

IN CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS of insurgencies and terrorism, very few mention the fact that one of the first manifestations of terrorism can be traced back to the second century B.C.E. It occurred during Hellenistic rule in ancient Israel, which began in 332 B.C.E. with the occupation of the country by Alexander the Great and continued under his Hellenist successors, the Ptolemies and Seleucids, until 160 B.C.E. Those who often refer to this historical period are contemporary Jewish terrorists who admire the heroism of the ancient Jewish militants and aspire to follow their example.

#### HASMONEANS

The most prominent Jewish group to use organized violence in the Second Temple era was the Hashmonai (Hasmonean) family. For the sake of historical justice, it is important to note that the Hashmonaim conducted an ongoing campaign of guerrilla warfare against Hellenistic rule in Israel, and terrorism was only a small part of their arsenal of strategies. The foremost incident of terrorism to be carried out by the Hashmonaim was the murder of Apelles, a Hellenistic envoy. He had been sent to their town, Modi'in, in order to ensure that the assimilation policy of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), who sought to impose a Hellenistic lifestyle on the Jews, was carried out according to the letter of the law.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the great historical gulf between the Hashmonai revolt and contemporary Jewish terrorism, it is hard not to be impressed by the similarity of the factors responsible for the violence and the fashion in which it developed. The murder of Apelles and his aides by Mattityahu (Matthias) the Hashmonai did not occur in a vacuum. It was preceded by a major crisis that threatened the resources most highly valued by the Hashmonaim and many other Jews. Until the advent of Hellenistic rule, the Jews in Israel enjoyed extensive autonomy, although they were not sovereigns

of their country. One of the central aspects of this autonomy was its religious and cultural freedom. The limited involvement of the various empires in the Jewish lifestyle helped make it feasible for the city of Jerusalem to prosper and for the Temple to become a spiritual and social center for the Jewish inhabitants of Israel.<sup>2</sup> In 218 B.C.E., Israel was taken from the Ptolemies by Antiochus III of the Seleucid dynasty. During his rule, the status quo was essentially maintained; however, his successors, Seleucus IV and especially Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), were more devoted to the ideal of Hellenistic cultural uniformity among the peoples under the empire's sovereignty. Among other efforts, the Seleucids strove to remodel Jerusalem into a Greek polis.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the desecration of the Jews' cardinal spiritual symbol, this policy also had far-reaching social implications. The urban and more established Jewish classes found the Hellenistic way of life and novel cultural richness to their liking.<sup>4</sup> The fact that many of them willingly assimilated these cultural distinctions brought them into closer political favor with the authorities and turned them into an elite with unique privileges. In this fashion, a new empire-sponsored Jewish aristocracy came into being that sought to instate a series of reforms in the lifestyle of all Jews in Israel, and the support of this aristocracy for a polis-like Jerusalem weakened its status as the heart of the Jewish experience.<sup>5</sup>

The new social structure led to great frustration among rural Jews, who were alienated by the Hellenistic practices and felt that the new elites had brought about forced changes in their way of life, including a decline in Orthodox Judaism. However, these collective feelings of deprivation and frustration remained latent until the actual implementation of reforms in the taxation system in Israel. In contrast to the prior method of collecting taxes, which was based on a uniform poll tax for the whole population, the Seleucids granted significant tax concessions to the urban elites and assigned them the role of collecting taxes from the rural Jews.<sup>6</sup> After filling the tax quotas that they were required to hand over to the authorities, these same elites were permitted to pocket the balance, a fact that encouraged a particularly effective tax collection. This divide-and-conquer policy only heightened the tension between the different Jewish groups.<sup>7</sup>

However, the tax reforms were not the only reason for the outbreak of violence. The Jewish periphery was aware that the Seleucid international status was not particularly robust. The defeat of Antiochus III at the hands

of the Roman legions in the Battle of Magnesia transformed the Roman Empire into a main actor in the Middle East. Among the Jewish farmer families, there was a widespread feeling that the days of the Hellenistic Empire were numbered, and siding with the Romans would reverse the division of power between the different groups of Jewish society.<sup>8</sup>

Mattityahu and his five sons held political and spiritual status among the rural Jews. They hailed from a family of priests from the Levi tribe that dwelled in the city of Modi'in. Mattityahu's distinction as a priest, his charisma, and that of his sons made them natural leaders of the periphery. His cry after slaying Apelles, "Those for God, come with me," became deeply etched in the Jewish collective memory and remains a slogan of Israeli independence and rectitude.<sup>9</sup> However, despite the myths woven around him, Mattityahu's days as commander of the rebellion were numbered. He died in 165 B.C.E., one year after the fighting broke out, and his son Yehudah (Judah) assumed the role of leader. In Mattityahu's days, rebel actions focused mainly on killing Hellenized Jews and attacks on Jewish population centers where the Hellenistic culture had been assimilated. However, under the command of Yehudah, the rebels also developed guerrilla warfare capabilities. They specialized in clandestine nighttime raids on army camps and, using this method, struck hard at the Seleucid forces.<sup>10</sup> Yehudah was also blessed with political acumen; he was able to establish close ties with the Roman Empire and promote its interests in the region.

