These I Shall Remember

Martyrdom in Jewish Memory

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Contents

Preface

Each year on Yom Kippur, the poem *Eileh Ezkarah* is recited by Jews around the world, recalling the Ten Martyrs who accepted death rather than transgress the Torah. The reading includes the vivid description of the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva, who as iron rakes flayed his flesh defied his oppressors to the end by calling out the words of *Sh'ma Yisrael*. The poem is, presumably, included to provoke an emotional response. As we sit in the synagogue and contemplate those *mitzvot* that we did not observe because of laziness, apathy, or carelessness, we recall those who chose death before committing a sin. Yet personally I am continually troubled by this portion of the liturgy. Perhaps it is because we focus on the martyrs of our people in a contemporary period in which the word "martyrdom" is becoming closely associated with suicide bombers and religious fanatics. Perhaps it is because of my Zionist upbringing. My father used to turn to me during this part of the service and say, "Couldn't they include someone who actually *fought back*?"

I am most certainly not the only person troubled by this text or by the theme of martyrdom, and Jewish grappling with this issue is nothing new. In my thesis, my goal is to understand how Jewish views and attitudes toward martyrdom have changed and developed throughout the course of Jewish history. By looking broadly at the many examples of Jewish martyrdom throughout history, I want to confront my ambivalence. I want to know how the contemporary Jew, living amidst secular culture and liberal Western values, might understand martyrdom. In order to accomplish this task, I will investigate the attitudes toward martyrdom in different periods of Jewish history and seek

to understand how Jews in the modern period understood martyrdom differently than their medieval and ancient ancestors.

My goal in this project is to trace the history of an idea, and as a result the project is both historical and theoretical. The historical portion will seek to investigate the evolution and significant trends in Jewish attitudes toward death and martyrdom. It asks, essentially, the question of how Jews viewed death and martyrdom in different periods of history. The conceptual piece, on the other hand, asks the question of why the notion of martyrdom developed in this way. What purpose did it serve in different time periods? How has this idea contributed to Jews' ability to cope with death and loss? Of course this division between the historical and conceptual is vague, artificial, and blurry. The historical questions are conceptual and the conceptual questions are historical. Yet the purpose is to understand how modern attitudes toward martyrdom compare to earlier attitudes, and to glean what the contemporary Jew can learn from earlier periods about how to cope with death during times of persecution and despair.

The topics of the different chapter will reflect both the historical and conceptual nature of the project. The work will begin with an introduction which seeks to frame the project as a whole and which attempts to define martyrdom. Martyrdom is a term that is used loosely in contemporary parlance, and it is not even immediately clear if the term "martyrdom" is the best term to use for this project. The introduction will survey some possible definitions of martyrdom and related terms and reach a working definition to frame the chapters that follow.

The first chapter will concentrate on the development of martyrdom in antiquity, stretching into the second Temple and rabbinic periods. Dealing primarily with Arthur

Droge and James Tabor's work *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*, I will seek to identify the ancient roots of martyrdom found in the Tanakh. I will then look at how some of the literature from the Second Commonwealth builds on the notions of noble death in the Tanakh to provide the first examples of martyrdom literature, especially in 2 Maccabees and in the pseudepigraphal work *The Testament of Moses.*

Chapter 2 will deal with martyrdom in the rabbinic period, where I will analyze the development of martyrdom ideals using Shmuel Safrai's article entitled "*Kiddush Hashem* in the Tannaitic Law," in which he argues that the phrase *kiddush hashem* did not denote martyrdom until, most likely, the Amoraic period. I will analyze a few well-known martyrdom texts from the Talmud, and the Midrash, dealing first with *aggadic* stories of ancient martyrs and then with the *halakhic* rulings regarding martyrdom found in the Babylonian Talmud. Finally, I will offer an analysis of the early medieval Rabbinic work, the Legend of the Ten Martyrs, which is the prose basis for the aforementioned poem, *Eileh Ezkarah*.

The third chapter will look at the medieval period, focusing on Jewish martyrdom during the Crusades. On the first Crusade, I will analyze some of the passages from the Hebrew Crusade chronicles, relying especially on Jeremy Cohen's book *Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade*. I will additionally look at some of the martyrdom poetry from throughout the medieval period. During that discussion I will draw especially from my teacher, Susan Einbinder, and her book *A Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France*. I will also look at some of the medieval *halakhic* developments regarding martyrdom, including

Maimonides' rulings on the subject, as well as the differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardi attitudes toward martyrdom in the medieval period.

The fourth chapter will deal with the modern period, beginning with the nineteenth century. Compared to the earlier periods, little has been written about martyrdom in modernity, at least explicitly. I will begin the discussion with an analysis of the attitudes toward martyrdom of the *Wissenschaft* historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Afterward, I will analyze some of the criticisms of Jewish martyrdom offered by some of the authors of modern Hebrew literature, drawing especially from Alan Mintz's work in his book, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*. I will then look at the way the Zionist movement dealt with the issue of martyrdom, arguing that the Zionists rejected traditional Jewish martyrdom on the one hand while creating their own unique brand of martyrdom at the very same time. Finally, I will conclude with an analysis of the debate regarding the victims of the Shoah and their status as martyrs.

In my conclusion, I will offer my own perspective on the question of the victims of the Shoah, and I will confront my ambivalence to share what insight I have gained from the study.

I am greatly indebted to a number of people for their help in the writing of this thesis. First and foremost is my advisor, mentor, and teacher, Professor Michael Meyer, who has encouraged and prodded me toward completion of the project with both rod and staff. I am grateful to Dr. Meyer not only for advising this thesis, but for all he has taught me in and outside the classroom during my studies at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. I am proud to be one of his final thesis advisees as he transitions

into retirement, and will recall the experience of writing with him fondly. I want to thank the rest of the faculty at HUC for their help and support in teaching me the skills necessary to write this thesis, especially Rabbi Ken Kanter who has been a rock of support, as well as Professor David Levine who helped with revisions of my chapter on the rabbinic period. Finally, I want to thank my friends and family who have supported me throughout the process of writing this thesis, and especially by fiancée, Aviva, who has been with me supporting me at every step.

ברוך הנותן ליעף כח

Introduction

In his seminal book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi describes the function of memory in Judaism. He notes that although the Jewish people wrote little or no history between the Tanakh and the modern age, Jewish memory conveyed through ritual and literature has always found meaning in the past. He writes:

> It was ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history and thus forged a new world-view whose essential premises were eventually appropriated by Christianity and Islam as well. 'The heavens,' in the words of the psalmist, might still 'declare the glory of the Lord,' but it was human history that revealed his will and purpose. This novel perception was not the result of philosophical speculation, but of the peculiar nature of Israelite faith. It emerged out of an intuitive and revolutionary understanding of God, and was refined through profoundly felt historical experiences. However it came about, in retrospect the consequences are manifest. Suddenly, as it were, the crucial encounter between man and the divine shifted away from the realm of nature and the cosmos to the plane of history, conceived now in terms of divine challenge and human response.[1]

The past, in Jewish memory, is filled with meaning. Jews could remember the past without writing history because a ritualized memory understood that what happened in the past is only a part of the more significant issue of what the past means. Yerushalmi's argument reminds me of a statement made by of one of my teachers. I paraphrase this statement by saying that Judaism allows me to hold the following contradiction in my hands: I can believe that the Torah was revealed at Sinai many thousand years before I

[1] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory, The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies (*Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 8.

was born, or not believe that it was revealed there at all, yet still know for certain that I was present when it happened. The reason I can do this is because when the event occurred, or perhaps even if the event occurred, is less significant than the question of what that event means.

Throughout Jewish history, Jews have described the deaths of those who came before them in a manner which ascribes meaning to those deaths. The ascribed meanings were sometimes theological, sometimes political. At times those ascribing the meaning demonstrated their admiration for the deceased, other times they revealed their ambivalence. There are even moments when it is clear that they ascribed some meaning to a death but the nature of that meaning is not entirely clear. Despite the varying ways in which death is remembered in Jewish tradition and the varying meanings that are ascribed to different deaths, one theme remains constant: Jewish tradition continues to see history and the deaths of people within history as meaningful.

It is difficult to identify an adequate term for the process of finding meaning in death or for the people who die meaningful deaths. At times, the people whose deaths we remember as meaningful have been referred to as martyrs. The Hebrew term most often associated with martyrdom is *kiddush hashem*, literally the sanctification of God's name. Yet the terms "martyrdom" and "*kiddush hashem*" are both problematic. The term "martyrdom" or "martyr" is of Greek and Latin origin, and both its connotation and denotation are often heavily intertwined with Christian theology and historiography. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, first describes a martyr as "a person who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce faith in Christ or obedience to his teachings,

a Christian way of life, or adherence to a law or tenet of the Church."[2] Yet in the first two chapters I will demonstrate how both the Christian and Jewish conceptions of martyrdom stem from a shared tradition in antiquity until martyrdom emerged as the central theme of Christian theology with Jesus as the Christian martyr *par excellence*. An additional problem is that, as Arthur Droge and James Tabor note, martyrdom is not a neutral term. They argue that "depending . . . on the perspective --or bias--of the observer, the act of taking one's life or allowing it to be taken can be described negatively as 'suicide' or positively as 'martyrdom.'"[3] Referring to a death as an act of martyrdom is an emotive reaction, an expression of one's approval of the cause for which the martyr died. The term martyrdom is problematic because of its biased nature as well as its Christological overtones.

Kiddush hashem is a Hebrew term without Christian connotations but there are two significant problems with using this term to refer to all meaningful deaths. First of all, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, the term existed for centuries in Jewish parlance before it became associated with sanctifying the divine name specifically through death, and it retains other meanings even today.[4] Second, the overt religious connotations of the term render it unfitting for secular Jews who ascribe political and other non-religious meanings to death. As I will argue in Chapter 4, for example, the Zionist movement viewed deaths in their own time and in Jewish history as meaningful, but not in any religious or theological sense. Thus, while they avoid using the term *kiddush hashem*,

[2] "martyr, n.". OED Online. December 2013. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114474?rskey=s5WJYU&result=1 (accessed January 26, 2014).
[3] Droge and Tabor, 4. Droge and Tabor suggest a neutral term, "voluntary death," to refer to the act of taking one's own life or allowing one's life to be taken. Below, I indicate why I did not take this approach.
[4] In Jewish liturgy, for example, the prayer which sanctifies God's name is still referred to as the *kiddushah* or, to differentiate it from the subsequent prayer which sanctifies Shabbat or festivals, as *kiddushat hashem*. This term originates in the Mishnah (M. Rosh Hashanah 4:5), but the continued usage of the term in this liturgical setting indicates that its older meanings are still relevant today.

they still actively participate in the tradition of ascribing meaning to the deaths of significant figures in Jewish history.

Despite the term's problems, throughout this work I will largely refer to the phenomenon of ascribing meaning to death using the term martyrdom. First, the term's semantic range in English seems to have widened to include not only death for non-Christian reasons, but even non-religious ones as well.[5] Therefore, the term "martyrdom" is more flexible than "*kiddush hashem*" because it includes dying for ideological and political causes that are not overtly religious. Droge and Tabor's notion that "martyrdom" is a biased term and the corollary of "suicide" is not problematic for my purposes. Indeed, I strive to identify what those biases are that lead Jewish communities to read meaning into the deaths of those who come before them. Furthermore, Droge and Tabor's understanding of martyrdom as the corollary term for suicide does not always apply in the history of Jewish martyrdom. Many of the figures most frequently referred to as martyrs in Jewish history, including Rabbi Akiva and the many victims of riots and pogroms who were regarded as martyrs, did not take their own lives. Instead, their lives were taken in the form of executions and murders.[6] I therefore offer a prescriptive rather than descriptive definition of the term "martyrdom" in this work: I use the term

[5] It may be noted that the OED provides an "extended" definition for "martyr": "In extended (esp. non-religious) contexts: a person who undergoes death or great suffering for a faith, belief, or cause, or (usu. with to; also with of, for) through devotion to some object." From "martyr, n.". OED Online. December 2013. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114474?rskey=s5WJYU&result=1 (accessed January 26, 2014).

[6] Droge and Tabor acknowledge that not all martyrs take their own lives, but draw no distinction between taking one who takes his own life and one who allows or asks another to take his life. See Droge and Tabor, 53. Still, examples abound of Jews who are regarded at martyrs yet did not invite their own deaths. What binds these figures together is not that they caused or invited their own deaths, but rather that they fully accepted them and did so with the understanding that their death would hold some greater meaning for those who remembered them.

martyrdom to denote a death, either self-inflicted or accepted passively, which others have remembered by infusing that death with meaning.

