



Courage and Sacrifice: The Final Stand at Masada

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Tuesday, Aug. 17 at 7:00 PM EDT

Course Description:

The fall of Masada marked the first time in Jewish history that a group of Jews collectively committing mass suicide was recorded. Following the fiery speech of Eleazar ben Yair, hundreds of Jews within the Masada fortress chose to kill their own wives, children, and each other, rather than surrender themselves as slaves to the Romans. How are we to understand the motivations guiding their actions? What are the ramifications of Jewish martyrdom for our society today? This seminar will examine how Eleazar ben Yair's rhetoric inspired his listeners to make the ultimate sacrifice. We will explore the relationship between God's will and Jewish destiny, the immortality of the soul, and the power of our free will to make decisions between an ignoble life and a worthwhile death.

Guiding Questions:

1. With the Romans about to breach the fortress of Masada, Eleazar ben Yair sees two possible options for the Jews: surrendering to the Romans or resisting unto death. Do you think the Jews of Masada did the right thing by committing suicide? Why or why not?
2. Eleazar ben Yair's speech is meant to be persuasive. Find three examples of phrases or techniques in the text of his speech that ben Yair employs to convince his listeners.
3. This speech was written down by the historian Flavius Josephus after 960 of the 967 Jews at Masada committed mass suicide. What parts of this speech might be difficult to believe now that you know it was written after the event took place?
4. Do you think that the concept of martyrdom, or giving up one's life for something larger than oneself, has its place in Judaism? Why or why not?

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Eleazar ben Yair

Courage and Sacrifice: The Final Stand at Masada



Masada fortress in Judean desert

Eleazar ben Yair's Speech

Excerpted from *The War of the Jews or History of the Destruction of Jerusalem*

By Flavius Josephus

Translated by William
Whiston

BOOK VII.

CHAPTER 8.

Concerning Masada And Those Sicarii Who Kept It; And How Silva Betook Himself To Form The Siege Of That Citadel. Eleazar's Speeches To The Besieged.

...However, neither did Eleazar once think of flying away, nor would he permit any one else to do so; but when he saw their wall burned down by the fire, and could devise no other way of escaping, or room for their further courage, and setting before their eyes what the Romans would do to them, their children, and their wives, if they got them into their power, he consulted about having them all slain. Now as he judged this to be the best thing they could do in their present circumstances, he gathered the most courageous of his companions together, and encouraged them to take that course by a speech which he made to them in the manner following:

“Since we, long ago, my generous friends, resolved never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God himself, who alone is the true and just Lord of mankind, the time is now come that obliges us to make that resolution true in practice. And let us not at this time bring a reproach upon ourselves for self-contradiction, while we formerly would not undergo slavery, though it were then without danger, but must now, together with slavery, choose such punishments also as are intolerable; I mean this, upon the supposition that the Romans once reduce us under their power while we are alive.

“We were the very first that revolted from them, and we are the last that fight against them; and I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God hath granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom, which hath not been the case of others, who were conquered unexpectedly. It is very plain that we shall be taken within a day's time; but it is still an eligible thing to die after a glorious manner, together with our dearest friends.

“This is what our enemies themselves cannot by any means hinder, although they be very desirous to take us alive. Nor can we propose to ourselves any more to fight them, and beat them. It had been proper indeed for us to have conjectured at the purpose of God much sooner, and at the very first, when we were so desirous of defending our liberty, and when we received such sore treatment from one another, and worse treatment from our enemies, and to have been sensible that the same God, who had of old taken the Jewish nation into his favor, had now condemned them to destruction; for had he either continued favorable, or been but in a lesser degree displeased with us, he had not overlooked the destruction of so many men, or delivered his most holy city to be burnt and demolished by our enemies.

