitude to Josephus, to which Jewish students in pre-state Israel were witness.

Simhoni wrote his textbook for high school and teaching students. Yet the textbooks written for grade school students at the time also largely adopt the multifaceted figure of Josephus as presented by Simhoni and do not rush to judge him.

The Mizrahi Religious Zionist educational stream created a unique curriculum that reflects the national dimension and the demand that history studies create in the child “a brave connection to the people Israel and the Land of Israel, our nation’s homeland and the soil of the teachings of the prophets and sages.” The next step was to write original textbooks suitable for their religious Zionist stream and the new curriculum. The task was placed on the shoulders of the young and promising historian Jacob Katz, who later became a renowned historian. Katz describes at length Josephus’s character and deeds. He declares that on the one hand, Josephus was impressed by Rome’s power and therefore understood the revolt had no chance of succeeding, but that after the rebels’ initial successes, “his lust for honor pushed him to seek greatness,” leading him to seek and receive the appointment as commander of the Galilee. According to Katz, it was Josephus’s selfish personality and pursuit of honor and luxury, that drove the rest of Josephus’s actions. His conduct in the cave at Yodfat after the city’s fall is explained by his wanting “to remain alive no matter what.” Still, although Katz condemns Josephus, he has no admiration at all for the rebels, viewing them as a collection of violent people who harmed everything sacred and precious. As befitting someone faithful and committed to the rabbinic tradition, Katz’s ideal figure is, of course Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, to whom Katz dedicates a long paragraph. He explains that ben Zakkai understood that the revolt was bound to fall and thus left besieged Jerusalem to establish a Torah center in Yavne. Although Josephus and ben Zakkai were apparently in the same political camp, Katz clearly distinguishes between the “cowardly” military leader concerned for his own welfare who joined the Roman camp and the religious leader concerned for the Jewish people’s spiritual future.

Katz concludes the episode of the destruction of the Second Temple with a description of Josephus’s activity in Rome. He adopts Simhoni’s approach in principle; that is, that through his literary work, Josephus “wanted to show the greatness of the people Israel in the past to the nations,” and that Josephus’s preoccupation with the Torah was intended “to raise up the faith of his people above all the religious of the nations of the world.” In light of this, Katz concludes that “in so doing, Yosef ben Matityahu atoned, through the words he wrote, for his sins as a warrior.” This admiration also explains why Katz adopts almost without reservation Josephus’s historical description, despite the fact that he was certainly familiar with the historian Gedaliah Alon’s critical studies. There were scholars who were very impressed by Katz’s willingness not to “adopt the Zionist activist heroic pantheon.” However, as we have seen, Katz’s attitude to Josephus and his writings was shared by other writers, primarily Simhoni.

The writing about Josephus during the Mandate period reveals greater complexity than has been described in the scholarly literature. The assertion that history teaching was recruited to national goals in order to inculcate uncritical admiration of historical events and figures does not stand the test of the evidence, at least regarding Josephus and the description of the Great Revolt. All the authors of the books described here saw themselves as committed to the national idea, yet nevertheless described the complex character of Josephus, examined his actions through the scholarly criteria in use at the time, and produced a complex narrative not committed to promoting national values at the cost of trampling “historical truth.” Moreover, although the textbooks were intended for different age cohorts, the differences among them relate to the degree of detail and the type of language, and they all present a very similar approach to Josephus. It is important to note that the more tolerant approach to Josephus was not accepted by all. Katz recalls that after his textbook was published, Mordechai Raziel, one of the senior teachers at the Tachkemoni religious school in Tel Aviv, approached him. Raziel, who had strong national views, argued that it was impossible for Josephus’s writing to atone for his actions, as there is no atonement for betrayal. Katz was sensitive to this criticism, and in later editions changed the text to “in so doing Yosef ben Matityahu **thought** to atone, through the words he wrote, for his sins as a warrior” (emphasis added). This anecdote strongly clarifies the capabilities and limitations of scientific criteria in disregarding the public’s opinions and leanings.