The significance of this understanding of martyrdom is twofold. First, it offers a wider view of martyrdom in order to incorporate more instances of meaningful death in Jewish history. Many scholars limit their definition of martyrdom to dying rather than transgressing one's faith or to avoid transgressing a commandment, and thus identify the first Jewish martyrs as dating from the Hasmonean period.[7] Yet already in biblical times, as I will argue in Chapter 1, there are stories about people who died meaningful deaths and these narratives contribute to the way later generations infuse the memory of those who died with meaning. The second significance is that this understanding of martyrdom places the meaning of an act of martyrdom somewhere between the martyr and the martyrologist. As Jeremy Cohen argues, "While tales of martyrdom . . . perhaps can teach us something about the martyrs themselves, their ideas, and their deaths, they communicate considerably more about the martyrologists, those who remember the martyrs and tell their stories because they find them meaningful."[8] This thesis is concerned with those who died for a purpose, but it is even more concerned with those who came after them and found meaning in their death.

The history of Jews finding meaning in death is complicated by the fact that Jews have always looked to their own history to find meaning in their contemporary situation. The medieval Jewish communities of Europe, for example, looked to the ancient Rabbis and to the Tanakh to find meaning in the deaths of their contemporaries. Issues of period, time, and historical context take on mythic status in much of the martyrdom literature.

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[7] See, for example, Flusser, 61; Lieberman, 416, and others.
[8] Cohen, viii.

As a result, the way in which I have divided Jewish history into periods and chapters is based on convention and is purely for the sake of instilling some sense of chronology, for the topic of meaningful death transcends the barriers between historical periods. Later chapters will reference texts, ideas, and events from earlier chapters, and earlier chapter will anticipate changes in Jewish memory recorded in later chapters. The martyrs of Jewish history died in history, but the attempts to find meaning in their death become conversations between generations.

Writing this thesis is my attempt to gain access to these conversations. While I attempt to be objective and scholarly throughout this work, this thesis is my own attempt to find meaning in martyrdom, a concept which I have found to be its own kind of quest for meaning. By analyzing and comparing the way that Jewish communities in the past have found meaning in death, perhaps I can find meaning in their words. Until the conclusion, I will attempt to remain objective, simply analyzing what kind of meaning different writers in Jewish history have found in the deaths of those whom they memorialize. Yet, while this thesis is a work of history and is concerned with history, the central question is not historical. The greater question underlying the history of Jewish martyrdom is how we honor the memories of those who died in the name of Judaism by finding or creating meaning in their deaths.

Chapter 1 - Martyrdom in Antiquity

Many scholars argue that the history of Jewish martyrdom begins during the Second Commonwealth. While I believe this statement is accurate, I intend to argue that the ideological roots of Jewish martyrdom can be found earlier. The Tanakh figures prominently in the history of Jewish martyrdom in two ways. First, it includes two distinct themes, nobility in death and death as expiation of sins through death, which are found throughout Jewish martyrdom of later periods. Second, stories in the Tanakh which do not themselves depict martyrdom are used ideologically by later martyrologists to add meaning to their martyrdom narratives. The Tanakh's literary influence is evident in the literature of the Second Commonwealth, including the oldest martyrdom narratives in Jewish tradition.

Martyrdom in the Tanakh

The Tanakh includes several narratives in which characters take their own lives, allow their lives to be taken by others, or allow themselves to be put in dangerous situations that endanger their lives. The writers and editors of these texts use the deaths of these figures to communicate some greater messages. The Tanakh includes no martyr *par excellence*, but its many characters who choose death or die for a given cause demonstrate the existence, already in antiquity, of some of the central themes of martyrdom. Later Jewish tradition will read even more themes of martyrdom into the Tanakh, and later martyrs will find inspiration from biblical narratives that do not seem related to martyrdom at all. There are, however, various passages which do provide some insight into the way that meaningful death was viewed in early antiquity. It is when these

themes and paradigms come into contact with new Hellenistic and medieval ideologies of death and afterlife that martyrdom becomes a more pronounced theme in Jewish literary tradition.

There are several instances in the Tanakh in which a character kills himself or invites another to kill him.[9] These characters are Abimelech (Judges 9), Saul and his arms-bearer (1 Samuel 31, cf. 2 Samuel 1, 1 Chronicles 10), Samson (Judges 16), Ahithophel (2 Samuel 17), and Zimri (1 Kings 16). Additionally, the passages which are often related to martyrdom by later writers and interpreters include the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22), the suffering servant described in Isaiah (Isaiah 53), and Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah's descent into the fiery furnace (Daniel 3). These passages vary in terms of their relationship to the idea of martyrdom itself, but to varying extents they each constitute an instance of some requisite theme or condition of martyrdom. I will offer a brief analysis of each of these passages in an effort to indicate what thematic elements they include which influence emerging Jewish notions of martyrdom.

There are many similarities between the deaths of Abimelech and Saul, and the two stories share common significance for understanding the way the Tanakh presents stories of nobility in death. In the story of Abimelech from Judges 9, Abimelech is a king laying siege to a town whose inhabitants flee to one central tower. As Abimelech approaches the tower to burn it and kill all of the townspeople, a woman throws a millstone from the tower's roof, crushing his skull and mortally wounding him. Abimelech asks his arms-bearer to use his sword to kill him, "lest they say of me, 'a

[9] 1. Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 53. Droge and Tabor, as I discussed in the introduction, view martyrdom as simply the positive term for what they term "voluntary death." Though I take a different approach to defining martyrdom, their catalogue and analysis of these passages in the Tanakh are instructive.

woman killed him.'"[10] Despite his request to be killed, there are many reasons that Abimelech might not be considered a martyr. According to this dialogue the wound that Abimelech suffered involuntarily from the falling millstone would eventually kill him. Therefore Abimelech's death is not a freely chosen death; rather, he simply chooses his means of death. When choosing the way he is to die, Abimelech does not consider God, Torah, or religion in his reasoning. Instead his chief concern is a selfish one, namely his reputation and his wish to avoid the humiliation of dying at the hands of a woman.

Although Abimelech's reasons for asking to be killed do not seem to fit with what is usually considered a martyr's death, his story is relevant to the understanding of Jewish martyrdom because it demonstrates a biblical understanding of nobility in death. Abimelech is depicted as having a choice, albeit fairly limited, as to how he will die. He understands that one death is nobler than another. Although a typical martyr's notion of a noble death may be different from Abimelech's, they share a common belief that some deaths are nobler than others and that the way in which one dies is significant. Abimelech is described as possessing concern for his reputation as a fierce warrior, for whom death at the hands of a woman would be humiliating. A martyr might choose death for a number of different concerns, yet typically the martyr's death represents something more than saving his own reputation. In this way, Abimalech's death is hardly that of a great martyr. However, what Abimelech does have in common with the martyrs that will come after him in the history of Jewish literature is a notion that the way one dies matters, and therefore death can be a way of sanctifying God.

The story of Saul's death is quite similar to that of Abimelech. Saul was wounded in battle against the Philistines and, like Abimelech, turned to his arms-bearer to ask him

[10] Judges 9:54. All biblical passages are my own translation, unless noted otherwise.

for death, saying, "Draw your sword and stab me, lest these uncircumcised ones come and stab me and make a fool out of me."[11] In this story, the arms-bearer is too frightened to comply with the king's request and Saul takes the sword and falls on it.[12] The many similarities between the deaths of Saul and Abimelech are obvious: both are leaders that are wounded in battle and ask their arms-bearers to kill them to achieve a more noble death. Yet in Saul's death the arms-bearer refuses and Saul is forced to kill himself. Whereas Abimelech is concerned about the humiliation of being killed by a woman, Saul appears to be concerned about dying at the hands of gentiles.

Neither of these differences is significant, though both point to themes of martyrdom which function in these narratives. The first difference between the stories, that Abimelech was killed by his arms-bearer and Saul took his own life, the difference may not be significant. It seems that the significant difference is not whether one dies by their own sword or the sword of his assistant, but rather whether one dies by their own choice or as a direct result of the enemy's action. The significance of one's chosen death in these stories, as well as later acts of voluntary death and martyrdom, lies in the acceptance of death for a reason, not necessarily in the details of how that death is implemented. Yet the second difference between the two stories is the two characters' reasons for accepting death. As previously stated, Abimelech wanted to die to save himself from the humiliation of being killed by a woman. Saul, too, is concerned with

[11] 1 Samuel 31:4, cf. 1 Chronicles 10:4.

[12] Ibid. A third account of Saul's death is relayed by the arms-bearer in 2 Samuel 1, but the version there contradicts the other two accounts in several ways. The most glaring contradiction is that the arms-bearer is relaying the death to David in 2 Sam 1, despite having died several verses earlier in 1 Sam 31:5. Additionally, in the account from 2 Sam. 1, the arms-bearer states that he complied with Saul's request to kill him. Most likely this is because the account in 2 Sam. 1 is a polemical account directed at the Amalekites, the identified ethnicity of the arms-bearer, which does not seem to be the concern of the other two accounts. Regardless, I argue in the rest of the paragraph, it does not seem significant for the present argument whether Saul asked to be killed or killed himself. For more analysis, see Droge and Tabor, 54.

who is identified as the one who kills him, not wanting to be killed by the "uncircumcised ones" (הערלים), and he is additionally concerned that by killing him they may "make a fool" out of him (והתעללו בי).[13] Just like Abimelech, Saul's chosen death indicates awareness that the way one dies has meaning for those who witness the death. While both characters die out of a concern for their own reputation, both show an awareness that the circumstances of their deaths affect the meaning that others will ascribe to their deaths.

The accounts of both Abimelech and Saul's death are filled with irony. Both men's deaths are viewed as punishments for their actions, and each one suffers exactly the fate that they attempt to avoid by taking their own lives. Abimelech is an evil character in the Bible, having achieved his position by murdering nearly all of his brothers.[14] Despite attempting to avoid the humiliation of dying at the hands of a woman, the recorded account of his death includes the fatal blow of the millstone. Additionally, the story may be intended to raise a sense of absurdity and irony. Whereas dying in battle might normally be thought of as more noble than dying at the hands of one's own arms-bearer, in this instance the latter is the more noble death. For Saul, the irony is even more bitter. He asks to be killed to avoid being mocked, yet after his death his head is impaled in a temple belonging to the "uncircumcised," and his decapitated corpse is hung on

[13] It is also possible that Saul's concern was the way his body would be treated after his death, considering that the verb והתעללו has connotations of rape and sexual abuse (cf. Judges 19:25). Still, the verb's usage here seems to simply indicate a mockery, as this is its usage in other places in Samuel (cf. 1 Sam 6:6) and it is used with God as the verb's subject describing the mockery that God made of the Egyptians (Ex. 10:2). While I am not convinced that the verb has any sexual connotation in this usage, it does remain a possibility given the notion of purity as evidenced by the reference to the enemy as uncircumcised.
[14] Judges 9:5.

display on the city wall of Beit-She'an.[15] The deaths of Abimelech and Saul appear to be stories of nobility in death, similar in this respect to martyrdom, yet in both of these stories this nobility is riddled with a profound sense of irony. Indeed, neither Abimelech nor Saul should rightfully be considered martyrs, yet the ironic accounts of their deaths reveal that the biblical author understood the idea of nobility in death. This idea, when written into a different context, plays an essential role in the deaths of Israel's martyrs.

Another character in the Tanakh who takes his own life is Samson. In the book of Judges, Samson it taken captive by the Philistines after his lover, Delilah, renders him powerless by cutting off his consecrated hair. Imprisoned in the Philistine temple, Samson's eyes are gouged out and he is tied to two columns supporting the entire structure. In his desperate hour, he calls to God, asking "O LORD God, remember me and grant me strength just this time, God, that with this one act I might avenge the Philistines for my two eyes!"[16] Exclaiming, "Let me die with the Philistines!" he then knocks over the columns, causing the entire temple to collapse and killing himself along with scores of Philistine officials. The text notes that Samson "killed more in his death than he killed in his life."[17] The meaning of this last sentence perhaps reveals the meaning of his death. It seems that Samson, the paradigmatic warrior figure, was able to die a warrior's death. There was meaning in Samson's death, and that meaning is found in the fact that in his death he was able to achieve vengeance against his enemies.

