

## Between Josephus and *Yosippon*: Lamdan's *Masada*

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Who are you that come, stepping heavy in silence?  
—The remnant.  
Alone I remained on the day of great slaughter.  
Alone, of father and mother, sisters and brothers.  
Saved in an empty cask hid in a courtyard corner.  
Huddled, a child in the womb of an anxious mother.  
I survived.  
Days upon days in fate's embrace I cried and begged  
for mercy:  
Thy deed it is, O God, that I remain.  
Then answer, Why?  
If to bear the shame of man and the world,  
To blazon it forever—  
Release me! The world unshamed will flaunt this shame  
As honor and spotless virtue!  
And if to find atonement I survive  
Then Answer: Where?  
So importuning a silent voice replied:  
“In Masada!”  
I obeyed that voice and so I came.  
Silent my steps will raise me to the wall,  
Silent as all the steps filled with the dread  
Of what will come.  
Tall, tall is the wall of Masada.  
Deep, deep is the pit at its feet.  
And if the silent voice deceived me,  
From the high wall to the deep pit  
I will fling me.  
And let there be no sign remaining,  
And let no remnant survive.

Y. LAMDAN, *Masada*, 1926

Against the hostile Fate of generations,  
 A stubborn breast is there bared with a roar:  
 'Enough! You or I! Here the battle will decide the final judgment!'

Y. LAMDAN, *Masada*, 1926

*Masada* echoes ... the fateful plight readers share with myriads of brethren who have escaped the imposed *aqedah* of old only to find refuge in the self-willed *aqedah* of this generation.

A.D. FRIEDMAN, 1927

[Hebrew authors] balanced the universal and the specifically Jewish horrors of the Great War and the Russian Civil Wars with the help of the Zionist solution. Epic poems such as Lamdan's *Masada* ... were stamped by this mark.

DAN MIRON, 1992

After these things, the men left the city and challenged the Romans to fight, killing too many of them to count. The Jews thus had fought until they all expired in the battle, dying for God and His Temple.

*Sefer Yosippon* 89 (יבט), late-9th/early-10th century

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Hebrew literature written in Palestine during the 1920s–1930s testifies to an intriguing shift from a variety of martyrological figures popular in the discourses of previous generations to a singular figure—the *self-sacrificial* Isaac. Apparently, the poets of that generation, the so-called “Third *Aliya*” [= immigration to Palestine], tapped a potential that only the *midrashic* renditions of Genesis 22 could offer: a *familial* story—a personal “family romance” if you will—an intimate tale involving son and father (and even mother at times). The mythical “holy family” of Christianity may have served as a transitional object in this process, a bridge from the collective images which that generation had typically inherited from Jewish tradition (the “Ten Martyrs,” for instance) to the more personal and familial images of the nearly sacrificed Isaac.

Given the chain of armed conflicts that took place in the Palestine of the 1920s and 1930s, the intensification of the martyrological mode in local Hebrew discourse is not surprising. Yet this historical trigger does not necessarily explain the *choice of trope*, namely, the literary shift from images of

*collective* martyrdom (e.g. the “Ten Martyrs,” situated in the 2nd century)<sup>1</sup> to *personal* ones. The particularly rampant use of *Aqedat-Yitzhak* as a trope in the martyrological imaginary of the time might have answered the cravings of a generation weaned on modernist individuality and psychologism for a myth revolving around *an individual* rather than the collective—even more so an ancestral trope that involved a *father-son* relationship and which therefore could be infused with contemporary psychological, perhaps Freudian interpretations of family dynamics. Indeed, it might have been the dark underside of this potential—Freud’s morbid emphasis on the aggression animating human psychology and family dynamics—that had haunted the rewritten “Isaac” of that generation, as it has continued to do throughout the 20th century and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

The poet Yitzhak Lamdan (1899–1954) was a major representative of that generation.<sup>3</sup> His poetry was perceived as dominated by the “motif of the *aqedah*” early on, as attested by his contemporary A.D. Friedman (see his 1927 observation quoted above). Though this assessment may be somewhat overstated, it is certainly true that Lamdan’s poetry offered a distinctive inroad into the coalescence of a Hebrew culture that may have conceptually turned the Land of Israel into the “Land of Isaac.”