**The third period: Building a state, building history?**

The founding of the state and creation of a state educational system offered an opportunity to unify education and create a unitary curriculum. Indeed, the Workers’ stream was abolished, and the state educational stream covered most of the Jewish population, although the state religious stream maintained some autonomy that enabled it to make special adaptations to the curriculum and to use its own textbooks. In 1954, a curriculum for elementary schools (grades 1–8) was introduced. Its design was based on the recognition that education had a central role in transforming the collection of ethnicities and groups in the young state into “ a free people in its land, which knows how to live in freedom and liberty and to protect it in strength and wisdom, to be worthy of the name ‘Israel’…a people which…in our days has been given the lofty and challenging task of being ‘ready for tomorrow’s redemption.’” This nationalist sentiment was expressed by Education Minister and a prominent historian Ben-Zion Dinur. The national importance of education in building Israeli society has been emphasized and made salient in many diverse ways and has been widely discussed in the last decades by many scholars. The study of history in school had a central role in establishing national identity. According to Dinur, the goal of history study was “To provide students the recognition that the founding of the State of Israel is the fruit of generations of loyalty and yearning…and to plant in them the love for the State of Israel and the desire to act on its behalf and protect its existence.” In the framework of the content studied, there was of course an honorable space given to the Great Revolt, including to “Yosef Flavius” and “the failure of the defense of the Galilee and its causes” (p. 82). The clear nationalist sentiment leads one to assume that Josephus would not be one of the admired figures in this curriculum. However, the textbooks and the state curriculum were not always in accord. In the state religious stream, it was not considered necessary to change the textbooks. Katz’s book, with its moderate nationalist tone and complex, slightly empathetic attitude to Josephus, remained the main textbook through the late 1980s, and even the author of this paper used it as a student. In the state stream as well, the old textbooks continued to be used.

Over time new textbooks began to be written. One such book, written by Binyamin Ahiya and Moshe Harpaz for sixth graders, according to the new curriculum, continued to be the most commonly used history textbook for several decades. While the previous textbooks dwelled on the origin, character, conduct, and books of Josephus, in this textbook, all these matters were compressed into several relatively short lines. However, the complex attitude to Josephus remained. On the one hand, he is described as a “wise and clever man,” on the other hand, they write that “his heart was not whole with the role placed on him and with the revolt in general.” The reason for this, according to the book, is, of course, the high esteem in which Josephus held Rome’s strength. The authors’ criticism is leveled primarily at his military tactics, as they argue that instead of fortifying his troops in Yodfat, Yosef should have used guerilla tactics. Later on, it is stated that Yosef succeeded in escaping Yodfat through trickery. *The War of the Jews* is mentioned as the primary source for learning about the period without any reservation. Israel’s founding, then, did not lead to a major change in the attitude to the historian who had recounted the fall of Jewish independence two millennia earlier. At most, the schoolchildren who would later become soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces were asked to note the tactical aspects and military lessons that could be learned from Josephus’s military efforts.

Two years after the publication of the curriculum for elementary schools, an updated curriculum was written for high schools by Michael Ziv, one of the most prominent figures in the young education system. According to Ziv, the goal of history study was “To develop in the student social activism, out of a sense of responsibility to the future. We do not intend to raise historians, but rather, citizens, participants in the creation and formation of history.” Ziv distinguishes between the scientific aspects of the study of history and the goals of teaching. The students are not supposed to be junior historians, but rather, citizens loyal to their state. He also expressed this explicitly in the curriculum he wrote. The goal of history classes was “to plant in the heart of the youth the Jewish national recognition…to instill in the student’s heart the recognition of the State of Israel’s importance for ensuring the corporeal and continued historical existence of the people Israel.”

Ziv then began writing history textbooks for high school that would suit the new curriculum. Despite Ziv’s nationalist declarations, for him, Yosef ben Matityahu was neither a traitor nor a scoundrel. Rather, Ziv presents Josephus as a moderate man, who, while greatly impressed by Rome’s strength, excelled in “his strong faith in the redemption of Israel…and his being a descendant of the Hasmoneans and his expertise in Roman affairs were of great benefit,” according to some historians believed, Ziv noted. Ziv’s textbook refrains from criticizing Josephus’s conduct in the Galilee and mentions that Justus of Tiberias had testified to Josephus’s commitment to the revolt and the war against Rome. The criticism of Josephus is levied only through the words of John of Giscala. Although the book states that Josephus deceived the warriors in the Yodfat cave, immediately afterwards, it offers Josephus’s explanation that God had given him a prophetic role. The book not only does not reject this argument, but also gives it a rational interpretation, according to which Josephus had intended his destiny to be chronicling and passing on the history of the war to future generations. In general, the book accepts Josephus’s version of the Great Revolt, with the exception of the account of the burning of the Temple. The story of the destruction concludes, as in other textbooks, with admiration of Josephus’s literary endeavor. His literary corpus is described as a set of books meant to defend the Jewish people’s honor and faith. In this context, *Against Apion* receives especially high praise, and the textbook’s authors declare that “this book secured its author a place of honor in Jewish history.”