Nonetheless, Samson's death is not treated as heroic like the deaths of later martyrs. The notion of a heroic death in battle and the idea that a meaningful death is one

[15] 1 Chron. 10:10, 1 Sam. 31:10. Even if Saul was intending to avoid death at the hands of the enemy to prevent them from using his death as propaganda, clearly he failed in this endeavor. Therefore the irony in his death remains intact: he met exactly the fate that he was attempting to avoid.
[16] Judges 16:28.
[17] Judges 16:30.

in which the martyr takes some of the enemies along with him will play a significant role in the modern period. In antiquity, however, Samson is a unique example of this phenomenon and his death is not held up as a paradigm for martyrdom by later interpreters. Indeed the absence of any mention of Samson's death as an example of martyrdom by the Rabbis may be as revealing as those figures that they do mention. Regardless, Samson's death provides yet another example of a narrative account in the Tanakh infusing a character's death with meaning. Though this meaning is not valued in antiquity by defining it as an act of martyrdom, Samson's death is nonetheless depicted as heroic and provides an example of a character who takes his own life in a meaningful way.

There are two more characters in the Tanakh who take their own lives, and these final two examples demonstrate that not all voluntary death in the Tanakh is infused with meaning. The deaths of Ahitophel and Zimri contain none of the heroism found in the story of Samson. Ahitophel was a counselor to David who sided with Absalom when he rebelled against his father. When David learned of his counselor's defection to his son, he prayed that God might ruin his counsel.[18] Sure enough, Absalom ignores Ahitophel's counsel because of divine intervention, and seeing his plan being ignored Ahitophel returns to his home and hangs himself.[19] In the story of Ahitophel's death, after he dies he is simply buried in his ancestral tomb with no mention of any greater meaning of significance to his suicidal action.

The death of Zimri has at least some meaning, as his death is explicitly identified as a punishment from God. Zimri was a general in the army of King Asa and rose against

[18] 2 Sam. 15:31.
[19] 2 Sam. 17:23.

him, killing him, usurping his throne, and slaughtering the entire dynastic line. Though horrifically violent, these actions are described by the narrator as fulfilling God's promise to the prophet Jehu.[20] Zimri does not reign for very long, however, for after a week the people claim Omri as king and he wages war against Zimri, laying siege to Tirzah. Recognizing his impending loss, Zimri enters the citadel and sets fire to it, killing himself. He died, the text notes, "because of the sins he committed, doing evil in the sight of the LORD."[21] This statement is strange, as nowhere else in the text is Zimri identified as having sinned, and his previous act of violence is identified as executing the will of God. Ironically, by taking his own life he also was executing the will of God because God intended his death as a punishment.

The meaning and significance of the deaths of these two characters is unclear and perhaps missing entirely. It is unclear why Ahitophel took his own life beyond his apparent frustration that his advice was not followed. Zimri may have taken his life for the same reason as Abimelech and Saul, namely a concern for death at the hands of the enemy, but his reasoning is not explicitly stated as their reasoning was. Neither the death of Ahitophel nor that of Zimri include any sense of the heroism found in the Samson story, and the narrative accounts of their deaths lack the notion of nobility that was used ironically in the Abimelech and Saul stories. The absence of any greater significance to their actions demonstrates that the meaning of taking one's life is not implicit in the action. Rather, the biblical writers infuse meaning into a character's death by portraying the figure as dying for some significant cause or by using their death ironically to make a statement about the character. The Tanakh's statements about the character of Ahitophel

[20] 1 Kings 16:10-12.
[21] 1 Kings 16:19.

and Zimri are unrelated to the way in which they died. As a result, these stories have little impact on the idea of martyrdom, save for the fact that they demonstrate that it is the historian in the Tanakh who infuses the death with meaning, not the person who takes his own life.

The passage from Isaiah 52:13 through 53:12, commonly known as the Suffering Servant Poem, includes a plethora of themes of martyrdom despite the fact that it is unclear what figure the passage is describing. The poem depicts an image of a man who suffers and dies in order to cleanse the sins of the many. There has been both a religious and scholarly debate over the identity of this man since the first few centuries of the Common Era. Many Christians, including the authors of the New Testament, conclude that the passage describes the prophet's vision of Jesus.[22] Both traditional and scholarly Jewish views tend to identify the servant either as the prophet Jeremiah, in the view of such traditional figures as Saadya Gaon and Abraham ibn Ezra, or more commonly as a symbol for all of Israel.[23] There is still no clear consensus among scholars over what figure the passage is describing, but as John L. McKenzie writes in his commentary, the "scope both of the Servant's atoning suffering and of his vindication go beyond any historical persons or events of ancient Israel known to us."[24] The author of this text presumably omitted a proper name intentionally, because the significance of the passage lies in the themes and ideas that it presents, not the character who is the object of the suffering.

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[22] Acts 8:35, NRSV.
[23] Mordecai Schreiber, "The Real Suffering Servant: Decoding a Controversial Passage in the Bible." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37, 1.
[24] John L. McKenzie. *The Anchor Bible: Second Isaiah*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968., 136.

This passage includes language and themes that appear consistently in later martyrdom texts. The central theme of the passage, which will become one of the central themes of martyrdom, is the notion of vicarious atonement. This passage is the first instance that I can find of the idea that the suffering and death of a righteous person can atone for the sins of the people. McKenzie notes that in this passage, "the prophet takes a higher and a more realistic view of suffering; it becomes a medium of salvation to the community."[25] Indeed, the innocent, righteous person is "delivered from death and from the charge of guilt because he has made himself a 'guilt offering' (v.10). This he has done by taking upon himself the guilt of others and accepting the treatment due to the guilty."[26] Just as the sins of the people can be atoned for through a guilt offering, the servant in this passage accepts the punishment for the people's sins so that they can be absolved of them. This idea that one can atone for sin through martyrdom will be found, as we shall see, throughout the Second Temple period and the Middle Ages. Even the language of this passage will be repeated in texts dealing with martyrdom. The symbol of the martyr as a guilt offering is repeated often, and a modern reader might immediately associate the phrase "led like a lamb to slaughter,"[27] with the Shoah. Therefore the themes and language of this passage are greatly significant for the development of martyrdom even if no individual martyr can be associated with the text.

The accounts of these deaths in the Tanakh lack many of the essential elements of martyrdom narratives, but do include some of the themes that will become commonplace in later martyrdom literature. The notion that one can die a noble death is essential to the idea of martyrdom, for the goal of the martyrologist is to depict the martyr's death as

[25] Ibid., 134.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Isaiah 53:7.

containing a sense of nobility and purpose. Furthermore, the use of irony in the accounts of Saul and Abimelech indicates that already in biblical times, the writers and editors of texts were using literary tools to manipulate the meaning that the reader ascribes to a given character's death. The passage in Isaiah perhaps adds the most thematic material to the developing idea of martyrdom, especially in its introduction of the idea of death as a vicarious atonement. The Isaiah passage is also significant because it functions as a model for later martyrologists. By using the language and imagery of the suffering servant, later Jewish martyrologists will find meaning in death by holding their martyrs up to the biblical exemplar. Indeed, two other narratives of the Tanakh function commonly in this role as well. These passages are not martyrdom narratives themselves, yet they become the lenses through which later Jewish martyrologists view the deaths which they record.

These two narratives in the Tanakh, the story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) and that of Daniel's three companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Daniel 3), come to represent a theme of unconsummated martyrdom in Jewish tradition. The narratives themselves are clearly not martyrdom narratives, for in neither story does the endangered character actually die. In the case of Isaac, an angel calls out at the last moment to stop Abraham from slaughtering him, and in Daniel the three men are thrown into the fiery furnace but are unscathed by it and are even joined there by a divine figure.[28] The binding of Isaac is significant because later martyrologists will depict their martyrs' deaths as fulfilling the role that Isaac did not, namely being sacrificed as an offering to

[28] Daniel 3:25.

God.[29] This is additionally significant because in the medieval period, the notion of sacrifice and *shkhitah*, ritual slaughter, will become central to the Jewish discourse on martyrdom. The narrative from Daniel, on the other hand, becomes the archetypical story of those who confront danger out of a commitment to their faith. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah descend into the furnace with the trust that God will save them. Although later Jewish texts depict martyrs who perish from the flames, they retain the notion that like in Daniel, the martyr retains some sense of immortality that the flames cannot harm.[30]

This list of examples where thematic roots of martyrdom appear in the Tanakh is not exhaustive but is comprehensive enough to demonstrate that the idea of martyrdom was not created *ex nihilo* in the post-biblical period, nor was it entirely a foreign import from other cultures. Ancient Israelites, at the time of the Tanakh, were familiar with notion of nobility in death. Israelite historians were well versed in recording the deaths of figures in a manner which infused their deaths with significance. Toward the end of the biblical period and continuing into the days of the Second Temple, the Mishnah, and the Talmud, these themes of martyrdom appear in texts that seem to clearly identify the protagonists as martyrs.

The Hasmonean Period

Many scholars date the origins of martyrdom in Judaism to the period of the Hasmoneans who ruled in the first two centuries BCE. As we have seen the seeds of

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[29] I will return to this theme shortly in my discussion of the mother and her seven sons from the Hasmonean period, as well as in the chapters that follow. For a more complete discussion of the binding of Isaac's influence on Jewish martyrdom, see Shalom Spiegel's *The Last Trial*. Trans. Judah Goldin. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2003.

[30] This can be seen in Rabbinic literature, as I will discuss in the story of Hananiah b. Teradyon in the next chapter, as well as the "incombustible martyr" theme of medieval Jewish martyrologies as discussed in Chapter 3.

martyrdom had already been sown in the form of the many ideas that are closely related to martyrdom and that appear in the Tanakh. Still, as David Flusser notes, sources that are commonly viewed as the first martyrdom texts in Judaism "begin to appear at the beginning of the Hasmonean period, for this period was the period of the Antiochan persecutions, a period of suffering and of dying for the sanctification of one's faith."[31] Many texts from this period present acts of martyrdom in the form of resistance to Antiochus' criminalization of Jewish practices. There is great ambiguity regarding the reasons for the Antiochan persecutions and the extent of their brutality. Victor Tcherikover argues that "We cannot determine to what extent the persecution was brutal and prolonged; the tales about the old man Eleazar and the mother and her seven sons who died martyrs' deaths are hardly more than fables originating at the time of the persecution, or a short time after it, to satisfy the needs of religious and national propaganda."[32] While Tcherikover is undoubtedly correct, as we noted in the introduction to this chapter, almost all accounts of martyrdom from antiquity appear to be ideological rather than historical in nature. Through an analysis of the way in which martyrdom plays a role in the ideological position of the text, one can learn how the author and audience of that text might think about the topic of martyrdom.

The aforementioned Eleazer and mother and her seven sons refer to passages from the sixth and seventh chapters of 2 Maccabees. The first example, Eleazar the scribe, tells of an elderly scribe being forced to eat pork. He refuses to eat it, and despite the pleas from his tormenters he instructs them to put him to death rather than force him to

[31] David Flusser. "*Kiddush HaShem* in the Days of the Second Temple and the Beginnings of Christianity," (in Hebrew) in *Holy Wars and Martyrology in the History of Israel and the History of the Nations* (in Hebrew). Jerusalem: Society for Israeli History, 1967.
[32] Victor Tcherikover. *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews.* New York: Atheneum, 1985., 201.

eat swine. Immediately following his parting words, the text states that he died "leaving in his death an example of nobility and a memorial of courage, not only to the young but to the great body of his nation."[33] The anonymous mother and her seven sons, a narrative comprising the entirety of the seventh chapter of 2 Maccabees, are also forced by Antiochus to eat pork. Yet one by one the sons refuse, despite each son witnessing each of his brothers' graphic and torturous death. Hoping for one last victory, Antiochus sweetens the deal by offering the youngest son monetary rewards for eating the swine. Still, the youngest heeds the advice of his mother and accepts his death, crying out, "I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by trials and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation."[34] In the end the mother too was put to death.

It is evident from the parting words of both Eleazar and the youngest son that these narratives are written, as Tcherikover writes, as propaganda. Eleazar and the mother and her seven sons are willing to martyr themselves over a relatively minor infraction, the eating of pork.[35] So stark is the contrast between the infraction and their sacrifice to avoid it that later renditions of the story change the persecution to forced idolatry, considered to be a more heinous transgression.[36] Additionally, the story is formulaic and repetitive. Even the number of sons, seven, is most likely a convention.

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[33] 2 Macc. 6:31. All passages from 2 Maccabees are taken from the NRSV translation.
[34] 2 Macc. 7:37-38.
[35] The transgression is minor because normally one must eat the pork in order to save their life under the rule of *pikuach nefesh*, the obligation to save a life. The issue of which commandments demand martyrdom rather than transgression (and under what circumstances) will be taken up in the next chapter.
[36] Idolatry, as we will see in the next chapter, is also one of the three sins so heinous as to require death rather than violation according to the Talmud.

Yet the formulaic telling of the story allows each of the sons as well as Eleazar to offer parting words which serve as an example to the readers of the text.