“To be sure we weakly hoped to have preserved ourselves, and ourselves alone, still in a state of freedom, as if we had been guilty of no sins ourselves against God, nor been partners with those of others; we also taught other men to preserve their liberty. Wherefore, consider how God hath convinced us that our hopes were in vain, by bringing such distress upon us in the desperate state we are now in, and which is beyond all our expectations; **for the nature of this fortress which was in itself unconquerable, hath not proved a means of our deliverance; and even while we have still great abundance of food, and a great quantity of arms, and other necessities more than we want, we are openly deprived by God himself of all hope of deliverance;** for that fire which was driven upon our enemies did not of its own accord turn back upon the wall which we had built; **this was the effect of God's anger against us for our manifold sins,** which we have been guilty of in a most insolent and extravagant manner with regard to our own countrymen; **the punishments of which let us not receive from the Romans, but from God himself, as executed by our own hands;** for these will be more moderate than the other.

“Let our wives die before they are abused, and our children before they have tasted of slavery; and after we have slain them, let us bestow that glorious benefit upon one another mutually, and preserve ourselves in freedom, as an excellent funeral monument for us. But first let us destroy our money and the fortress by fire; for I am well assured that this will be a great grief to the Romans, that they shall not be able to seize upon our bodies, and shall fail of our wealth also; **let us spare nothing but our provisions;** for they will be a testimonial when we are dead that we

were not subdued for want of necessities, but that, according to our original resolution, we have preferred death before slavery.

7. This was Eleazar's speech to them. Yet did not the opinions of all the auditors acquiesce therein; but although some of them were very zealous to put his advice in practice, and were in a manner filled with pleasure at it, and thought death to be a good thing, yet had those that were most effeminate a commiseration for their wives and families; and when these men were especially moved by the prospect of their own certain death, they looked wistfully at one another, and by the tears that were in their eyes declared their dissent from his opinion. When Eleazar saw these people in such fear, and that their souls were dejected at so prodigious a proposal, he was afraid lest perhaps these effeminate persons should, by their lamentations and tears, enfeeble those that heard what he had said courageously; so he did not leave off exhorting them, but stirred up himself, and recollecting proper arguments for raising their courage, he undertook to speak more briskly and fully to them, and that concerning the immortality of the soul. So he made a lamentable groan, and fixing his eyes intently on those that wept, he spoke thus:

“Truly, I was greatly mistaken when I thought to be assisting to brave men who struggled hard for their liberty, and to such as were resolved either to live with honor, or else to die; but I find that you are such people as are no better than others, either in virtue or in courage, and are afraid of dying, though you be delivered thereby from the greatest miseries, while you ought to make no delay in this matter, nor to await any one to give you good advice; **for the laws of our country, and of God himself, have from ancient times, and as soon as ever we could use our reason, continually taught us, and our forefathers have corroborated the same doctrine by their actions, and by their bravery of mind, that it is life that is a calamity to men, and not death; for this last affords our souls their liberty, and sends them by a removal into their own place of purity, where they are to be insensible of all sorts of misery;** for while souls are tied down to a mortal body, they are partakers of its miseries; and really, to speak the truth, they are themselves dead; for the union of what is divine to what is mortal is disagreeable.

“It is true, the power of the soul is great, even when it is imprisoned in a mortal body; for by moving it after a way that is invisible, it makes the body a sensible instrument, and causes it to advance further in its actions than mortal nature could otherwise do. However, when it is freed from that weight which draws it down to the earth and is connected with it, it obtains its own proper place, and does then become a partaker of that blessed power, and those abilities, which are then every way incapable of being hindered in their operations. **It [the soul] continues invisible, indeed, to the eyes of men, as does God himself; for certainly it is not itself seen while it is in the body; for it is there after an invisible manner, and when it is freed from it, it is still not seen. It is this soul which hath one nature, and that an incorruptible one also; but yet it is the cause of the change that is made in the body; for whatsoever it be which the soul touches, that lives and flourishes; and from whatsoever it is removed, that withers away and dies; such a degree is there in it of immortality.**

“Let me produce the **state of sleep** as a most evident demonstration of the truth of what I say; wherein souls, when the body does not distract them, have the sweetest rest depending on themselves, and conversing with God, by their alliance to him; they then go every where, and

foretell many futurities beforehand. And why are we afraid of death, while we are pleased with the rest that we have in sleep? And how absurd a thing is it to pursue after liberty while we are alive, and yet to envy it to ourselves where it will be eternal! We, therefore, who have been brought up in a discipline of our own, ought to become an example to others of our readiness to die.