By means of his military accomplishments, and together with the political backing of the Roman Empire, Yehudah was able to secure partial religious autonomy for the Jews and even restore the status of the Temple in Jerusalem as the Jewish ritual center.<sup>11</sup> Yehudah was killed in Elasa in the year 160 B.C.E. as a result of a tactical error in a battle against a superior Seleucid force. Particularly important to our contention that the violence was the product of a social network is the fact that the command of the rebellion after his death was taken up by Yehudah's brothers Yonatan (Jonathas), Apphus and Shimon (Simon) Thassi. Although he was younger than Shimon, Yonatan displayed political skills similar to those of his deceased brother. He strengthened the Hashmonaim's ties with different groups in the Seleucid camp but not at the expense of the alliance with the Romans.<sup>12</sup> He made diplomatic advances toward Ptolemy VI in Egypt and even made contact with the Spartans in southern Greece. Yonatan's diplomatic skills accorded him unprecedented political clout that was manifested

principally in the expansion of the Hashmonai sovereignty to extensive parts of ancient Israel. Yonatan's rule lasted nearly seventeen years, until he was arrested by Trifon, who sought to take control of the Seleucid kingdom and feared Yonatan's power. After Yonatan died, his elder brother Shimon took over the helm. Under his command, Judea became a near-sovereign entity; a monarchical dynasty was subsequently established and assumed control of Judea for more than 100 years.<sup>13</sup> The story of the Hashmonaim became a founding myth of the Jewish nation throughout history and ultimately became one of the cultural cornerstones of the renewed Zionist movement.

#### TERRORISM IN JERUSALEM

A little more than 100 years after the fall of the Hashmonai kingdom, relations between the Jewish residents of Israel and the sovereign Romans and non-Jewish residents in Israel reached an unprecedented low point. Once again, differences on the matter of both Jewish cultural autonomy and tax rates led to the collapse of relations. A wave of violence broke out in 66 C.E. in the city of Caesarea. Gessius Florus, the Roman procurator in Judea, was furious at the urban Jews for protesting against the taxes and decided to revoke their civilian status. This decision laid the groundwork for the eruption of street fights between the city's Jewish and non-Jewish residents, and unrest quickly spread to other mixed cities. The gradually mounting violence led many Jews to flee their cities of residence and seek refuge within the walls of Jerusalem; however, the bloodshed also breached the walls of the city. Whereas the more moderate Jewish streams, such as the Sadducees and the Pharisees,<sup>14</sup> sought to tone down the violence, groups of zealots viewed the events as an opportunity to whip up the flames of the rebellion against the Roman authorities. Florus's policy played straight into the hands of the zealots. In order to signal to the Jews that he would no longer tolerate their provocations, the Roman procurator dispatched army units to Jerusalem to help collect the Temple taxes.<sup>15</sup> The refusal of the Temple priests to accept the dictates of the Roman legions resulted in the massacre of 3,000 of the city's Jewish residents. The subsequent Jewish response took Florus by surprise. While one group of guerrilla fighters scaled Roman outposts on the mountain of Masada and slaughtered the legion soldiers stationed there, another group, led by the son of the high priest, Elazar Ben-Hananiah, attacked the legions posi-

tioned in Jerusalem and recaptured the Temple Mount and Lower City.<sup>16</sup> In the following months, Jewish insurgents were also active in the central and northern parts of the country, but their militias ultimately could not withstand the superiority of the Roman military might. In 73 C.E., the forces of the Roman emperor, Titus Flavius Vespasianus, were able to suppress the rebellion, and in this manner the era of the Second Temple reached its conclusion.<sup>17</sup>