In research literature, it is accepted that in the first two decades of the State of Israel, history teaching was enlisted in the services of national needs, building the nation, and emphasizing faith in the rectitude of the Zionist enterprise. Yet analyzing how the figure Josephus in the history textbooks indicates that even during this time, Josephus continued to be presented as a complex person, and the various textbooks refrained from hurling derisive epithets at him, such as “traitor” and “coward.” It is almost certain that the descriptions of Josephus were influenced by the progress in research and the academic advice provided to the textbooks’ authors, yet the fact that up-to-date academic research served as a shield to the explicit nationalist trends of the state curriculum curricular is highly significant.

**The fourth period: From nationalist history to scientific history**

In the 1960s, history studies in the Western world underwent a major upheaval. Up to that time, the study of history had been seen as part of a means of establishing a sense of identity and national belonging. Critical voices , and primarily critical of its consequences for the rise of militant nationalism, had not had much if any impact on curricula in the West. A turning point in the goals of history teaching came in the 1960s. The American educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom emphasized that the goal of school learning should not be familiarity with knowledge but, rather, gaining learning skills and tools, which would assist the student in any field the student would later choose in life. Similarly, in the same period, Jerome Bruner, the American cognitive psychologist argued that when dealing with the various fields of knowledge (literature, history, science, etc.), the goal is not familiarity with these fields of knowledge, but rather understanding the “structure of knowledge.” In other words, history studies should not transform the student into a loyal member of the community, but rather, a junior historian. The sense of belonging and identity were replaced by the ability to ask questions and read critically.

The Israeli education system adopted these approaches, and over the course of the 1970s, curricula and textbooks were rewritten in all subjects taught in schools, including history. The middle school (grades 7–9) curriculum starts with setting five goals in the field of cognition. Only the first goal involves acquiring knowledge of historical events, while the rest deal with the skills needed for historical research, including being able to fully utilize sources of information, to make comparisons among historical phenomena, to search for causes and consequences, and the like. The next three goals are defined as goals in the field of values. The first pertains to judging historical events in accordance with moral standards; the second deals with “fostering understanding and tolerance towards…other people and nations.” Only the last deals with identity and belonging: “cultivating a feeling of identification with the nation and the state.”

Toward the end of the 1970s, a curriculum was also written for high school. In this curriculum, also, nationalist values were pushed aside in favor of historicist skills and cognitive abilities. These changes permeated the new textbooks and were clearly reflected in the book *Jewish Society in Second Temple Times: Developments and Struggles in the Period between the Return to Zion and the Bar Kokhba Revolt*. The book reflects a completely different didactic approach from that which was prevalent up to that point. Previous history textbooks would present the student an organized lecture of the historical narrative, in which passages from sources and discussions are presented in a separate and distinct context. Yet in this book, long passages from historical sources and from the work of modern scholars are integrated into the narrative historical lecture. While reading, the student is prompted, through leading questions, to delve into the ancient historians’ passages and modern scholarly discourse in order to reconstruct the historical reality.

The book gives primary attention to evaluating Josephus’s credibility and motivations. For example, after presenting the “fourth philosophy,” the students are asked: “How does Yosef ben Matityahu describe the people of the ‘fourth philosophy’? What, in your opinion, did he want to achieve in presenting their opinions as a transformation of on the ways of the fathers? What do you learn about Yosef ben Matityahu’s attitude to the people of the ‘fourth philosophy’?” As a whole, the book includes many comments about Josephus’s writing and its reliability. One of the clear examples of this relates to the episode of the burning of the Temple. The students are introduced to Josephus’s account, according to which the Temple was burnt against Titus’s wishes, and in opposition, the statement of Sulpicius Severus is provided, according to which Titus was directly responsible for the burning of the Temple. Students are then asked to explain their position on this contradiction.

However, the critique of the sources about Josephus does not stem from rejection of or alienation toward the “traitor to his people.” Instead, the book almost reluctantly describes the conflict between John of Giscala and Yosef ben Matityahu. More importantly, the Yodfat episode is recounted in short, without hinting that Josephus survived due to an act of deception. In general, the book completely avoids making clear ethical judgments of Josephus and his actions. In fact, while the authors propose that the teacher should conduct a public trial of Josephus among the students, it suggests that the teacher should notice that: “the intent for such a discussion is not to reach extreme conclusions of complete rejection or approval. It is important the students understand the person’s complexity and the problem with relating to his book, and get used to seeing that there is a lot of gray in the world, not only black or white…”