Yet Lamdan differed from his peers both biographically and artistically. Unlike other poets of the time, he arrived in Palestine in 1920 as an *orphaned* survivor of the atrocities of World War I and the antisemitic pogroms that followed.<sup>4</sup> Barely escaping the violence himself, he lost both parents and his older brother in the Ukraine, his birthplace—a wound from which he would never fully recover, as the dark tone of his oeuvre and diaries attests. His poetry is deeply personal and expressive, yet it lacks the daring experimentalism and modernism characteristic of his peers, the poets U.Z. Greenberg and Avraham Shlonsky. Stylistically, he largely followed in the footsteps of the venerated “national poet” of the Hebrew Revival, Haim Nachman Bialik. Not unlike Shlonsky, however, the Russian cultural background is quite palpable

1 See Furstenberg, “The Changing Worlds of the Ten Rabbinic Martyrs.”

2 For more on this background, see Feldman, *Glory and Agony*.

3 For a biographic portrait and historical background in English, see Yudkin, *Isaac Lamdan*, Ch. 1. In Hebrew, see Lipsker, *Igrot*, and Barzel, *Expressionism Nevu’i*.

4 The horrors of these atrocities were documented in real time by the great Yiddish folklorist and author S. Ansky, whose work *The Enemy at His Pleasure* became available in English almost a century later. Famed Israeli translator and writer Hillel Halkin tellingly dubbed his review of this book “The Prelude” [to the Holocaust ...]. For a current view of these events—written in the shadow of the February 2022 Ukrainian crisis—see Jeffrey Veidlinger’s recent article (Veidlinger, “History”): “Massacres of over 100,000 Jews between 1918–1921 paved the way for the Nazi Holocaust-by-bullets.” Cf. his new book, Veidlinger, *In the Midst of Civilized Europe*.

in his poetry. Yet, in the absence of the revolutionary energy of the former, Lamdan frequently invoked images of *passive victimage* and lachrymose gloom rather than heroic *self-sacrifice*. His poems are in fact suffused with allusions to the *victims* of the Revolution and the Russian Civil War (rather than to the famous “dozen” [heroes] of the Russian poet Aleksandr Blok, as did Shlonsky, for example). Moreover, Lamdan cast these victims in the garb of traditional Jewish *martyrology*, reminiscent of the poetry of H.N. Bialik, his adored master.

Crucial to this imagery was the traditional *aqedah*, used now as a metaphor for the *contemporary* “trials” of his generation. In a poem ostensibly celebrating “The Night of the Shofar Blast,” the poetic voice mournfully describes the “days of the New Year” as “led to the *aqedah*—before me—.” (!) Referring to himself, the poet shockingly asks: “Who will bring comfort and reward/ to the fate of a young *bound lamb*?”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in the poem blatantly named “*Aqud*” (“*Bound*”), the poet directly identifies with his namesake despite his awareness of the differences between the biblical *aqedah* and his own. Waking from a drunken stupor and noticing a picture of *Aqedat Yitzhak* on his table, he desperately inquires:

What do you intimate, an empty, open-mouthed bottle:  
‘That there is rescue ... as echoed in this picture’—?  
But this is *not me*, a different *Isaac was there*  
Different was the binder, and different the binding.<sup>6</sup>

So what precisely was this difference? The answer is telling:

*I did know* where I was being led to  
Nor was it God who commanded my going for a test.  
*I myself so loved the journey*  
*That I did not even inquire about the lamb.*<sup>7</sup>

Like some of his contemporaries, Lamdan identified *not with the biblical aqedah* but rather with the Jewish *post-biblical* portrayals of his namesake. Volunteering for his own immolation, this Isaac was ready for the possibility that the biblical

5 Lamdan, *Baritma Hameshuleshet* [*In the Triple Harness*] (part of the sequence “To Father,” 7–27), emphasis added. The poems in this collection were written mostly during 1924–1928. Unless otherwise stated, translations from the Hebrew are mine.