These same words are also revealing of beliefs that the writer of 2 Maccabees holds that were not present in the biblical narratives about death. In the climax of the story of the mother and her seven sons, the mother is pleading with her youngest son to "Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers."[37] Implicit in her words is a notion that does not appear anywhere in the Tanakh, that martyrdom provides a reward in death to the martyr. The mother appears to favor her son's martyrdom in part because she will get him back, meaning they will be joined together in the afterlife. This is a profound divergence from the martyrdom depicted in the Tanakh. According to Droge and Tabor, "When death came to be seen as an entry into immortality, or as reversible through a resurrection to heavenly glory, then the notion of voluntary death in the face of the injustices of life underwent a profound transformation."[38] Not only is the afterlife a possible reward, but so is God's comfort. The first son to die is the only one to quote Torah in his parting words, stating "The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song that bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, 'And he will have compassion on his servants.'"[39] Flusser notes that this verse is used in conjunction with martyrdom during this period because it is understood to mean that" God will comfort his servants because of the deaths of the holy ones, because of those who died *al kiddush hashem*."[40] Both the idea of an afterlife and the idea of winning God's comfort and grace

[37] 2 Macc. 7:29.
[38] Droge and Tabor, 69.
[39] 2 Macc. 7:6, quoting Deut. 32:36.
[40] Flusser, 61.

through martyrdom strengthen the appeal of dying a martyr's death and contribute to the increased prevalence of martyrdom in texts from this period.

Many scholars have stressed the idea of an increase in the significance of martyrdom during this period in reference to another Jewish text, *Testament of Moses*, which was probably written in the first century CE.[41] The text presents itself as a prophetic speech given by Moses as he hands power over to Joshua at the end of his life. Moses offers a prophetic vision which foretells the First Temple, the divided monarchy, the Babylonian exile, the return to the land and the building of the Second Temple, and concludes with an eschatological vision. Immediately preceding the vision of the End of Days, there is a short narrative about a man named Taxo and his seven sons. Taxo tells his sons that the people are about to experience another punishment. He suggests that his sons fast with him for three days and then die together in a cave, stating "There let us die rather than transgress the commandments of the Lord of Lords, the God of our Fathers. For if we do this, and do die, our blood will be avenged before the Lord."[42] Immediately after this statement, the End of Days is described in poetic form.

Many scholars identify this juxtaposition of the story of Taxo and the Apocolypse as representing a causal relationship. They believe that it is the actions of Taxo and his sons that bring about the final revelation described in chapter ten. Flusser argues that "according to *Testament of Moses*, the sovereignty of heaven will be revealed as a result

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[41] The scholarly debate as to the date of this text is summarized in J. Priest, "Testament of Moses" in. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha vol. 1* ed. James H. Charlesworth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 920-921. Priest favors the first century dating, but acknowledges that there are scholars who place this during the Hasmonean period (i.e. first or second century BCE) and some who date it to the time of the Hadrianic persecutions in the second century C.E. Regardless of the exact dating, there is a fairly substantial scholarly consensus that the martyrdom story presented in the text is an allusion to the Antiochan persecutions. Therefore my discussion of this text fits most appropriately here, with its thematic if not chronological parallels in 2 Maccabees.

[42] Charlesworth, Testament of Moses 9:8.

of the will to die *al kiddush hashem*, or as a direct benefit of Taxo and his sons' deaths *al kiddush hashem*."[43] In Flusser's view, the eschatology described in the poem following Taxo's death is the reward for his death. Many scholars agree with Flusser that the juxtaposition of Taxo's death with a description of the final redemption indicates that Taxo and his sons' martyrdom brought about the final redemption.[44] Charlesworth, on the other hand, argues that Taxo's role in causing the final redemption is "not clear." He notes that maintaining that the author of this text "has set forth a unique teaching that Taxo's innocent suffering is the act that *provokes* the divine vengeance that leads to the consummation of the end-time seems to require much more than the text will bear."[45] Rather than acting as catalyst for the final redemption, Taxo is a stock character used to demonstrate the horrific suffering which leads to that redemption. His martyrdom is simply one reaction to that suffering, but there is no reason to overstate its significance and endow his action with the power to bring about the end-time.

The narratives from the Hasmonean period represent the refinement of biblical notions of nobility in death into fully shaped martyrdom narratives. It seems clear that Eleazar, the mother and her seven sons, and Taxo and his seven sons are all literary tools rather than historical figures. Yet the fact that the writers of 2 Maccabees and the Testament of Moses would use the motif of martyrdom as one of the Jewish responses to suffering and persecution, if not the main response, is demonstrative of the increased

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[43] Flusser, 62.

[44] Some of this scholarly debate is traced in Charlesworth, 923. The sheer volume of scholarly debate on this issue is quite astounding and dates back to the middle of the nineteenth century. The latest article to tackle the issue of Taxo as a messianic figure is E. Israeli. "'Taxo' and the Origin of the *Assumption of Moses*," in *JBL* 128 no. 4 (2009). She notes, "Taxo's appearance and willingness to die for his faith are therefore a link in the chain of suffering conducive to final redemption." (738). The word "therefore" simply refers to her summary of the book's structure, indicating again the simple assumption that because the vision of the final redemption follows the story of Taxo, it must have been caused by Taxo. Israeli, like many scholars, does not provide a detailed argument for this belief.

[45] Charlesworth, 923. Italics added.

significance of martyrdom in this period. In Rabbinic literature, these early notions of martyrdom reappear as the Rabbis portray some of their own as dying heroically in response to religious persecution.

Josephus, Masada, and Jewish Martyrdom

The story of the siege of Masada at the end of the Great Revolt of the first century and its dramatic conclusion, the mass suicide of its inhabitants preceding their imminent slaughter at the hands of the Roman legion, presents a problem for the historian of Jewish martyrdom. The only historical source for information about these events is the work of Josephus, and Josephus' account has spawned at least two very different interpretations. Furthermore, because there is no mention of the events at Masada in any of the classical Jewish literature, it is hard to argue that those who took their own lives at Masada were considered martyrs by any Jews, save for Josephus, until the rise of Zionism in the nineteenth century (a topic which will be analyzed in chapter 3). The topic of whether or not the mass suicide on Masada in the year 73 CE is an example of Jewish martyrdom is therefore still an open question.

In order to examine this question I will first examine the historicity of the mass suicide on Masada and then analyze what the ideological connotations of Josephus' account may be. Because there is so little evidence, the accuracy of Josephus' account cannot be verified or rejected with any certainty. Those who accept Josephus' account are represented most famously by Yigael Yadin, who excavated Masada in the 1960's. Yadin presents the story of Masada just as it is presented by Josephus. He argues that

during the Great Revolt "a group of Jewish zealots" were joined by "a few surviving patriots" from the destruction of Jerusalem who were "determined to continue their battle for freedom."[46] He writes that in 72 CE the Roman Tenth Legion, led by Silva, laid siege to Masada and prepared a ramp to eventually attack the fortress. Yadin's description continues, saying:

> This was the beginning of the end. That night, at the top of Masada, Eleazar ben Yair reviewed the fateful position. The defensive wall was now consumed by fire. The Romans would overrun them on the morrow. There was no hope of relief, and none of escape. Only two alternatives were open: surrender or death. He resolved 'that a death of glory was preferable to a life of infamy . . .' Rather than become slaves to their conquerors, the defenders – 960 men, women, and children, thereupon ended their lives at their own hands. When the Romans reached the height next morning, they were met with silence.[47]

Since Yadin's excavations, however, many scholars have doubted the historicity of Josephus' account. There are many arguments that suggest that Josephus' narrative is fictitious. Josephus mentions that the Sicarii on Masada found ample provisions and a large arsenal of weapons.[48] Trude Weiss-Rosmarin argues from these facts that suicide would not have been a likely choice for the Sicarii. She notes that "It is unlikely that guerrilla fighters possessed the tenacity and experience of the Masada Sicarii, who, moreover were not weakened by famine and thirst, and were amply equipped with weapons, would commit suicide when there was still the opportunity of inflicting heavy

[46] Yigal Yadin. *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealot's Last Stand*. Translated by Moshe Pearlman. (New York: Random House, 1966), 11.
[47] Ibid., 12.
[48] Josephus, *Jewish War* VII: 295-299.

losses upon the enemy, making his [the enemy's] triumph a costly victory."[49] Additionally, very few human remains were discovered when excavating Masada, leading some scholars to doubt Josephus' account of the numbers and others to doubt his account in general.[50] While there is not sufficient evidence to disprove Josephus' account of the Masada narrative, these arguments do at least shed some doubt on the historicity of these events.

In addition to questions of its historicity, many scholars also question whether or not Josephus' account of the events at Masada were intended to be an exemplary tale of martyrdom or an embarrassing description of extremism and foreign ideologies. Arguing that Josephus' description was intended to be viewed negatively, not positively, scholars such as David Ladouceur have argued that Josephus' description of Eleazar ben Yair's speech must be read in parallel with Josephus' own words at the fall of Jotapata. There, when his fellow Jews in hiding from the Romans wanted to kill themselves rather than surrender, Josephus delivers a speech attacking the notion of killing oneself rather than fighting. In the speech, he states that "It would surely be folly to inflict on ourselves treatment which we seek to avoid by our quarrel with them."[51] Similarly, Josephus notes that "…in my opinion there could be no more arrant coward than the pilot who, for fear of a tempest, deliberately sinks his ship before the storm."[52] Surely the man who so powerfully denounced suicide in the face of military loss could not have praised the very same idea by portraying the Sicarii of Masada as heroic martyrs.

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[49] T. Weiss-Rosmarin. "Josephus' 'Eleazar Speech' and Historical Credibility." in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies vol. 1*. (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1997), 419.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Josephus, *Jewish War* III:364. All translations of Josephus are from H. St. J. Thackeray from *The Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927).
[52] Ibid., III:369.

Many scholars have nonetheless understood Josephus' description of the events at Masada as a martyrdom narrative, providing many explanations for the incompatibility of ben Yair's speech with Josephus' own speech at Jotapata. Yadin, for example, provides a psychological explanation, noting that "Whatever the reasons, whether pangs of conscience or some other cause which we cannot know . . . it seems evident that he (Josephus) had been genuinely overwhelmed by the record of heroism on the part of the people he had forsaken."[53] Ladouceur, however, argues that "...it was not Josephus' intention to portray unreservedly the defenders [of Masada] as heroes, and so there actually exists no inconsistency between his depiction of the Sicarii in the Masada episode and elsewhere in the *Bellum*."[54] Josephus clearly writes ben Yair's speech to portray ben Yair as favoring suicide as a heroic act of martyrdom. Ladouceur and other scholars refute, however, the notion that Josephus shared this conviction with the historical character whose speech he recreated. Indeed, it appears that while Josephus intended to portray the Sicarii atop Masada as viewing their own deaths as heroic, Josephus himself did not consider them to be martyrs.

The Jews of late antiquity did not, therefore, preserve the Masada story as a story of heroic Jewish martyrdom. The narrative is still relevant to the study of Jewish martyrdom, though, because of the way in which it will be reclaimed by modern Jews. Here the gap between history and memory is extremely wide. The event occurred in some fashion in the first century, it was recorded and known about, but it was only endowed with meaning some 1800 years later. In chapter 4, I will continue the

[53] Yadin, 15.
[54] David. Ladouceur. "Josephus and Masada" in *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity* ed. Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 96.

discussion of the Masada narrative when examining how it functions in the modern understanding of martyrdom.

Chapter 2 - Martyrdom in Rabbinic Literature

Whereas martyrdoms in the Hasmonean period primarily occurred in response to the Antiochan persecutions, those of the Rabbinic period were responses to Hadrian's persecutions. Unlike the martyrs described in the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature, the martyrs described in Rabbinic literature are for the most part presumed to be actual historical figures. There are problems, however, with reading Rabbinic literature as history. Saul Lieberman opens his article on the martyrs of this period by stating that "the simple rule should be followed that the Talmud," or really any Rabbinic literature, "may serve as a good historic document when it deals in contemporary matters within its own locality. The legendary portions of the Talmud can hardly be utilized for this purpose."[55] Yet it is not always discernible when a passage in Rabbinic literature is "legendary," as there are often many different accounts in Rabbinic literature of a given historical event, with each account presenting its own ideological understanding of that event. The stories of martyrdom in Rabbinic literature are no exception. While the martyrs themselves may have existed, the Rabbinic accounts of how they died are reflections of Rabbinic ideology rather than a concern for historical preservation. Martyrdom in the Rabbinic period is a theme which exists in a number of texts, often with multiple texts purporting to describe the same historical event. Through the use of this theme in different narratives, these texts reveal a multiplicity of Rabbinic ideas of and attitudes toward martyrdom.