“Yet, if we do stand in need of foreigners to support us in this matter, let us regard those Indians who profess the exercise of philosophy; for these good men do but unwillingly undergo the time of life, and look upon it as a necessary servitude, and make haste to let their souls loose from their bodies; nay, when no misfortune presses them to it, nor drives them upon it, these have such a desire of a life of immortality, that they tell other men beforehand that they are about to depart; and nobody hinders them, but every one thinks them happy men, and gives them letters to be carried to their familiar friends [that are dead], so firmly and certainly do they believe that souls converse with one another [in the other world]. So when these men have heard all such commands that were to be given them, they deliver their body to the fire; and, in order to their getting their soul a separation from the body in the greatest purity, they die in the midst of hymns of commendations made to them; for their dearest friends conduct them to their death more readily than do any of the rest of mankind conduct their fellow-citizens when they are going a very long journey, who at the same time weep on their own account, but look upon the others as happy persons, as so soon to be made partakers of the immortal order of beings.

“Are not we, therefore, ashamed to have lower notions than the Indians? and by our own cowardice to lay a base reproach upon the laws of our country, which are so much desired and imitated by all mankind?

“But put the case that we had been brought up under another persuasion, and **taught that life is the greatest good which men are capable of, and that death is a calamity; however, the circumstances we are now in ought to be an inducement to us to bear such calamity courageously, since it is by the will of God, and by necessity, that we are to die; for it now appears that God hath made such a decree against the whole Jewish nation, that we are to be deprived of this life which [he knew] we would not make a due use of.** For do not you ascribe the occasion of our present condition to yourselves, nor think the Romans are the true occasion that this war we have had with them is become so destructive to us all: these things have not come to pass by their power, but a more powerful cause hath intervened, and made us afford them an occasion of their appearing to be conquerors over us.

“What Roman weapons, I pray you, were those by which the Jews at Cesarea were slain? On the contrary, when they were no way disposed to rebel, but were all the while keeping their seventh day festival, and did not so much as lift up their hands against the citizens of Cesarea, yet did those citizens run upon them in great crowds, and cut their throats, and the throats of their wives and children, and this without any regard to the Romans themselves, who never took us for their enemies till we revolted from them. But some may be ready to say, that truly the people of Cesarea had always a quarrel against those that lived among them, and that when an opportunity offered itself, they only satisfied the old rancor they had against them. What then

shall we say to those of Scythopolis, who ventured to wage war with us on account of the Greeks? Nor did they do it by way of revenge upon the Romans, when they acted in concert with our countrymen. Wherefore you see how little our good-will and fidelity to them profited us, while they were slain, they and their whole families, after the most inhuman manner, which was all the requital that was made them for the assistance they had afforded the others; for that very same destruction which they had prevented from falling upon the others did they suffer themselves from them, as if they had been ready to be the actors against them. **It would be too long for me to speak at this time of every destruction brought upon us; for you cannot but know that there was not any one Syrian city which did not slay their Jewish inhabitants, and were not more bitter enemies to us than were the Romans themselves; nay, even those of Damascus, when they were able to allege no tolerable pretense against us, filled their city with the most barbarous slaughters of our people, and cut the throats of eighteen thousand Jews, with their wives and children. And as to the multitude of those that were slain in Egypt, and that with torments also, we have been informed they were more than sixty thousand; those indeed being in a foreign country, and so naturally meeting with nothing to oppose against their enemies, were killed in the manner forementioned.**

“As for all those of us who have waged war against the Romans in our own country, had we not sufficient reason to have sure hopes of victory? **For we had arms, and walls, and fortresses so prepared as not to be easily taken, and courage not to be moved by any dangers in the cause of liberty, which encouraged us all to revolt from the Romans. But then these advantages sufficed us but for a short time,** and only raised our hopes, while they really appeared to be the origin of our miseries; for all we had hath been taken from us, and all hath fallen under our enemies, as if these advantages were only to render their victory over us the more glorious, and were not disposed for the preservation of those by whom these preparations were made.