6 Lamdan, *Baritma Hameshuleshet*, 30–31.

7 Lamdan, *Baritma Hameshuleshet*, 30–31 (emphasis added).

“rescue” was not applicable in the here and now. Such Midrashic intertext fully materializes in the poem “On the Altar”:

Here we are all bound, bringing the wood with our own hands,  
 Without inquiring whether our burnt offering [*qorban olah*] is accepted!  
 Not a stone gave birth to us, brother,  
 Therefore, there is surely a father, who desires our offering,  
 Surely, there is a mother who will not forget us—  
 Let us then *silently stretch our neck on the altar*.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, Lamdan’s *aqedah* did not partake in the Freudian “family romance” woven at the same time by his contemporary Avraham Shlonsky, for example. Although the image of his deceased father was dominant in his early poetry, it did not appear in the rewriting of the biblical drama. Lamdan’s murdered father could be only a distant object of love and yearning, not an active character in the self-sacrificial story of his generation. At most, Lamdan was liable to compare *himself* to “a cruel Abraham.” As the closure of this book suggests, he himself had to sacrifice his private, personal yearnings to be a poet (!) on the altar (or pyre, *moqed*) of the fate of his people:

Ah, forgive me, my beheaded brethren,  
 Not my hand—a different, stronger hand  
 Had cut you off and sent me here  
 Building an altar and demanding an offering!<sup>9</sup>

In the main, Lamdan’s rewritten *aqedah* is either the personal story of an orphaned Isaac, or—and here lies his main contribution—a *collective* emblem of the tragic fate of the Jewish people “bound on eternal gallows.” Indeed, it was this ‘national *aqedah*’ that entered the bloodstream of Hebrew culture through Lamdan’s idiosyncratic yet highly influential rendition of the story of *Masada* (1923).

This book-length epic-dramatic poem, which catapulted its author to fame and reputation that lasted for several decades, charted the hopes and fears of the “new *Yishuv*” in its struggle to take root in the arid and hostile land of the

8 “*Al hamizbe’ah*” (“*On the Altar*”): Lamdan, *Baritma Hameshuleshet*, 80. Cf. the Aramaic Targum (translation) of Gen 22. This poem flies in the face of H.N. Bialik’s influential, post-pogrom Kishinev poem, “*Im tirtzu lada’at*” [“*If You Wish to Know*”] (1908), which took to task historical Jewish martyrdom, challenging the Jewish tradition of “going joyfully to their death, stretching out their necks/to every honed blade, to every raised axe.”

9 Lamdan, *Baritma Hameshuleshet*, 176 (closing poem, “Nameless Days”).

ancestors. It gave profound expression to the anguished sense that this was their last chance of survival, and that no other way was viable. Indeed, the poem was immediately embraced as a household icon, both in Palestine and in the Zionist youth movements in Europe.

We have thus come round to a critical question: How did Lamdan manage to so successfully fuse the theme of *ritual sacrifice* with the last Jewish *military stand* against the Romans in 73 CE, as reported—ostensibly with historical precision—by Josephus Flavius? The scholarly consensus has naturally pointed to an obvious contemporary source of inspiration—the historian Dr. Y. N. Simhoni's 1923 Hebrew translation (from the Greek) of Josephus' *Jewish War*. Indeed, in the introduction to his book, Simhoni singled out “the sublime dramatic scene of the defenders of Masada” as “the pinnacle of Josephus's *writing style*.”<sup>10</sup> Given the proximity of their publication dates, later historiography has coupled Simhoni's and Lamdan's texts as major contributors to the creation of the Israeli “Masada myth,” more often than not assuming that Simhoni's Hebrew Josephus inspired Lamdan's epic poem.<sup>11</sup>

I beg to differ. First, Lamdan had been working on his poem *prior* to the appearance of the new Josephus translation, publishing segments of it as early as 1923. More importantly, by naming this book-length poem “*Masada*” rather than “*Metzada*” (a variant of the Hebrew *metzada*—fortress or stronghold), as established by Simhoni's translation, Lamdan may have divulged a different source: the “modern” Russian translation of Josephus' *Jewish War*, published in 1900 (!) by the tenacious pioneer Yaakov L. Chertok (1860–1913).<sup>12</sup> Most importantly, I would suggest that by extricating Lamdan's *Masada* from the clutches of Simhoni/Josephus' “historical” *Metzada*, we might undo a long-attested confusion about the poem's multifocal take on the knotty issue of national martyrdom.