The large volume of martyrdom texts in the Tannaitic literature prohibits a comprehensive consideration of the entire corpus. Instead, I will consider a few texts that

[55] Saul Lieberman. "The Martyrs of Caesaria." in *Annuaire de L'institut de Philologie et D'histoire Orientales et Slaves* (New York: The Moretus Press, Inc. 1944)., 395.

demonstrate the Rabbis' attitudes toward martyrdom in this period. The existence of multiple attitudes suggests that, although martyrdom continues to increase in significance in this period, the notion is still relatively unstable. In this period, for example, there are still multiple technical terms for martyrdom. Shmuel Safrai argues that in this period the later standard term for martyrdom, *kiddush hashem*, was still a generic term for sanctifying God's name rather than referring specifically to martyrdom, stating that in the Tannaitic period *kiddush hashem* "did not have the exclusive meaning that the notion received throughout the [later] generations."[56] He argues that "just as we have found ideas which in early days had expansive meanings which, throughout the generations, contracted to a specific singular definition, so it is with '*kiddush hashem*' which contracted to its singular meaning of martyrdom."[57] Similarly, just as the terminology of martyrdom within Judaism was not unified in this period, neither was the ideological meaning of martyrdom. Different accounts of the same figure's martyrdom reveals various ideological usages of martyrdom in the Tannaitic period specifically and the Rabbinic period more generally.

The two most famous martyrs of the Rabbinic period, and perhaps in all of Jewish history, were Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Hananinah ben Teradyon. Each of their deaths appears multiple times in Rabbinic literature within heavily ideological narratives. R. Akiva's death is mentioned in several places, including a braita in the Babylonian Talmud:

> The rabbis taught: Once upon a time the evil empire decreed that Israel must not engage in the study of Torah. Papos b. Yehuda found Rabbi Akiva, who was gathering groups to study Torah together. He said to him,

[56] Safrai, 407.
[57] Ibid., 408.

"Akiva, are you not afraid of the empire?" He replied, "I will tell you a parable. To what is this similar? It is like a fox that was walking about on the banks of a river, and saw fish gathering together from place to place. He said to them, 'From what are you fleeing?' They responded, 'From the nets that humans bring upon us!' He said to them, 'Would you like to come up onto the dry land and you and I can dwell together, like my ancestors once dwelled with yours?' They replied, 'Are you not the one that they call the cleverest of all animals? You are not clever, you are stupid! If we are afraid in a place where we can live, how much more so do we fear in a place where we cannot live!' Just as we are now sitting and engaging in Torah study, as it is written *for it is your life and the length of your days* (Deut. 30), so too with us, if we should desist from studying, how much more so!" It was just a few days until they caught Rabbi Akiva and placed him in prison, and they caught Papos b. Yehudah and put him next to him. He said to him, "Papos! Who brought you here?" He said to him, "Happy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that you were caught on account of the words of Torah. Woe to Papos who was caught in vain matters." The hour that they brought Rabbi Akiva out to be killed happened to be the time of the recitation of *shema*. As they were flaying his flesh with iron combs, he accepted upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. His student said to him, "Our teacher, even now?" He replied to them, "All of my days I have been {troubled by} the verse that reads *with all your life* – even if to give up your life. {I asked, 'when will the opportunity come to me that I may fulfill it?'} Now that it has come to me, should I not fulfill it?" He was extending the word *echad* as his soul departed from him at *echad*. A heavenly voice called out, saying: "Happy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that your soul departed at *echad*." The ministering angels said to God, "This is the Torah and this is its reward?" *From mortals, by Your hand, O Lord, from mortals*… (Ps. 17:14) He said

to them, "Their portion is in life." A heavenly voice called out, "Happy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that you are invited to life in the world to come!"[58]

This braita includes a considerable amount to be analyzed, including the use of the parable about the fox and fish, its idea of an afterlife, and some important variances between manuscripts of the text. I will treat each of these themes individually.

In the parable, Akiva compares the situation of the Jews under the Hadrianic persecutions to fish in a river. The comparison states that the fish are most likely to be found and caught in their natural habitat, the river, but they will surely die if they leave their habitat to avoid capture. Similarly the natural habitat of the Jews is the study of Torah, and though it makes them easy to capture they could not survive without it. Indeed, the parable proves true. Both Akiva and Papos, representing the fish that stayed in the river and the hypothetical fish who tried his luck on dry land, are caught by the authorities and thrown in prison. Yet the one who continues to live, the one granted in eternal life in the World to Come, is Akiva. In the end, the parable's message is achieved through irony. The fish are going to die regardless of whether they live in the water and get caught by the nets or whether they jump to dry land because the fish only have their physical lives. R. Akiva, on the other hand, can allow the authorities to take his physical life since his soul will live on in the World to Come.

The afterlife was a theme in the story of the mother and her seven sons, and here it appears even more starkly in the Rabbinic story of the martyrdom of R. Akiva. In his article on the history of the belief in an afterlife as a reward for martyrdom, Shmuel Shepkaru argues that the notion of an afterlife in the story of the mother and her seven

[58] B. Brachot 61B.

sons is actually more of a biblical notion of a bodily resurrection of the dead.[59] In this story, the afterlife is seen much more as a heavenly realm as evidenced by the fact that it is the angels that question God and help him to reveal that the true reward is life in the World to Come. While Shepkaru argues that the reward that Akiva sought was merely the opportunity to fulfill the commandment of loving God with all his life, clearly the editor of this braita had a different notion of the ultimate reward.[60] The editor's concern for a heavenly afterlife as reward for Akiva can be seen in the verse used in God's response to the angels. The verse, with its continuation, reads "From mortals, by Your hand, O Lord, from mortals, whose portion in life is this-worldly, may their bellies be filled with Your treasures. Satisfy their children, may they have excess for their little ones. But I shall behold Your face in righteousness and awake be satisfied by your likeness."[61] This Psalm, a prayer for deliverance from human enemies, ends with an understanding that worldly reward is nothing compared to the reward of experiencing God. The editor uses this text to indicate that Akiva's reward is not just the opportunity to fulfill a commandment or a physical resurrection on Earth, but an experience of the Divine in heaven.

Another significant ideological statement made by this rendition of the Rabbi Akiva martyrdom story is that the narrative reveals changing notions about the nature of martyrdom as an ideal to which one should aspire. Safrai analyzes this text as an answer to the question, "Is *kiddush hashem* a matter such that if the opportunity should happen

[59] Shmuel Shepkaru. "From After Death to Afterlife: Martyrdom and Its Recompense." *AJS Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1999), pp. 1-44., 3.
[60] Shepkaru, 23. My interpretation differs somewhat from Shepkaru's because I have limited my analysis to this singular version of Rabbi Akiva's death. I must acknowledge, as he does in his article, that there are many problems to taking this approach. Many have to do with manuscript variations as described in the next paragraph, which will demonstrate the way that a later editor altered the understanding of martyrdom that the text presents.
[61] Psalm 17:14-15.

upon a person he must fulfill it, or is this a reward that God grants him, such that he can fulfill it and merit a place in the world to come?"[62] Safrai argues that the variances in two parts of the text, those that I have marked in braces in the above translation, demonstrate changes in the Rabbinic answer to these questions. First, he notes that most of the earlier manuscripts of this passage do not read that Akiva was "troubled by" the verse all of his life (מצטער על) but rather that he had expounded the verse all of his life (דורש). Additionally, the sentence "When will the opportunity come . . ." is missing in a large number of early manuscripts. Safrai concludes that "It is not so improbable that under the influence of ideas of *kiddush hashem* that were widespread in a later period, this sentence was added to the story of Rabbi Akiva's death both in the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud . . . despite the fact that the matter disrupts the style of the story."[63] Thus this one rendition of the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva reveals a tremendous amount about the Rabbis' attitudes toward martyrdom, and the evolution of the text reflects the evolution of those attitudes.

The evolution of the other famous Rabbinic martyrdom story, that of Rabbi Haninah b. Teradyon, also demonstrates how the idea of martyrdom changed throughout the rabbinic period. In the Sifre, a Tannaitic Midrash, the story of his death is recorded as follows:

> When they captured R. Haninah b. Teradyon they decreed that he should be burned with his book. They said to him, "It has been decreed for you to be burned with your book." He recited the verse *The Rock, perfect are His deeds* . . . (Deut. 32:4). They said to his wife, "It has been decreed for your husband to be burned and for you to be killed." She recited this verse

[62] Safrai, 215.
[63] Safrai, 416.

> *a faithful God, without injustice* (Deut 32:4). They said to his daughter, "It has been decreed for your father to be burned and for your mother to be killed, and for you to do labor (to be forced into prostitution). She recited the verse *Great in counsel and abundant in deed, whose eyes are open . . .* (Jer. 32:19). Rabbi said: "What great ones are these righteous ones, that at the moment of their distress all three recalled verses of acknowledging God's justice, something that is not in all of the writings, but all three directed their hearts to acknowledging the justice." A certain philosopher stood before the proconsul and said to him, "My master, do not take pride in your burning of the Torah, for it has returned to where it left, to its father's house." He said to him, "Tomorrow your punishment will be the same as theirs." He responded, "You have given me good news, for tomorrow my fate will be with them in the World to Come."[64]

In many ways, this story reflects some of the same ideological statements as the story of Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom. Here too, however, later generations inserted their own ideological concerns into the text. This narrative appears again in the Babylonian Talmud[65] but with additional ideological concerns and reflecting the *zeitgeist* of a different period. Saul Lieberman identifies three differences between the text in the Sifre and that in the Talmud. He notes that in the latter version, wet wool was placed over Haninah's heart to prolong his suffering which reflects a practice typical in the third and fourth centuries in Palestine.[66] Additionally, in the Talmud Haninah's disciples urge him to hasten his death by opening his mouth and letting the fire in, which he refuses to do because "he preferred to endure the terrible pains and not to return the deposit of the King until He Himself chose to take it."[67] Last, while in the Sifre a certain philosopher objects

[64] *Sifrei D'varim* sec. 307.
[65] B. Avodah Zarah 18A.
[66] Lieberman, 419.
[67] Ibid., 420.

and is ultimately killed, in the Talmud it is the executioner himself who throws himself into the fire.[68]

Each of these three differences in the two renditions of this story reflects changes in the way martyrdom was understood later in the Rabbinic period rather than earlier. The first difference, the wet wool placed in Haninah's heart, may be evidence of an increased focus on the suffering of the martyr. This is far from certain, however, because it may simply reflect different practices of execution in the two periods that produced these two texts.[69] Yet if the wet wool is not evidence of increased attention to suffering, Haninah's refusal to open his mouth may be. Lieberman claims that Christian martyrs of this period used to open their mouths to expedite death, so this added detail may also have a polemical dimension to it.[70] The significance of the last difference between the two texts relates to both the identity and the action of the non-Jew who intervenes. In the Sifre text, it is the philosopher who objects and is sentenced to death by the Roman official. In the Talmud, the executioner asks to join Haninah in the World to Come by easing his pain in death, and then voluntarily jumps into the fire. The significance of this act is missed by Lieberman, who does not mention the final sentence of the story as presented in the Talmud. It reads, "Rabbi wept and said, 'there are some who merit eternity in one hour and there are some who merit eternity after many years.'"[71] Rabbi's words indicate that the message of the story is that a single act of kindness can merit eternal life in the same way as many years of study.

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[68] ibid.
[69] Lieberman denies this claim, assuming that execution practices would have remained stagnant over the course of a few hundred years. Even if it was the same Roman Empire ruling Palestine in the third century as in the fifth, there could still be significant differences. I cannot help but think, for example, how much executions have changed in the United States in the past 100 years.
[70] Lieberman, 420.
[71] B. Avodah Zarah 18A.

Martyrdom was such a prevalent theme in the Rabbinic period that it informed the Rabbis' understanding of Torah. An analysis of this phenomenon is provided in Daniel Boyarin's study of the intersection of Midrash as historical and exegetical. He quotes the following attributed to Rabbi Akiva in the Mekhilta:

> *This is my God, and I will beautify Him* [Exod. 15:2]. Rabbi Akiva says: Before all the nations of the world I shall hold forth on the beauties and splendor of Him-Who-Spake-and-the-World-Came-to-Be! For, lo, the nations of the world keep asking Israel, "What is thy beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful of women?" [Song. 5:9], that for His sake you die, for His sake you are slain, as it is said, We have loved you unto death [*'ad mwt*] "for thus do the maidens [*'almwt*] love Thee" [Song. 1:3] – and it is said, "for Your sake we have been killed all the day" [Ps. 44:23]. You are beautiful, you are heroes, come merge with us!
>
> But Israel replies to the nations of the world: Do you know Him? Let us tell you a little of His glory: "My beloved is white and ruddy, braver than ten thousand. His head is purest gold; His hair is curls as black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by springs of water. . . . His cheeks are like perfumed gardens. . . . His palate is sweetmeats and He is all delight; This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem" [Song 5:10 ff.].
>
> And when the nations of the world hear all of this praise, they say to Israel, Let us go along with you, as it is said, "Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among the women? Whither hath thy beloved turned, that we may seek Him with thee?" [Song 6:1].
>
> But Israel replies to the nations of the world: You have no part of Him; on the contrary, "My beloved is mine, and I am His; I am my beloved's, and He is mine; He feedeth among the lilies" [Song 2:16 and 6:3].[72]

[72] *Mehilta D'Shirah* 3. This translation is from Boyarin, 118. Boyarin himself follows the translation of Goldin, *The Song at the Sea*, pp. 115-117 with modifications reflecting relevant manuscript variations.