The presentation of Josephus’s character in the 1980s exposes two processes that transpired in Israeli society and its education system. The scientific aspect of the textbook, which engages with source criticism, engaging with scholarly literature, and revealing the disagreements among them, is an outstanding example of the curricula written in the previous decade, inspired by the curriculum revolution in the English-speaking world. Yet the last sentence presented from the pedagogical guidebook for teachers indicates that this revolution was simply a part of a deep change Israeli society was undergoing at the same time. The textbooks written in the 1950s and 1960s were written out of a strong and naïve faith in the righteousness of Zionism, the State of Israel, and its Jewish society. Faith in all these was undermined after the Yom Kippur War, the public dispute on the settlement in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, and the unending war in Lebanon. The recognition “that there is a lot of gray in the world, not only black or white,” expresses these changes well. Interestingly, the combination of both processes, the educational and the social, enabled a sort of transformation in Josephus’s status in the textbooks. Until this point, we have seen that Josephus, the man and military leader, received quite sharp ethical critique, but the old textbooks adopted the words of Josephus the historian almost without changes, and even praised him. Now, the tables had turned. Adoption of the scientific-critical approach facilitated a precise analysis of Josephus’s writings and awareness of his biases and ideological tendencies. At the same time, the recognition that “there is no black and white in life,” enabled a more tolerant and comprehensive evaluation of the man and an understanding of his ideological leanings.

**Josephus in the 21st century: Continuity and dialogue**

During the past forty years, two additional curricula have been drawn up, yet Josephus’s character in the textbooks has not changed significantly. Although in these newer books there is a real retreat from the in-depth scientific approach of the previous textbook discussed, the character of Josephus remains quite complex, and not subject to an unequivocal judgment. These same decades were also accompanied by lively public interest in the status of history study and its ideological implications for Israel’s students. In the early part of the first decade of the twenty-first century, public criticism led to the withdrawal of a textbook because some sectors in Israeli society felt it had a left-wing bias. This criticism led to the religious right’s growing interest in history studies, which culminated in the founding of a publishing house, the Har Bracha Institute, aimed at writing and distributing textbooks for the State Religious schools.

The Har Bracha Institute is an arm of the Har Bracha Yeshiva, located in the Har Bracha settlement south of Nablus. Since its early years, the yeshiva has had much interest in history. It was founded by students of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, who, like his father, Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, saw history as an arena of divine revelation. Rabbi Ze’ev Sultanovich, who is on the yeshiva’s faculty and serves as a consultant and advisor for the textbooks’ authors, dedicates his thought to revealing the theological meaning of upheavals in world, and especially, Jewish history. Over the past decade, the Har Bracha Institute has published history books that aim “to show the hand of God in historical processes and the world’s progress toward the Redemption.” The location of the yeshiva and the institute in the territories of Judea and Samaria hints that this Redemption is characterized by a radical nationalist approach.

Recently, the institute published a textbook for sixth graders in the state religious educational stream. It is important to note that as of the writing of these lines, this is the only textbook intended for these students; hence the book’s relative importance in the construction of their identities. In accordance with the institute’s religious and nationalist tendencies, it is natural that it attributes great significance to the events surrounding the destruction of the Second Temple. Indeed, the description of the period opens as follows:

In contrast to 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.

The revolt took a heavy toll on the Jewish people. The temple was destroyed, and tens of thousands of people were killed. However, today about two thousand years after the Great Revolt, most nations continue to one degree or another the Greco-Roman culture to which they are accustomed. The Jewish people still live and create within the independent cultural space whose existence it was fighting for.

Against this background, the words of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda sound remarkably restrained. In light of this, it is surprising to discover in this same book the assessment that “The decision to revolt against the Romans was not a considered decision taken by the Jewish leadership 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 Yodfat episode, the book’s authors write only that “he persuaded his companions 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 is considered a traitor to his people?*” But given the negative image of the Zealots and the reasonable way Josephus is presented, they have no reason to judge him as such. 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 authors accept Josephus’s narrative. Why? The authors belong to the Religious Zionist sector, which is strongly committed to religious and nationalist values. This dual commitment may sometimes create internal contradictions, both in everyday life and on the ideological level. The nationalist declaration made at the chapter’s opening clearly expresses the authors’ nationalist worldview. One might therefore have expected a strong rejection of Josephus and his books. Yet the same chapter also expresses commitment to Jewish tradition, particularly rabbinic literature. Along with Josephus’s writings, the book quotes and discusses several rabbinic traditions related to the destruction of the Second Temple. The two most prominent of these are the declaration that the Second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred, and the second is the story of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s flight from Jerusalem. The first tradition blames the destruction not on the Romans but rather, according to the authors’ interpretation, on the conflict among the zealot groups. This position leads to a view that Josephus’s description is supported by, sheds light on, and provides clear historical weight to rabbinic tradition. Blaming the zealots, however, of course reduces the blame on the Romans. The tradition of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s flight sheds positive light on a person who, like Josephus, fled to the Roman side. The authors’ historiosophic approach provides an additional dimension to the Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai story: Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai fled to Yavne not only because he believed the revolt had no chance, but because he interpreted history’s direction for himself and future generations. The revolt against Rome was against God’s wishes, while standing alongside Rome accorded with the divinely planned path of history. For this reason, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai not only fled Jerusalem but also blessed Vespasian and prophesied his reign. The textbook’s authors understood well that they could not condemn Josephus, who acted just like Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. Of course, they do not mention Josephus’s prophetic pretenses, but they are aware they cannot present Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai as a role model while at the same time condemning Josephus.