*Masada's* ostensibly paradoxical vision had been noted and analyzed in detail in several studies.<sup>13</sup> The general agreement is that the poem is torn between two contradictory moods or ideologies: desperate pessimism and optimistic

10 Emphasis mine. This “stylistic” comment is followed, however, by a very different observation about the work's “admirable closure:” Elazar ben-Yair's venerable speech about the preferred death of heroes of a war for liberation. One might ask if Simhoni's admiration was indeed aroused by Josephus' writing excellence or by the “preferred death” of his heroes.

11 This comment applies to most secondary sources dealing with Lamdan's *Masada*.

12 An ardent pioneer who immigrated to Palestine twice, with both first and second waves of immigration, Chertok was the father of Moshe Sharett, later the first Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister.

13 See Blauschild, “Rise and Fall,” chapters 5 and 11; Ben-Yehuda, *Masada Myth*.

activism. On the side of despondency, we may count its detailed imagery of arid rocks and merciless sun, of doubt and fear, of tears, bereavement, gallows, and despair unto death. Especially memorable are the references to listless suicidal “desperados,” as well as to their martyred and murdered brethren in the diaspora. Significantly, *no* glory is attached here to the taking of one’s life, nor is it carried out *en masse* and in the light of day. Indeed, the images of agonizing *individual* suicides must have conjured for Lamdan’s contemporaries not so much the mass-murder/suicide of Josephus’ “Masada,” as much as one of the tragic symptoms of their own time—the suicides among the young pioneers, then freshly recorded in the volume *Qehilyatenu* [*Our Commune*] (1922).<sup>14</sup> Yet *Masada* was mostly remembered and admired—especially in Warsaw ghetto and its environs during the 1940s—for the bravado of its opening canto:

Against the hostile Fate of generations,  
A stubborn breast is there bared with a roar:  
Enough!  
You or I!  
Here will the battle decide the final judgment!<sup>15</sup>

This challenge is reinforced by the sonorous cadences and trance-like rhythms of nightly dancing around the bonfires, straddling Hassidic and secular horas perfected by the pioneers, and the fervent invocation qua pledge, “Arise, the chain of dance / Never shall Masada fall again!” not to mention the poetic revival of revered heroes, past and present (from the Second-Temple Rabbis Avtalion and Elazar to the contemporary revered author Y.H. Brenner and the no-less admired Galilean hero Yosef Trumpeldor). Add to this the confident closure, echoing the traditional blessing pronounced at the closing of the annual Torah reading—“Be strong, be strong, and we shall be strengthened!”—and it is not difficult to imagine the uplifting effect of the poem through the trials and tribulations of the 1930s and 1940s, in both Palestine and Europe.

That this self-boosting had little to do with the story as told by Josephus seemed to concern nobody. Nor was anyone troubled by the *blatant sacrificial imagery* of the poem that is not present in Josephus. I therefore suggest that the long-accepted yoking together of Lamdan’s *Masada* and Simhoni’s

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14 This collectively authored book was dedicated to the memory of members of the Hashomer Hatza’ir youth movement who “fell and died in the Land or on the way to it,” of the 16 mourned, two committed suicide.

15 Lamdan, quoted in Yudkin, *Isaac Lamdan*, 199.

translation of Josephus' *Jewish War* is misleading and has not contributed to a proper understanding of the poem.

To clear up this confusion, I propose *Sefer Yosippon* as Lamdan's major source of inspiration. This anonymous version of Josephus' history, rewritten in Hebrew in large part from the late-antique Latin *De excidio Hierosolymitano*,<sup>16</sup> may indeed be the source that taught Lamdan to fuse the imagery of burnt offering (qua martyrdom) with the Greco-Roman military noble death—a conflation fashioned with great dexterity by the author of *Yosippon* that perfectly suited Lamdan's ambivalent yet sympathetic vision.