Boyarin's analysis of the text indicates just how much this Midrash reveals about Rabbinic ideas of martyrdom. Boyarin notes that the interpretive method used by Akiva, as presented in this passage, turns upon two phrases. First is the notion of "this is my God," where the word "this," (זה) for the rabbis is always associated with a theophany.[73] Second is the play on words, where the word for maidens (עלמות) is read as "upon death" (על מות), and then is linked to the verse from Psalm 48:15 where these same consonants either mean "until death," or "for eternity." Boyarin argues that all three meanings of this term are relevant: eros, from its meaning of "maidens," death, from its meaning of "until death," and eternity, from its meaning of "for eternity."[74] The result is Boyarin's reading of Akiva's view of martyrdom. He writes that "R. Akiva's reading of the Torah, his midrash, led him to an apocalyptic view of the religious life. The high moment of union with God which the Jews experienced at the crossing of the sea could only be relived in two ways – on the national level at the moment of *eschaton*, and on the personal level, by dying a martyr's death."[75]

Boyarin's analysis of this text successfully elicits at least two significant themes of martyrdom, one of which has been present in previous texts and one which we have not yet seen. Already familiar is the idea that martyrdom exists in close relationship with notions of eschatology. In the story of the mother and her seven sons, according to one interpretation, the mother's certainty that she will be reunited with her sons at the end of days is her reason for convincing her youngest son to martyr himself. Additionally, in the story of Taxo and his sons, there were varying interpretations of martyrdom's

[73] Daniel Boyarin. *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990., 120.
[74] Ibid., 122-123.
[75] Ibid., 126.

relationship to eschatology. The scholarly consensus was that an act of martyrdom essentially precipitated the end times by bringing about the final redemption. Along with a minority of scholars, I suggested that the act of martyrdom was simply a single response to the great suffering which marks the end of days. Regardless of which interpretation is correct, in both of these stories martyrdom is viewed as some sort of essential part of eschatology. In Boyarin's analysis, R. Akiva provides yet another understanding of the relationship between martyrdom and eschatology. According to Boyarin, Akiva is expounding this verse from Exodus to explain how martyrdom is a kind of microcosm for the final redemption. The martyr is redeemed individually through his or her act of suffering, just as the world is redeemed by its suffering at the end of days.

The second theme that appears in this Midrash is the notion of martyrdom as an expression of love for God. Just as the redemption from Egypt was God's ultimate act of love for Israel, giving one's life for God is viewed as the ultimate act of love for God. Interestingly, both were violent acts: the crossing of the Red Sea, the context of the verse that this Midrash is expounding, and Akiva's martyrdom. Both could easily be misunderstood because of the surface violence, just as the nations of the world cannot understand why Israel continues to love God even if it costs them their lives. What they do not understand is that despite its violent nature, the act of God redeeming an individual by martyrdom is full of love, according to the Midrash, just like the love with which God redeemed Israel at the sea.

Martyrdom in Rabbinic Law

The Rabbis' understanding of martyrdom is displayed not only in narrative and exegetical texts, but in one significant legal text as well. This text, taken from the Babylonian Talmud, identifies which commandments require death rather than transgression, and under what conditions must a Jew die rather than transgress. Analyzing the legal rulings regarding martyrdom reveals where in the hierarchy of rabbinic values one ought to place martyrdom. Additionally, it will further complicate the question of whether, in the Rabbis' minds, martyrdom constituted an ideal worthy of aspiration or an act of desperation that one normally ought to avoid. Indeed, these legal texts further indicate that there was no rabbinic consensus regarding the value and significance of martyrdom. The dissonance between the Rabbis' legal rulings and the narrative descriptions of martyrdom indicates that there were many competing views of martyrdom which changed throughout the generations, and sources with different ideologies present different views of martyrdom's purpose.

The main halakhic statement regarding martyrdom is found in both Talmudim. In the Babylonian Talmud it appears as the following:

> R. Yochanan in the name of R. Shimon b. Yehotzadak said: It was voted and decided upstairs of a house in Nitzah in Lod: Regarding all of the transgressions that are in the Torah, if one should say to someone, 'transgress and you will not be killed,' he should transgress and not be killed, except for idolatry, sexual impropriety, and bloodshed. Except for idolatry? There it was taught: R. Yishmael said: From where might we learn that if they say to someone 'worship an idol and you will not be killed' that he should worship and not be killed? Scripture says: *and live by them* (Lev. 18:5) and not die by them. Is this true even in public?

> Scripture says: *and do not profane My holy name, and I will be sanctified* (Lev. 22:32). . . . When R. Dimi came, he said: They taught this only regarding a period of non-persecution, but during a time of persecution, even for a simple commandment one ought to be killed and not transgress.[76]

According to this sugya, there are three considerations that one must consider when deciding whether to martyr oneself or transgress a commandment. One must consider what commandment is to be transgressed, whether or not it is a time of persecution, and whether the forced transgression will appear in public or in private. For three commandments, the prohibitions on idolatry, sexual impropriety, and bloodshed, martyrdom is required rather than transgression. Still, the minority opinion, ascribed above to R. Yishmael, notes that this only holds for forced idolatry in public, but in private one ought to worship the idol rather than be killed. R. Dimi adds that the entire above conversation only holds true during a time when there is no legal prohibition of the practice of Judaism. During a time of such persecution, however, one must martyr him or herself rather than transgress any commandment.

Some of the ideological significance of these legal rulings appears in the ways in which they support or contradict other martyrdom texts. An example of a story which this text supports is the story of the mother and her seven sons from 2 Maccabees. The sons martyred themselves rather than eating pork, which is a minor commandment, but the episode fell during a period of persecution. This ruling, it seems, adds a political dimension to their religious act of martyrdom. Eating pork is a sin before God, it might be argued, no matter when one does it. But by expanding the opportunity for martyrdom

[76] B. Sanhedrin 74A, Y. Sanhedrin 21B, Y. Shevi'it 4, 35A.

during a time of persecution, martyrdom becomes a political statement. The act is not performed only out of reverence for God's commandment, but also, and perhaps dominantly, out of protest for the ruling authority's laws.

The legal ruling contradicts what I previously identified as a later ideological notion that holds martyrdom as an ideal to which one should aspire. According to the above passage, martyrdom is not an ideal but rather a last resort. One must be willing to commit any but the most heinous transgressions to avoid martyring oneself. In R. Yishmael's opinion, one may even worship an idol to save his own life as long as the coerced worship is not public.[77] Still, the inclusion of R. Yishmael's opinion in both Talmudim indicates that it still carried weight in the later period. Additionally, the absence of any clear halakhic ruling demonstrates that for the editors of this sugya it was still unclear to what extent martyrdom was a last resort and to what extent it was an ideal to which everyone should aspire.

Legend of the Ten Martyrs

The Legend of the Ten Martyrs tells of the death of ten prominent Rabbis. The narrative exists in several early medieval Midrashim, but is best known by many Jews because of its prominent place in the Yom Kippur liturgy, placed there in poetic form and referred to by its opening words, *Eileh Ezkerah*, "These I shall recount."[78] The narrative account of the deaths of ten sages at the hands of a Roman official exists in many

[77] According to Safrai, Yishael's more lenient ruling is an earlier tradition. The passage attributed to R. Yishmael is not only attributed to a Tanna, Safrai points out, but a version is recorded in the Sifra, a Tannaitic Midrash. See Safrai, 418.

[78] The poetic rendition is also recited by Sephardim on Tisha B'Av. Regarding the narrative, I will reference the version that exists in Jellinek, *Beit HaMidrash* vol. 2 (1967), 64. There are many versions of this narrative, though Jellinek's is most often cited in scholarly literature.

manuscript traditions, which include substantial variations, and many renditions of this narrative include parallels with other literature. Like some of the martyrdom literature from the ancient and Rabbinic periods, the Legend of the Ten Martyrs is most significant for its use as a paradigm for martyrdom later in the medieval period. Yet also like the older narratives, this legend provides its own unique ideological perspective on martyrdom.

The legend is structured in three sections. It begins with a prologue, which explains the context for the martyrdom, continues with a story of R. Yishmael's ascent on high, and concludes with ten stories, the account of each martyr's death. The prologue begins with a parable which sets the historical and ideological context of the narrative:

> When God created the trees, they became proud in their places and began raising themselves higher and higher. When God created iron, they would lower themselves and say, "Woe to us, for God has already created that thing which cuts us down." Similarly, after the destruction of the Temple, the corrupt people of that generation were proud and said, "What have we lost with the Temple's destruction? Behold, there are among us wise sages that guide the world by His Torah and His commandments." Immediately God granted the Roman Caesar the desire to learn Torah from the sages and the elders.[79]

From his study of Torah, the Caesar learns that, according to Exodus 21:16, one who kidnaps a person and sells him must be punished by death. He then calls for the ten sages and tells them that they must be put to death, for Jacob's ten sons sold Joseph into slavery and were not punished, so these ten sages must suffer their punishment.

[79] Jellinek, *Beit HaMidrash* vol. 2 (1967), 64.

The idea of martyrdom as a punishment for the sin of Jacob's sons is, according to Solomon Zeitlin, of apocalyptic origin and is not original to the Legend of the Ten Martyrs. Zeitlin notes that the author of the Book of Jubilees "held that the sin of the ten sons of Jacob… had not been atoned, and that hence the Jews must afflict themselves annually on the day on which Joseph was sold, in order to attain atonement for this sin which their forefathers committed."[80] This idea emerged from the same school of thought that produced the Christian concept of original sin, a concept that "was in vogue among the Jewish Apocalyptists, but was strongly opposed by the rabbis."[81] For Zeitlin, this explains why it is that the legend does not appear in the Talmud or in the Tannaitic Midrash. "Since the Tannaim strongly opposed the idea that a sinless man should atone a sin committed by somebody else we can readily understand why they did not record the story of the Ten Martyrs."[82] Zeitlin points out that this ideology which portrays the Ten Martyrs as blameless sacrifices dying for the sins of someone else (in this case, Jacob's sons) is a concept that appears more Christian than Jewish.[83]

The ideology presented in this context does sound quite Christian, but the reason that this legend became so central in Jewish literature is that the editor of this legend is able to reconfigure this ideological statement. In the prologue quoted above it is stated

[80] Solomon Zeitlin, "The Legend of the Ten Martyrs and its Apocalyptic Origins," 6.
[81] Ibid., 8.
[82] Ibid.
[83] I am not inclined to agree with Zeitlin on this point. In his book *Dying for God*, Daniel Boyarin demonstrates quite convincingly that martyrdom is a concept which emerged from a shared Judeo-Christian tradition, from what he argues is a long period of time in which Christianity was simply one expression of Judaism and not a distinct religious group. While Boyarin's argument rests mostly on some Rabbis that he identifies as liminal figures straddling the emerging line which divided Judaism and Christianity rather than on this narrative, the shared tradition of vicarious atonement through martyrdom can clearly be seen by the shared Jewish and Christian tradition of Isaiah 53, the "suffering servant" passage discussed in the previous chapter. While the passage became central to Christian martyrdom as *imitatio Christi*, its influence on Jewish martyrdom is present in this text. For more on martyrdom and the division between Judaism and Chrsitianity, see D. Boyarin *Dying for God*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999. The most relevant sections are his general discussion of the shared tradition of Judaism and Christianity in the introduction, as well as his analysis of the martyrdom of R. Akiva on pp. 102-108.

explicitly that the reason for the martyrs' suffering is atonement for the sin of pride following the destruction of the Temple. While the early apocalyptic and seemingly Christian notion of punishment is preserved in the text, it is transformed into the ideology of the narrative's antagonist, the Roman official. By placing this ideology in the mind of the Roman official, the editor strengthens the anti-Christian polemical elements of the narrative. The polemical nature of the text is apparent when R. Yishmael ascends on high and sees that Rome will be punished for killing the martyrs.[84] The polemic is strengthened, though, because not only does Rome represent Christianity like it often does in medieval Jewish literature, but the Roman official is even presenting a Christian theological understanding of the events. By placing the Christian ideology in the mouth of the Roman official and by adding a unique Jewish theology at the very beginning of the narrative, the editor of this narrative is able to add a polemical dimension to this story of martyrdom.

