בס״ד

The Jewish Historian and the Israeli Student

The father of history, Herodotus, begins his monumental book, aptly titled *The Histories*, with the words, “These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes.” All historians aspire to share the results of their research to the public. But to what does the history *teacher* aspire? To present someone *else’s* findings? In the last hundred years, various and even conflicting answers have been given to this question. Thus, when we turn to examine how Josephus has been taught, we must first determine 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 as an ideal and primary means of forging a national identity. One of the first to undertake this mission for the Jewish nation was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who published a textbook called, *The Chronicles of Israel* (דברי הימים לבני ישראל) From the very outset of his narrative about the Great Revolt, Ben-Yehuda makes very clear whom he holds 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 Joseph Ben Matityahu – 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 often than he does Titus or Vespasian. Ben-Yehuda’s description of the revolt concludes with this 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 is the same Simchoni who first translated Josephus’s *Jewish War* from Greek into Hebrew, and, in fact, Simchoni was among the few to write positively about Josephus. The first mention of Josephus in Simchoni’s book is when Josephus accepts the appointment as commander of the Galilee. Simchoni describes Josephus as “hardworking and savvy.” Nonetheless, he concedes 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 account of what Josephus did at Jotapata very short. By contrast, John of Giscala is described as a tyrant, who led a “corrupt regime” in Jerusalem. Generally, Simchoni fully accepts the reports of Josephus, regarding both factual details and evaluations of the various historical figures. Simchoni’s description, therefore, stands in stark contrast to that of Ben-Yehuda. Simchoni, who died at the tender age of 42, was eulogized by Haim Nahman Bialik with the words: “I expected that he would be the first to make the mark of nationalism on history.” What Simchoni wrote about Josephus shows us that a commitment to Jewish nationalism, combined with in-depth factual knowledge and intellectual honesty makes it possible to present a complex and balanced portrait of Josephus the writer and the military commander.

The differences between Ben-Yehuda and Simchoni reflect the two quite different approaches that the new educational system faced about Josephus, approaches that, to a considerable extent, still exist today in various sectors of Israel’s education system. One of the central personalities in the Israeli education system in the early days of the state was Michael Ziv, who headed the Department of Secondary Education in the Ministry of Education and wrote the main history textbook at the time. 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 during our 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.” Ostensibly, Ziv might have been expected to adopt the same basic approach as Ben-Yehuda, but, in fact, his history textbook reflects both a more cautious and nuanced stance. Take, for example, Ziv’s passage on the appointment of Josephus as commander of the Galilee:

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. His being a descendant of the Hasmoneans, and his expertise in things Roman, were also of great benefit.

Ziv refrains from any decisive characterization of Josephus. More importantly, students are immediately presented with differing perspectives. Unlike Simchoni, Ziv affirms explicitly that Josephus deceived the other fighters in the cave at Jotapata, but he rationalizes this, explaining 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. The question, then, is did Josephus really betray his people, or did he ultimately serve them well? Ziv’s book emphasizes that Josephus wrote the history of the war as a response to Roman books portraying 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.” Needless to say, Ziv deliberately used 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 founding of the State of Israel, each ideological faction sought to educate its students in the spirit of its own values. As a result, there were textbooks and syllabi specifically for workers, the middle class, religious Jews, and others. After the emergence of the state, the separation between the state secular 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 of all time.

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 over the course of the years (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 surprising, therefore, 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.” According to Katz, the writing of *The Jewish War* was personal for Josephus, expressing the conflicted soul of a man whose contemptible military record left him living in a gilded cage. In a later edition, Katz relented a bit, conceding that, “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 mid-1970s, there was a significant change in the syllabus in Israel. In line with new approaches developed in the United States, the goal of education became not the memorization of facts, but the acquisition of the fundamental structure of each discipline of knowledge. Thus, the aim of the study of history was no longer imparting information about the past, and certainly not helping students identify with it. The teacher of history was now expected to equip the students with 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 differing, even contradictory points of view. The book abandons the use of a clear, authoritative voice, and instead invites 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 is accompanied by a “Teachers’ Edition” with suggestions for discussion, one of which is to put Josephus on trial. The authors explain the purpose of this exercise:

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 become accustomed to seeing that there are a lot of gray areas in life. It’s not just black and white.

This admonition not only relates to the need for of scientific objectivity, but also reflects Israeli society to a large extent. When the book had appeared, the aftershocks of 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.

In recent years, textbooks for the secular schools have been characterized primarily by watering down the sources presented in earlier textbooks, and by telling the story as concisely as possible without substantively changing the balanced picture of Josephus established in the 1980s. In contrast, some intriguing changes have taken place in textbooks for national religious schools.

In 2019, a history textbook was published by the Har Bracha Institute. The Institute, located in a settlement just south of Nablus in Samaria, was founded with the goal of demonstrating that history is really *hester-yah* – God behind the scenes, or the secrets of God, through which God’s leadership, and intentions, are revealed. Note, for example, the beginning of this book’s chapter on the destruction of the Second Temple:

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 in this same book the assessment that: “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, the book’s authors write only 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 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, those behind the Har Bracha textbook essentially accepted Josephus’s story. Probably they do so for two corresponding 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; thus, 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 can 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, rather, convey how history can be used to say something about contemporary issues, and thus to identify how various contemporary agents use history for their own needs.

In the 17 pages, of Har Bracha textbook 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, for whom Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai is the most suitable model? Josephus provides the solution. On the one hand, Josephus showers praise on the heroism of the people at Masada, quoting the speech of Eleazar ben Yair at great length. On the other hand, the personal example of Josephus (like that of R. Yohanan b. Zakkai) is hardly a reflection of heroism. The author of this book then 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 the rebels faced. 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. While this book is suffused with nationalism, it also clearly recognizes the guilt of the rebels and an adoption of the way of Josephus and R. Yohanan b. Zakkai.

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