Indeed, in some sense, the author of *Yosippon* seems to have anticipated those contemporary readers who find the collective suicide described in Josephus' *Jewish War* hard to accept.<sup>17</sup> So, instead of having *the Jews* of *Metzada* (not the *Sicarii* of "Masada," as in Josephus) fall on their swords (or worse, kill each other), he had Eleazar send them off "to fight the enemy and die like heroes."<sup>18</sup> They do so, and the closing statement neatly summarizes the idea of "the last stand" or "fighting to the last man" associated in the Israeli mind with "Metzada":

After these things, the men left the city and challenged the Romans to fight, killing too many of them to count. The Jews thus had fought until they all expired in the battle, dying for God and His Temple.

*Sefer Yosippon* 89 (טט)<sup>19</sup>

A second, apparently later version according to Flusser, intensifies the description of the heroic death, while erasing the religious overtones.<sup>20</sup>

16 *DEH* (*On the Destruction of Jerusalem*) is a Christian theological treatise based on *BJ*. The author of *SY* de-Christianized and re-Hebraized this primary Latin source (and the many others he used); see Bell, "Josephus and Pseudo-Hegesippus," and Bay, "Temple Ekphrasis;" Bay, "The 'Maria Story' in Greek Latin and Hebrew;" and Bay's paper on the literary relationship between *DEH* 5.2 and *SY* 73 presented at the Bern workshop *Seeking Sefer Yosippon* on May 12, 2022. I am greatly indebted to my partner Steven Bowman for introducing me to the Hebrew *SY* as well as to its modern editor, the late Professor David Flusser.

17 Trude Weiss-Rosmarin had suggested as much in her columns in *The Jewish Spectator* in the 1960s; on the ensuing controversy, see Blauschild, "The Rise and Fall," 25–26; Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, Ch. 11; Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth*.

18 The author of *SY* identified the dwellers of Masada (Hebraized by him as *Metzada* = a fortress, about a millennium before Simhoni repeated the same gesture) as "Jews," and not as the murderous *Sicarii* (who do appear earlier in his story). Is this another expression of sympathy for them?

19 Flusser, *Sefer Josippon*, 1.430.

20 Flusser, *Sefer Josippon*, 1.431.



Yael Zerubavel has already observed that Yosippon's version of Masada "fits the activist conception of heroism in secular national Hebrew culture much better than Josephus's original version." She further suggested that it is "most curious" that, while the commemorative narrative "derived its legitimation from Josephus's historical account," Yosippon's version "had been largely ignored in the modern commemoration of Masada."<sup>21</sup> I could not agree more. Yet this "curious" act of omission was not limited to the Israeli commemoration of Masada. The ascendancy of Josephus' history at the expense of *Yosippon* may attest to biases, conscious or not, running deep in Modern Hebrew and Jewish historiography. While these processes are beyond the scope of this article, I would like to clarify here how *Yosippon's* depiction of Metzada "curiously" persisted in the Israeli mind despite the almost unanimous "suppression" of the book itself in twentieth-century scholarship.

I propose that the unacknowledged source responsible for this feat of memory was precisely Lamdan's poetic creation, *Masada*. Could not his celebrated line—"Here will the battle decide the final judgment!"—have been inspired by the Jewish "beautiful death" in a "final battle" invented by the author of *Yosippon* for his Metzada heroes? Certainly much more than Masada à la Josephus!<sup>22</sup>

Yet there is more. Notice the opening phrase of the closure of the scene of Metzada: "After these things." Although not unique in the Hebrew Bible, this phrase could summon up the opening of Genesis 22, the biblical version of the story of the *aqedah*. Is this a "quote" and, if so, what is it doing here? By referring with this phrase to the events of the day before, the author cleverly links the slaying of the families with the offering (*olah*) demanded by the God of Abraham "after these things." This is indeed Yosippon's second innovation in this dramatic episode. Eleazar has to negotiate with his men the dreadful act of putting their loved ones to death so that they would not suffer at the hands of the Romans. To do so, he not only presents this deed—as did Eleazar in Josephus' version—as an act of compassion (*hemla*); he also promises the men that through this mercy killing, their slain families—women, children and elders—"will be considered as a sacrificial burnt offering that will please God, because they will not be sullied by gentile impurity" (*qorban olah leratzon*

21 Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 208.