Israeli students are taught in Jewish history lessons that the Second Temple was destroyed because of blind hatred (or causeless hatred, *sin'at khinam* in Hebrew). However, very few of these students know that behind this time-worn phrase lies the story of a fierce political dispute that led to the most dramatic episode of political terrorism in early Jewish history. The tempestuous period that preceded the rebellion provided a fertile breeding ground for extreme political groups in Jewish towns and villages that were based on social networks and had their roots in extended families. Each of these groups had its own distinct features. The zealots in the Jerusalem region, who were led by Elazar Ben Shimon and Zechariah Ben Avkulos, did not merely settle for a fight against the Roman legions but also directed their arrows at the priests who upheld the oligarchic rule. Therefore their decision to join forces with Yochanan of Gush Hālay, who left the Galilee for Jerusalem with the intention of taking over the city, was not surprising.<sup>18</sup> The fight for control of Jerusalem was particularly brutal. Eight thousand inhabitants of the city lost their lives in the battles before Yochanan was able to gain control. However, Yochanan's reign did not usher in a period of peace. Another group of zealots from the Judea Desert, headed by Shimon Bar Giora, was called to the aid of Yochanan's opponents and set off for Jerusalem. Bar Giora's band of fighters came from the weakest economic sectors; class ideology was a main distinction of his group. Before their assault on Jerusalem, they were involved primarily in robbing and pillaging the property of the local aristocracy.<sup>19</sup> The struggle between Shimon and Yochanan in Jerusalem ended in a status quo. While the people from the Galilee shored up their control of the Upper City and the Temple Mount, the Judean group took over the Lower City. Both groups eventually joined forces but only when the Romans attacked Jerusalem. By this stage, the Jewish soldiers were so exhausted from their interecine fighting that they did not have the strength to withstand the power of the Roman legions.<sup>20</sup>

However, the group most pertinent to our discussion is the Sicarians. According to documented Jewish history, this sect was the first group to systematically engage in terrorism. It appears that, at least initially, it consisted of a social network that evolved from the extended family of Menachem and Yehudah Galili (father and son). The origin of the name of the sect is still a source of dispute. One school claims that they were named after the dagger (*sicca*), which they used to kill their opponents. Another school asserts that the origins of the name come from the Latin word *sicarius*, which means killer-assassin.<sup>21</sup>

Although there is evidence of their activities as early as the Hashmonai rebellion, the Sicarians took shape as a group with a clear political agenda only after the death of Herod.<sup>22</sup> The Sicarian worldview can be discerned even in the ideological fundamentals of Jewish terrorist associations nearly 2,000 years after the disappearance of the original sect. The Sicarians aspired towards the autonomous existence of the Jewish people and unreservedly opposed foreign rule. For them, this was a religious principle of the highest degree. Their basic guideline was that noncapitulation to a foreign ruler was one of the three cardinal *yehareg ubal yasevor* commandments, that is, a person must be willing to sacrifice his or her life rather than violate one of these directives.<sup>23</sup> They also believed that the redemption of the people of Israel was approaching, and as long as the Romans continued to rule, its coming would be delayed. This ideology had its practical implications for the Sicarians. Their violent provocations against the Roman authorities were intended to aggravate the tension between the foreign rule and the Jewish populace and intensify the oppression of the Jewish residents of the country. In this way, they hoped to bring about a chain reaction that would ultimately lead to a large-scale Jewish uprising. They also did not refrain from terrorizing moderate Jews who sought to prevent the situation from deteriorating into a major confrontation.<sup>24</sup>

Like other groups of zealots, the Sicarians engaged in guerrilla warfare, but at the same time they also perfected operational methods that can be equated with those of modern-day terrorist groups. Their principal operational tactics were political assassinations and kidnappings as bargaining chips. Sicarian perpetrators of assassinations were known for their great daring. On many occasions, assassinations were carried out in Jerusalem on holidays, when the city was swarming with pilgrims. The assassins mingled with the crowds of celebrators and stabbed their victims with

small daggers in broad daylight.<sup>25</sup> In this fashion, the Sicarians murdered the High Priest Yonatan, who had tried to prevent the rebellion against the Romans, and later, during the course of the rebellion, they took the lives of the priest Hanan Ben Hanan and his brother Hezekiah.<sup>26</sup> One of the more notorious kidnappings was carried out by the Sicarians in 63 C.E. Their target was the scribe (and personal secretary) of the high priest, Elazar Ben-Hananiah. In exchange, the abductors demanded the release of ten of their colleagues who had been arrested by the Romans. After an intense shuffling effort conducted by the high priest with Luccius Albinus, the Roman procurator in Syria, the latter relented and the swap was effected.<sup>27</sup>

The legend of Masada, so deeply engraved in the Israeli collective consciousness as the epitome of Jewish loyalty and rectitude in the face of a cruel enemy, is essentially a tragedy of political zeal for which the Sicarians were also responsible. In 66 C.E., a group of Sicarians were able to seize the Masada flat-top mountain (along the eastern periphery of the Judean Desert) from the Roman garrison. Located atop a precipitous crag, the great fortress was encircled by a 1,400-meter wall, and guard towers were positioned all along the wall.<sup>28</sup> Inside the fortress, there were many waterholes and food stores, which made it possible for the Sicarians, commanded by Elazar Ben Yair, to survive on the plateau for seven years. The fortress was used as an advantageous launching base for attacks against Jewish and Roman settlements.<sup>29</sup>