The literary influences of the second section of the narrative also influence the legend's ideological position. The second section is a long digression in which R. Yishmael ascends on high to inquire whether God has approved Caesar's ruling and concludes with a list of the names of the Ten Martyrs. According to Yosef Dan, the expansiveness of the story of R. Yishmael's ascent on high and the exact names of the ten martyrs constitute the main differences between the manuscript traditions of this narrative.[85] In the version published by Jellinek, where the story about R. Yishmael is quite short compared to other manuscripts, there is still a considerable digression regarding R. Yishmael's conception and the roots of his physical beauty. The section

[84] Jellinek, 66.
[85] Yoseph Dan. "The Emergence and Trends of the Legend of the Ten Martyrs" (in Hebrew) in *Mehkarei Sifrut Mugashim L'Shimon Halkin* (in Hebrew) ed. Ezra Fleischer. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1972), 19.

concludes with R. Yishmael seeing an altar beside the Throne of Glory. When he asks what is offered on this heavenly altar, the angel Gabriel responds that "We offer the souls of *tzaddikim* upon it each day."[86] Thereby, Yishmael understands that the decree is sanctioned by God and informs the sages below. The section concludes with the list of the names of the ten martyrs.

The variances in the lists of names among the manuscript traditions are some of the strongest indications that the text is not historical in nature. Until the early twentieth century, the text was largely believed to describe actual historical events despite the fact that the varying lists of martyrs never provided a coherent list of ten that actually lived in the same period. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars attempted to emend the lists, suggesting alternative names which would preserve the historical integrity of the narrative. Eventually the shortcomings of this strategy became clear. Describing the evolution of scholarship on the matter, Yosef Dan notes that

> …after all of the attempts to relate to this narrative as a historical source which needed to be revised and emended, a clear picture never arose and [after scholars] did not leave the realm of different suggested emendations to the list of names of the ten sages, it was evident to… relate to the narrative as an early medieval compilation which belonged to a wider stream of literary creativity founded upon the Talmudic-Midrashic literature but not dependent upon it; a stream whose creativity constitutes the beginning of an independent Hebrew narrative from the medieval period, which draws from earlier sources but develops its branches in its own unique directions and views the spiritual world and the internal, personal reality of medieval writers.[87]

[86] Jellinek, 66.
[87] Dan, 19.

Dan's description indicates that the Legend of the Ten Martyrs, while heavily influenced by Talmudic and Midrashic literary genres, appears to be its own unique form of early medieval Jewish literature. This narrative functions neither as a pseudo-Talmudic aggadah, nor as a work of Midrash, but rather as a legend that borrows heavily from these earlier literary forms.

The other inconsistency of the legend, namely the varying stories of R. Yishmael's ascent on high, demonstrates the significant influence of yet another literary genre. Dan argues that a major manuscript recension of the legend varies regarding "the major expansion of the description of R. Yishmael's ascent on high . . . including a detailed description of the event and structures of the higher worlds in the manner of the *Hekhalot* and *Merkavah* literature."[88] He argues that the legend was developing at the same time that this literature was being produced, and it influenced the legend by giving it an eschatological bent. The legend, under the influence of this literature, evolves into polemic forecasting the downfall of Christendom.[89]

While there is clearly a polemical dimension to this narrative as it developed in the early medieval period, I am convinced that this is only half of the legend's ideological purpose. A narrative like this, which borrows so heavily from earlier literature including Talmudic *aggadot*, Midrash, and works of esoterica, seems to require an explanation for why someone would write a new narrative. If the work is not historical, as modern scholarship has clearly demonstrated, and if the disparate narratives of most of these ten martyr's deaths existed in other literature before this narrative was compiled, it seems that the editor of this narrative must have had a reason to create it. While his intent may

[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid., 21.

have partly been to compose a polemic against Christianity, it seems that the narrative was partly written to influence Jewish behavior as well.

While the Roman Emperor's reason for executing the sages relates to the sin of Jacob's sons, the narrator's explanation blames the pride of those who thought their wisdom so great as to ignore the need for rebuilding the Temple. The narrator places the blame for the tragic deaths of these ten sages upon those who believed that the sages' wisdom was great enough to replace the offerings in the Temple. When R. Yishmael arrives in heaven, he sees that they are correct: these righteous sages have replaced the bulls and sheep upon the altar. Yet the offering is not their wisdom but rather their lives. According to the narrator, it is neither the Caesar nor the sons of Jacob that bear the guilt for the execution of the ten martyrs. Instead the guilty are those who believed in a purely intellectual communication with God devoid of any physical communication through sacrifice. The result was a physical sacrifice, and tragically it was no bull or sheep but rather the very sages whose intellects were to replace the traditional offerings.

The ideology of martyrdom presented in this text, according to this reading, is a complex understanding of Rabbinic martyrdom as divine punishment for Jewish transgressions. Resembling the manner in which the Rabbis interpreted the fall of the Temple as a collective punishment for Israel's collective sins, the editor of this text views the ten martyrs as a similar collective punishment for a similar collective sin. Yet just as the Rabbis equivocate regarding their reaction to the Temple's destruction, the editor of this text blames the punishment on Jewish transgression while simultaneously seeking divine retribution upon the Romans who carry out the punishment. The martyrdom is, paradoxically, both deserved and unfair. The legend of the Ten Martyrs is both tragic

and romantic. It is the tension between the admiration for the martyr and the pain of the tragedy that defines this account of martyrdom. This tension will reappear often in the medieval period and even through the modern period whenever martyrdom is evoked as a response to Jewish suffering.

Chapter 3 - Medieval Martyrdom

As we have seen in the previous chapter, martyrdom was a response to persecution in the Second Temple and Rabbinic periods. Yet in the literature of medieval Ashkenazi Jewry, beginning in the 12th century responses to the First Crusade, martyrdom becomes perhaps the central Jewish response to such conditions. The volume of martyrdom literature in the medieval period is immense and spans many centuries, genres, and regions. Because the martyrdom texts of the First Crusade have been studied so extensively and because of their profound effect on later medieval martyrdom texts, I will begin my description of medieval Jewish martyrdom with an overview of those texts. Following the First Crusade, Ashkenazi Jews continued writing martyrdom literature, mostly in the form of poetry. These poems described not only the violence of the Crusades, but also those martyrs who were killed by ecclesiastical authorities following sham-trials for crimes such as blood libels. After I note some of the significant themes of this poetry, I will describe how two of the most significant medieval *halakhic* authorities, the French *Tosafists* and Maimonides, responded to the legal problems regarding martyrdom. Finally, I will argue that the opposing views of the *Tosafists* and Maimonides typify a significant divide between the way that medieval Ashkenazim and Sephardim viewed martyrdom.

Martyrdom of the First Crusade

In November of 1095, Pope Urban II formally called for a Crusade to take back the Holy Land and the Sepulcher from the Muslims occupying Jerusalem. As the

Crusade began, the pontiff quickly lost any control over the increasingly violent troops. These troops continued their quest under the direction of generals and militants who answered to no central authority. The Crusade was focused on recapturing the place where Jesus had suffered and died, and when the Crusaders happened upon Rhineland Jewish communities en route to Jerusalem, they recalled that it was the ancestors of these Jews who had caused Jesus' suffering and death in this place. Whether out of true religious zeal, socioeconomic motives, or some combination of these and other factors, the Crusaders attacked several Rhineland Jewish communities during the year 1096. Three Hebrew Crusade chronicles document the violence of these attacks. These chronicles, which document what came to be referred to as *gezerot tatnu* (persecutions of the Hebrew year 4856), portray martyrdom as one of the primary Jewish responses to the violence of this period. They include many narratives depicting martyrdom as the ideal response to Crusader attempts to convert Jews by force. The prevalence of these martyrdom narratives and the details of their accounts, including the communal nature of many such actions, seem to indicate a heightened focus on martyrdom as a response to anti-Jewish violence.

There is vast scholarly literature on the persecutions and martyrdom of 1096 and this literature includes a wide diversity of understandings of the literature which records these events. In order to analyze the stories of martyrdom from this period, I will analyze some of the debates that have emerged between scholars on a variety of issues. First, I will examine the debate over the historical accuracy of the chronicles which document these events, which includes disagreement over the proper methodology for analyzing these chronicles. Second, I will explore some of the various explanations for the

increased focus on martyrdom in this period. Finally, I will identify some of the common themes of Crusade-period martyrdom literature, including the communal nature of the martyrs' actions, the significance of time in many of these narratives, and the use of Christian symbols and imagery. Through this analysis, I intend to demonstrate a rather complex attitude toward martyrdom amongst Ashkenazi Jews in the 12th and 13th centuries which includes a higher degree of ambivalence toward martyrdom than may be initially apparent.

Although there can be little doubt that the Hebrew Crusade chronicles are significant for the historical study of Jewish martyrdom, the nature and chronology of that significance has been the subject of much debate and scrutiny. Much of this debate rests on two interrelated questions regarding the relationship of the chronicles to the events they describe, namely the question of historicity and questions regarding methods of inquiry. When reading these chronicles, scholars differ on the extent to which they view the chronicles as historically accurate, and depending on their view of the chronicles' historicity they apply varying methods of historical inquiry, ranging from the positivist to the literary. This debate is not new, yet because the attitudes of the 19th-century Jewish historians are their own topic of inquiry for this study, I will wait to analyze those scholarly debates until Chapter 4. Instead, I provide here a limited description of the most recent scholarly debates regarding the historicity of the Crusade chronicles and the methodology that should be used to analyze them.

This debate regarding the historicity of the Hebrew Crusade chronicles can no longer be viewed as a full spectrum ranging from the positivist to the skeptical. No serious scholar in recent decades has advocated for the complete objectivity of the

chronicles, nor have any argued that the events they describe are entirely fictional. Instead the spectrum ranges from those who view the ideology of the chroniclers as reflective of the characters that they are describing to those scholars who view the chroniclers as reframing those characters and their experiences to fit their own ideological concerns. Thus the approach that I will refer to as the "historical" approach places the ideology presented in the text as originating in 1096, the year that the events took place, while the more "literary" approach places this ideology as the reaction to the events by the chroniclers of the late 12th century.[90]

The more historical end of this spectrum is represented most notably in recent years by Robert Chazan in a series of books and articles written about the massacres of the First Crusade. Chazan believes that while the chroniclers themselves were not eye-witnesses to the massacres, the author of the oldest chronicle wrote with knowledge of the eye-witness accounts of others and the subsequent chronicles wrote both with eye-witness accounts and the text of the earlier chronicles. He writes,

> The time elapsed between the events and the composition of the later narratives was generally quite brief and, at most, only four or five decades separated an event from the report. In cases where the materials came from written sources, the degree of similarity in corresponding passages in [The Mainz Anonymous] and [the chronicle attributed to Solomon ben Simson] can be taken as evidence that the two chroniclers accurately reproduced information from the earlier written sources. Where the sources were oral, the narrators apparently heard firsthand from survivors

[90] It should be noted that both the spectrum that I am presenting ranging from the historical to the literary view is indicative of the moderate range of a much larger spectrum. Theoretically, the extreme end of the historical view would be the positivist view, while the extreme end of the literary view would be the skeptical view. I do not consider here any scholars who fall outside of the moderate range, though it should be noted that there are some scholars who hold more radical views, as noted by Shlomo Eidelberg who indicates that there are historians who date some of the chronicles as late as the 14th century. See S. Eidelberg, *The Jews and the Crusaders*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977. p. 10.

> of the tumultuous events. The transmission of earlier source material to the late narrators does not seem to entail complications that would diminish the reliability of the chronicles.[91]

Additionally, Chazan argues from the diversity, ambivalence, and heterogeneity of the actions described in the chronicles to support their historicity. He notes that "the diversity of behavior depicted is the best index available of the reliability of the original sources . . ." while noting that despite some "exaggeration . . . wholesale suppression of key tendencies and widespread fabrication of actions and attitudes are unlikely."[92] While admitting that the accuracy of the chronicles cannot be proved, Chazan views the chronicles as presenting an accurate account of the events they describe.

The view opposing Chazan, which I refer to as the "literary" view, is represented by, among others, Ivan Marcus.[93] Marcus does not deny that the massacres recorded in the chronicles occurred, but rather argues that the chronicles are not chronicles at all and require a literary, not historical, analysis.