22 The language Lamdan uses betrays a contemporary intertext as well, "the final battle" of the hymn of the Socialist Internationale (translated from the Russian by Shlonsky in 1924): "ze yihye qrav aharon lemilhemet olam," namely, "This will be the final battle in the world war."



FIGURE 18.1 1929 ad for a theatrical performance of Lamdan's "Masada" by Hashomer Hatzair youth movement in "The Palace", a major venue of Jerusalem at the time. This attests to the popular impact of the poem in real time  
HASHOMER HATZA'IR ARCHIVE, YAD YA'ARI, USED WITH PERMISSION

*la'adonay, velo tithallel betum'at hagoyim*).<sup>23</sup> This addition turns the objects of murder into a "burnt offering" and hence sanctified martyrs—an idea perhaps covertly hinted at in Josephus' choice of language, but certainly not overtly elaborated by him or by *Yosippon's* Latin source, Pseudo-Hegesippus. *Yosippon's* phrasing follows logically, however, the opening of Eleazar's speech, where a list of historical precedence begins with: "Do remember your Father Abraham who took his only son to offer him to God ...?"

Almost a millennium later, Lamdan borrowed this rhetorical move to great effect. See for instance the canto named "A Tender Offering" ("*Olah rakkah*," *Masada*, 28), where an "only son" ascends Masada "joyously, his head full of dew drops," confident that his gift, his tender offering (of life? of death?) "will be pleasing [accepted]" (*teratzeh*, derived from the same root and meaning as the word used by *Yosippon*, *leratzon*). Lamdan comes even closer to the language of the medieval text when he describes the despair of being abandoned by an absent God as the lack of any divine authority that would approve or

23 Flusser, *Sefer Yosippon*, 1.429–430.

accept as pleasing (*yeratzeh*) “the offering of our life and the sacrifice of our youth and love” (“Weeping,” *Masada*, 63).<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, as the poetry of an ostensibly *secular* pioneer, Lamdan’s images of “national sacrifice” are deeply rooted—much more than his peers’ images—in the language of *sacral ritual*. One expression of this proclivity is the heavy figurative use of “first-fruit offering” (*bikkurim*), unprecedented in Hebrew portrayals of the pioneering project. In a section named “A First-Fruit Caravan,” for instance (“*Orḥat bikkurim*,” 32), the pioneers climbing up the unyielding rock of Masada are startlingly imagined as substituting in their *body and soul* the firstfruits that in antiquity would be brought to the Temple on the pilgrimage festival of *Shavu’ot*. The first-person speakers of this canto carry the “grain of our lives” and “our joyous blood” as a sacred offering (*minḥah veqodesh*) for the impending “final battle;”<sup>25</sup> they offer a selfless donation of “the springs of our youth” and the “first fruit of our lives;”<sup>26</sup> not to mention “handful of hearts,” “golden dreams,” and “baskets of love.”

There is no doubt then that the ritual-sacral nationalism of Lamdan’s *Masada* is much closer to the mood of Yosippon’s *Metzada* than to the Masada scene in *the Bellum Judaicum*. Like the former, it melds “national and sacral elements;”<sup>27</sup> thus setting the tone and perhaps the norm for the national martyrologies that were to follow.