The authors’ dual, contradictory commitment is also expressed in their treatment of the Masada episode, which is given considerable space in the book. At the beginning of their discussion of the episode the book declares, “Masada has become a symbol of fighting to the end for independence, liberty, and the freedom to choose.” This declaration is similar to the position of the textbooks from the 1940s and 1950s, in which Masada was given a central place in building the nationalist ethos. Yet the approach to the topic immediately changes. The book continues with lengthy passages from the speech given by Eleazar ben Yair (as recorded by Josephus), followed by an explanation and evaluation of the passages, concluding with the question, “Was this really a sense of the victory of the spirit, or of painful fall and loss of life?” The book poses three additional questions to the students. The first pertains to Josephus: “Why, in your opinion, did Josephus describe the last moments on Masada in such an impressive manner? (Think also about a certain event Josephus thought about while writing the passage.)” The students are asked to compare Josephus’s positive judgment of the Masada rebels to his own actions in Yodfat. In this way, a positive aspect is added to Josephus’s character, at least from a nationalist perspective. This question is followed by two questions that undermine the positive description of the rebels. The students are asked to think of some of the justifications expressed by the women who refused to die along with the other zealots and their families. Subsequently, the students are asked to put themselves in the place of the fighters and explain “Which side would you have chosen—to surrender to Rome or to continue the war to the end?” It appears that regarding the Masada episode, too, there is a contradiction between the ideological declaration at the chapter’s opening describing Masada as a heroic national symbol and the discussion that obliges the students to note the problematic nature of the rebels’ mass suicide. The equivocal judgment of the Masada zealots also reflects on Josephus’s character, of course. Perhaps Josephus acted correctly in Yodfat, and his actions can be justified, just like the students have now justified and understood the flight of the women from death on the mountaintop.

The ambiguity, and perhaps even contradiction regarding Masada appears connected to the authors’ dual commitment. A textbook committed to nationalist values must give a prominent place to Masada, which is a powerful part of the Zionist nationalist ethos. Indeed, the book is very aware of this: “Masada is one of the most popular sites in Israel.” The book even acknowledges the experience of visiting Masada, addressing students as follows: “In visiting the site, attempt to feel those moments before the glorious landscape” (ibid.). In order to provide the students in the classroom the experience of visiting Masada, the book includes two color pages of pictures of the landscape and archaeological findings of the site. Masada’s presence in the book is connected to the site’s status in the Zionist-Israeli ethos, but Masada is not part of the rabbinic collective memory. As mentioned, from the point of view of the rabbis, to whom the book’s authors are committed, the correct choice was that of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who preferred to accept Roman rule rather than commit suicide or fight. Thus, the book is obliged to raise questions about the actions of the Masada rebels and prepare the students to recognize that the right path at the time was that of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who is presented in the book’s next chapter.

**Conclusion**

History textbooks throughout the world and in Israel are perceived as the state’s agents for imparting the national ethos. Indeed, Israeli history textbooks published until World War I express a well-formed nationalist position expressed in insults and condemnation of Josephus’s actions and deeds. However, following the war, there was a major shift. Although the construction of the Jewish national home continued in great force, and many of the textbook authors saw themselves as committed to consolidating Jewish Zionist nationalism, the attitude to Josephus changed. The textbooks began to recognize and even praise his literary contribution to the Jewish people. The derogatory name-calling ceased and a clearer understanding of his motives begins to appear. The reason for this is likely the commitment of the textbooks’ authors both to academic research and to the scientific values of the curricula. In contrast to the widespread view in the scholarly literature that textbooks are greatly influenced by changes regarding nationalism and the nation’s status, it appears that, regarding Josephus at least, the commitments of the textbooks’ authors to Jewish nationalism, to the scholarly literature, to curricula, and even to the religious world and rabbinic literature led them to present Josephus to students as a complex character, both as a military leader and as a historian.