In 73 C.E., during the Great (Jewish) Revolt, the Roman procurator, Flavius Silva, lay siege to the Sicarians who were entrenched in Masada. After a number of months of blockade, Silva's legions were able to build a circumvallation wall and then a broad ramp on the western side of the fortress. This ramp allowed them to break into the Masada compound. As for the sight that greeted the legion soldiers after they penetrated the walls, there are differences of opinion. Most historians agree that the Sicarians set the buildings on fire in the compound.<sup>30</sup> However, whereas Josephus Flavius, on the basis of the testimonies of two survivors, described a mass suicide of 967 Sicarians who had realized that the battle was lost,<sup>31</sup> other historians argued that the Sicarians committed mass murder among themselves. According to the latter version, each man first killed all the members of his family and then ten men were assigned the task of slaying the rest of the inhabitants.<sup>32</sup>

The Great Revolt ended in a crushing defeat for the Jews. Roman legion soldiers destroyed the Temple, the symbol of Jewish sovereignty, and the Jews were banished from their country. The failure of the Great Revolt and the subsequent forced exile left deep scars in the Jewish collective memory. The fear that violence might lead to a similar tragedy remained so profound among the Jews that the Halacha (Jewish law) adopted a specific directive aimed at avoiding any future signs of rebellion that might again provoke the anger of the gentiles.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, over the course of nearly 2,000 years of Jewish Diaspora, descendants of these Jews have refrained almost entirely from engaging in terrorism. Although the scarcity of Jewish-instigated acts of political violence can be explained by the Jews' weakness facing the authorities in countries where they resided, this can also be regarded as a direct outcome of the Halachic decision. Therefore it is possible to assert that religion, which so often has been accused of inflaming violence and terrorism, can also play an entirely opposite role.

#### JEWISH POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

The historical search for Jews who took part in acts of terrorism can be traced back to the nineteenth century. In view of the deeply influential proscription against violence and the long-standing conformity to its decree, it may also come as no surprise that these nineteenth-century activists could hardly be described as *bona fide* Jewish terrorists. They were mainly educated young people who had long since abandoned the Jewish faith in order to become part of the leftist *avant-garde* in Europe whose main undertaking was to defy the ruling authorities. These Jews were particularly prominent in the Russian revolutionary movement, whose efforts included attempts to undermine the tsar's rule. One of the most famous insurgents was Dmitri Bogrov, who came from a Jewish family in Kiev. On September 14, 1911, Bogrov shot dead the tsar's prime minister, Pyotr Stolypin, while he was attending a performance at the Kiev Opera House. The killing took place in the presence of Tsar Nicholas II, who was sitting close to the prime minister, and it was designed to incite political instability and ultimately inspire revolutionary fervor in Russia. Bogrov was tried in a military tribunal and was executed just ten days after the assassination.<sup>34</sup> Several decades later, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the Weatherman underground movement took shape, and among its other as-

pirations, it sought to bring an end to American involvement in Vietnam. Members of the movement, many of them Jews, did not hesitate in engaging in classic terrorist tactics such as planting explosive charges and committing arson in order to advance their ideological goals.<sup>35</sup> The Jewish terrorists who operated in tsarist Russia and those in Nixon-era America shared the fact that they were young men and women with a developed sense of political awareness and were wholly committed to the political concerns that plagued their compatriots. In addition, their Jewish descent had no discernible relevance to the course of action they chose.

One exception worth mentioning is the Bund movement, which was established in Vilna in 1897 and was active primarily in Eastern Europe. Similar to other political movements at the time, the Bund also operated in the name of an antisarist socialist ideology.<sup>36</sup> The uniqueness of the organization resided in the fact that along with its universal socialist perspective, Bundists did not hesitate in extolling the virtues and furthering the particular interests of Jewish laborers. In fact, they regarded the struggle for their rights as an essential part of their activities.

It would be somewhat of an exaggeration to describe the Bund as a terrorist network. It was basically a labor organization and political party that for a long time opposed the use of violence.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, there were isolated incidents in which the leaders of the organization endorsed attacks on symbols of capitalist exploitation such as industrialists and government officials. They justified these actions by claiming revenge for the harm done to their people or the need for self-defense. For example, after the Russian governor of Vilna, Von Wahl, gave the order to flog twenty Jewish laborers, he was shot and killed by a Bund activist, Hirsh Lekert.<sup>38</sup> Members of the central committee of the organization expressed their support for the act and declared, "Honor and glory to the avenger, who sacrificed himself for his brothers!"<sup>39</sup>

However, despite the occasional use of violence to further the status of Jewish workers, to a great degree the Bund was exceptional in terms of Jewish political aggression. The most severe manifestations of Jewish terrorism took place only with the resurgence of the Jewish settlement project in modern-day Eretz Israel (Land of Israel).

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