24 Was Lamdan familiar with *sy*? It is difficult to establish any direct link, but the circumstantial evidence is quite strong. The widespread pre-modern circulation of *sy* is well documented; see e.g. Baer, “The Hebrew Book of Yosippon,” in Flusser, *Sefer Josippon*, 2.63–73. In modern times, *sy* figured as an ideal in M.Y. Berdyczewski’s 1898 Hebrew story, “*Bederekh rehokah*” (“On a Distant Journey”), on which see Bowman, “Yosippon.” Within a decade, the call for revolt that Yosippon’s anonymous author had put into the mouth of Mattathias the Hasmonean began to circulate among members of the Second Aliya (see Feldman and Bowman, “Let Us not die,” and Feldman, “Not as Sheep”). Yosippon is referred to in passing in memoirs of the Second and Third *aliyot* (e.g., Berl Katznelson, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, Pinhas Govrin), not to mention S.Y. Agnon’s classic novel about that generation, *Only Yesterday* (1945), where Yosippon is recommended for Shabbat reading. It is therefore quite feasible that Lamdan, who received a traditional Hebrew education at home as a child, would be familiar with Yosippon as well.

25 The expression “the final battle” may betray a contemporary intertext as well, the hymn of the Socialist Internationale, which was translated from the Russian by the poet Avraham Shlonsky in 1924: “*ze yihye qrav aḥaron bemilhemet ’olam*,” namely: “This will be the final battle in the world’s war.”

26 Interestingly, this particular image will re-emerge in the twenty-first century in David Grossman’s 2008 novel, *Isha Boraḥat Mibesora* [translated as *To the End of the Land*]; see my *Glory and Agony* (“Afterword”) and “Josephus or Yosippon?”

27 Flusser, *Sefer Josippon*, 2.180.

According to Flusser, *Sefer Yosippon's* special national-sacral amalgam may have been inspired by the zeitgeist of tenth-century Italy. Moving from tenth-century southern Italy back to twentieth-century Palestine, I would risk a conjecture of my own. Given its date of publication—November 1926—could not *Masada*, a distinctly sacral-national masterpiece of the time, have contributed to the alarm of the young Gershom Scholem, then a recent newcomer in Palestine who just realized to his horror that the revival of Hebrew meant the recovery of its sacral “names,” both powerful and dangerous? Could Lamdan’s *Masada* have given him the final push, triggering his “Confession about Our Language,” sent in December of that very year as a birthday gift to his ailing intimate friend Franz Rosenzweig?<sup>28</sup> Could Scholem have sensed already then that the “burnt offering” peppering the “final battle” of *Masada* was not “just” a figure of speech? That all this highly metaphoric language had a potential to cancel its own figurativeness, to realize its own metaphoricity? Was it too real to him for comfort? Did he anticipate that Lamdan’s *gift-bearing caravan* was in danger of morphing into an arms-bearing “convoy”<sup>29</sup> (both *shayara* in modern Hebrew, a word used often in Lamdan’s *Masada*), of transforming from “giving of the self” to “giving up the self?”

This is only a speculation, of course. Scholem was quite circumspect about the “new” Hebrew poetry written in Palestine. His passion, both dotting and critical, was invested in the oeuvre of the great icon of his generation, H.N. Bialik. Yet if we take seriously his harsh critique of Bialik’s elegiac poems (*shirei haqinah*),<sup>30</sup> we may extend a similar critique to the work of Isaac Lamdan, Bialik’s ardent disciple.

28 This letter accumulated a vast literature since it was discovered in the 1980s. Most relevant to my argument are William Cutter “Ghostly Hebrew;” Robert Alter’s cogent treatment in *Necessary Angels*; Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language;” and Stéphane Mosès, “Language and Secularization.” While Cutter suggested that Hebrew literature could have triggered Scholem’s alarm, he did not consider the ‘young’ literature written by the pioneers in Palestine in those very years, as I suggest here. Alter, by contrast, pondered “whether Scholem would have regarded the stirring of apocalyptic currents in contemporary Zionism [the right-wing Gush Emunim movement, for example] as a predictable unleashing of dangerous potentials implicit in the very revival of Hebrew” (37). My findings seem to suggest, however, that Hebrew literature could have given Scholem enough cause for alarm even half a century before the emergence of Gush Emunim (and this beyond his abiding interest in the philosophy of language, as pointed out by Derrida, Stéphane Mosès, and Galili Shahar).

29 As in S. Yizhar’s watershed Israeli War-of-Independence [1948] novella, *Shayara shel Hatzot* [Midnight Convoy].

30 See G. Scholem, *Briefe*, 232–234.

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