“**And as for those that are already dead in the war, it is reasonable we should esteem them blessed, for they are dead in defending, and not in betraying their liberty; but as to the multitude of those that are now under the Romans, who would not pity their condition?** and who would not make haste to die, before he would suffer the same miseries with them? Some of them have been put upon the rack, and tortured with fire and whippings, and so died. Some have been half devoured by wild beasts, and yet have been reserved alive to be devoured by them a second time, in order to afford laughter and sport to our enemies; and such of those as are alive still are to be looked on as the most miserable, who, being so desirous of death, could not come at it.

“**And where is now that great city, the metropolis of the Jewish nation,** which was fortified by so many walls round about, which had so many fortresses and large towers to defend it, which could hardly contain the instruments prepared for the war, and which had so many ten thousands of men to fight for it? Where is this city that was believed to have God himself inhabiting therein? It is now demolished to the very foundations, and hath nothing but that monument of it preserved, I mean the camp of those that hath destroyed it, which still dwells upon its ruins; some unfortunate old men also lie upon the ashes of the temple, and a few women are there preserved alive by the enemy, for our bitter shame and reproach. Now who is there that revolves these things in his mind,

and yet is able to bear the sight of the sun, though he might live out of danger? Who is there so much his country's enemy, or so unmanly, and so desirous of living, as not to repent that he is still alive?

“And I cannot but wish that we had all died before we had seen that holy city demolished by the hands of our enemies, or the foundations of our holy temple dug up after so profane a manner.

“But since we had a generous hope that deluded us, as if we might perhaps have been able to avenge ourselves on our enemies on that account, though it be now become vanity, and hath left us alone in this distress, **let us make haste to die bravely. Let us pity ourselves, our children, and our wives while it is in our own power to show pity to them; for we were born to die, as well as those were whom we have begotten; nor is it in the power of the most happy of our race to avoid it.** But for abuses, and slavery, and the sight of our wives led away after an ignominious manner, with their children, these are not such evils as are natural and necessary among men; although such as do not prefer death before those miseries, when it is in their power so to do, must undergo even them, on account of their own cowardice. We revolted from the Romans with great pretensions to courage; and when, at the very last, they invited us to preserve ourselves, we would not comply with them. Who will not, therefore, believe that they will certainly be in a rage at us, in case they can take us alive? Miserable will then be the young men who will be strong enough in their bodies to sustain many torments! miserable also will be those of elder years, who will not be able to bear those calamities which young men might sustain! One man will be obliged to hear the voice of his son implore help of his father, when his hands are bound.

“But certainly our hands are still at liberty, and have a sword in them; let them then be subservient to us in our glorious design; let us die before we become slaves under our enemies, and let us go out of the world, together with our children and our wives, in a state of freedom. This it is that our laws command us to do; this it is that our wives and children crave at our hands; nay, God himself hath brought this necessity upon us; while the Romans desire the contrary, and are afraid lest any of us should die before we are taken. Let us therefore make haste, and instead of affording them so much pleasure, as they hope for in getting us under their power, let us leave them an example which shall at once cause their astonishment at our death, and their admiration of our hardiness therein.”

CHAPTER 9.

How The People That Were In The Fortress Were Prevailed On By The Words Of Eleazar, Two Women And Five Children Only Excepted And All Submitted To Be Killed By One Another.

1. Now as Eleazar was proceeding on in this exhortation, they all cut him off short, and made haste to do the work, as full of an unconquerable ardor of mind, and moved with a demoniacal fury