> The three Hebrew narratives are literary responses to those events. Whereas the martyrs themselves sought by their actions to justify the ways of God, the narrators who chronicled their actions had, by use of archetypal imagery, to justify the martyrs. In so doing they fashioned rich and complex narratives which invite literary analysis.[94]

Clearly, Marcus does not deny the existence of the martyrs, but rather simply notes that the authors of the Hebrew narratives had a different set of concerns which merit a literary

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[91] Robert Chazan. *European Jewry and the First Crusade*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1987. p. 45.
[92] ibid.
[93] Ivan Marcus. "From Politics to Martyrdom: Shifting Paradigms in the Hebrew Narratives of the 1096 Crusade Riots," in Prooftexts Vol. 2, No. 1, Catastrophe in Jewish Literature (January 1982), pp. 40-52.
[94] Marcus, 41.

rather than historical reading of the texts. He notes that the historical approach is based upon a misunderstanding of the genre of these narratives, arguing that

> The classification of the texts as medieval chronicles is one reason for this failure. That term usually denotes texts which contain documentary historical data which are embedded in a theological narrative framework. But the notion that medieval chronicles consist of an almost mechanical combination of "facts" and a "religious narrative framework" is a distortion: Such texts cannot be treated as though the "facts" are preserved in narrative like fossils in amber. . . . The events actually reported qualify for inclusion only when they fit the narrator's preconceived religious literary schema. Medieval chronicles are, in this sense, fictions: imaginative reorderings of experience within a cultural framework and system of symbols.[95]

Marcus argues that the labeling of these texts as chronicles has led scholars to treat the works as a list of facts occasionally interrupted by a liturgical or religious interpretation of those facts. Instead, these "facts" are often invented by the writer so that the narrative reflects the writer's ideological perspective. For Marcus, the text as a whole must be viewed as reflective of ideological choices and no single detail or "fact" can be isolated as an objective piece of information within the greater narrative.

Though the debate about the historicity and genre of the Hebrew Crusade chronicles remains significant, a more recent study by Jeremy Cohen has articulated a compromise position. Cohen notes that "Modern investigators likewise agree that, in their twelfth-century context, the Hebrew Crusade chronicles served a rhetorical, educational, perhaps even inspirational purpose far exceeding the mere documentation of

[95] Ibid., 42.

what had transpired."[96] Cohen denies that the purpose of the chronicles is simply to record the events of 1096, a position with which Chazan and Marcus would both agree. Furthermore, he notes that the advent of New Historicism has allowed historians to analyze an historical document using literary analysis without denying its historicity. The rise of New Historicism has "helped to blur traditional boundaries between the academic disciplines of history, literature, and hermeneutics."[97] In other words, a literary analysis of the chronicles can yield substantive information regardless of the historical accuracy of the text. Therefore, literary analysis should not be misunderstood as a rejection of the historicity of the narrative. Instead, it reflects the belief that the only ideology which can be interpreted is that of the martyrologist, not the martyr, for the latter left nothing written to be analyzed. The degree to which the ideology of the martyr and the chronicler actually were similar remains an open question which can, most likely, only be answered by speculation.

The tension between viewing martyrdom as a theme which exists in history or one which exists in historiography occurred in the previous chapters as well, and is of course a epistemological question which approaches historians of all periods. The nature of this tension seems to change, however, among medieval historians. In the previous chapters, the historicity of the martyrdom narratives was unknown. In the debate regarding the Crusades, however, no scholars doubt that the narratives, in some way, describe actual events. The debate then shifts to whether this fact is relevant for historians. If, for example, an historian were to believe that the account of R. Akiva's martyrdom is entirely fictional, then he would ascribe the ideology of martyrdom to the author rather

[96] Jeremy Cohen. *Sanctifying the Name of God*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. p. 43.
[97] Ibid., 46.

than R. Akiva. Yet for historians of the Crusades, there is no doubt that there were Jews who took their lives and the lives of their loved ones in order to die *al kiddush hashem*. Therefore, the debate is no longer about *if there was* an actual martyr to influence the martyrologist's ideology. Instead, the question is *to what extent* the actual martyr influenced the martyrologist's ideology, a question that is nearly impossible to answer.

The study of the martyrdom of the Crusades is, then, the study of how later generations understood the deaths of those who died *al kiddush hashem*. Regardless of how accurate their descriptions are, these later writers described the events by placing them into narrative or poetic frameworks which display their interpretation of what happened. The use of literary analysis can help explicate the attitudes that these writers display *vis-à-vis* the martyrdom of those who came before them. By analyzing these texts as literature and identifying their use of symbolism, irony, and allusion, there is no implicit denial of the historical reality underlying the description. Instead, this kind of analysis allows the contemporary reader to try to understand how the martyrological writer understood the martyr's death by explaining the literary methods used to describe the events.

Before engaging in this literary analysis of the martyrdom literature, it may be helpful to note the scholarly debate regarding the motivations for the martyrdom that this literature describes. Many different scholars have sought to explain the newfound importance of martyrdom in this period, and as Jeremy Cohen indicates, these explanations come in the form of "two strategies which are hardly mutually exclusive." Cohen writes that "One strategy explains the behavior of the martyrs as expressing the

distinguishing characteristics of early medieval German Jewry."[98] Avraham Grossman, for example, provides a list of several unique characteristics of 11th century Ashkenazi Jewry that motivated the Jewish martyrs of the Crusades. He notes, for example, an increased attention to aggadah, or legendary literature, during this period. Grossmann argues that *aggadic* literature held "deepest influence on the formation of their world view" and that in opposition the legal challenges to martyrdom discussed in the Talmud and other legal texts, the *aggadic* literature makes it clear that "not only is someone permitted to take his life in a time of persecution in order to save himself from a terrible transgression, but he is indeed commanded to do so."[99] Grossman also includes in his list of motivating factors the significance of the Book of *Josippon*, the 10th century work mistakenly attributed to Josephus which tells the history of the Second Temple period including the tale of the martyrs at Masada, and the liturgical poems of the period which effectively "strengthened the great rejection of Christianity" among the people, which included the rejection of conversion as a means to save one's life.[100] In addition to these literary motivations, Grossman also includes the cultural phenomena of general animosity between Christians and Jews, messianic fervor, and the power of the rabbis in their increasingly entrenched role in Jewish society as contributing factors. Martyrdom gains significance, then, as a result of these literary trends and in opposition to these problematic social developments.

The other strategy of explanation proposes that martyrdom became a major theme of the Jewish response to the Crusader violence because of a heightened climate of

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[98] Cohen, 14.
[99] Avraham Grossman. "The Roots of Qiddush haShem in Early Ashkenaz" (in Hebrew), in *Qedushat haHayyim ve-heruf hanefesh*, ed. I. Gafni and A. Ravitzki (Jerusalem: Mirkaz Zalman Shazar, 1993),, 66.
[100] Ibid., 71.

religious zeal at the time, what Cohen refers to as the "ideological climate of the First Crusade."[101] Ironically, this argument presents the Jewish motivation for martyrdom as part of the very same *zeitgeist* that motivated the Crusade itself. Chazan writes that this explanation is essential to understanding the Jewish response to the violence, noting that "Proper understanding of the Rhineland Jews of 1096 can only be achieved by projecting them against the broader backdrop of that frenzied period. . . . Jews themselves were caught up in the explosive zeal of the period and became as radical in their behaviors as were the Crusaders in theirs."[102] Martyrdom is not only the means by which the Jews of this period proved their fate, but Crusaders who died in battle over the Holy Land were also considered martyrs by their communities. There can be little doubt that the culture of religious fervor in Europe, with its emphasis on martyrdom and messianic ideals, was felt by both Christians and Jews. Susan Einbinder notes that "Even when they might seem most to be at odds with it, medieval Jews were woven securely into the fabric of the institutional, intellectual, and social tapestry of Christian-dominated Europe."[103] Religious zeal was a significant part of that tapestry and the violence of this period, whether by the Crusaders in war or the Jews by their own hands, is an expression of that zeal.

Both of these strategies for explaining the Jewish martyrdom of the Crusades are helpful for understanding the prominent place of martyrdom in this period, though in my opinion the environment of messianism and religious fervor should be thought of as the primary explanation for it brought about the need to look to Rabbinic texts about martyrdom. Grossman's identification of *aggadic* literature and *Josippon* as primary

[101] Cohen, 15.
[102] Chazan 1996, 74.
[103] Susan Einbinder. *A Beautiful Death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. p. 4

motivations for these martyrs is insufficient. It does not explain the chronological and literary gaps between the *aggadic* tales of martyrdom and the Hebrew Crusade chronicles. Einbinder notes that "even if rabbinic precedents could entirely explain medieval Jewish martyrological composition, those precedents have traveled far from their original settings."[104] Other Jewish communities also read these texts but did not act upon them in this way. Perhaps it was the very fact that these martyrs took their own lives which motivated the chroniclers of the first Crusade to turn to this literature as a means to understand their actions. Cohen notes that the gap between the act of martyrdom and its description demands a more nuanced understanding of the role of the earlier texts, for "how can one imagine that [the chroniclers'] worldview before the violence remained unaltered in its aftermath?"[105] Our understanding of the motivations of the martyrs of 1096 is filtered through the means by which the chroniclers understood them. Clearly, the chroniclers turned to *aggadic* literature to explain the actions of the martyrs. This may be a reflection of the martyrs' own motivations, but as Cohen demonstrates, there is good reason to believe that it is also a means by which the chroniclers contextualized the martyrs' deaths into a pantheon of Jewish martyrs dating back to the Talmud. The focus on aggadic literature is, then, a result of the martyrdom of this period rather than a motivating factor.

The martyrs who took their lives in reaction to the persecutions and violence of the first Crusade did so, in my opinion, as a result of the same factors which motivated those very persecutions. The generations which followed then turned to the legendary literature of the past, including the Rabbinic martyrs of the Talmud, as a lens through

[104] Einbinder, 4.
[105] Cohen, 55.

which to understand the martyrs of their own day. Just as the early medieval midrashim took earlier martyrdom narratives and rewrote them to reflect their own unique attitudes toward martyrdom, the chroniclers of the first Crusade wove the stories of the martyrs of the past into their descriptions of the martyrs of that period. While these earlier texts served as a paradigm of martyrdom for these chroniclers, the chronicles too view martyrdom in a number of different ways. The literature of the 12th and 13th centuries reflects more than just the events of 1096. It reflects the pain brought about by the events of 1096, the ambivalence toward martyrdom and conversion of this period, and the intense animosity toward the Christian neighbors who persecuted them through violence and forced conversion.

There are many texts about martyrs from the centuries following the Crusades, including the various narratives in the Hebrew Crusade chronicles as well as the poetry and lamentations over the martyrs of 1096 and other martyrs who died in smaller, less well-known attacks afterward, which I will treat separately. Without attempting to document the full corpus of martyrs of this period, I will suggest a few themes which emerge from the vast literature of this period and attempt to draw a number of conclusions from those themes. Though the list is far from exhaustive, I have identified three themes which seem to characterize the various narratives contained in the Crusade chronicles. First is the communal nature of many acts of martyrdom, in contrast to earlier Jewish martyrs. Second is the significance of time for these martyrdom narratives, and finally is the co-option of Christian imagery. These themes reveal a collection of texts which reflect a spectrum of attitudes toward martyrdom. On one end of that spectrum is ambivalence toward martyrdom as an alternative to baptism, and on the opposite end is

the use of these narratives to reflect significant animosity toward Christianity as often expressed in the polemical content of these narratives. The complexity and ambivalence reflected in the many accounts of martyrdom from this period reflects the difficult grappling of the martyrologists to make sense out of the horrific violence of the Crusades.

Unlike earlier stories of Jewish martyrdom, which told the tales of individual martyrs like the mother and her seven sons or of great leaders giving their lives *al kiddush hashem*, many of the martyrdom texts of the Crusades depict Jews martyring themselves as a community rather than individually. The longest and most detailed of the Crusade chronicles, that of Solomon bar Simson, begins in precisely this manner. The first martyrs mentioned by the chronicle are eleven nameless martyrs who were attacked in Speyer and who "sanctified their Creator on the holy Sabbath and refused to defile themselves by adopting the faith of their foe."[106] They are followed quickly by the two attacks on the Jews of Worms, who also martyred themselves and each other *en masse*, when "Fathers fell upon their sons, being slaughtered upon one another, and they slew one another – each man his kin, his wife and children . . . They all accepted the divine decree wholeheartedly and, as they yielded up their souls to the Creator, cried out: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."[107] Statements of this nature, in which groups of nameless Jews slaughter themselves or each other, or else submit to death rather than baptism, pervade this literature. While there are also many vignettes of individuals taking their own lives, they simply add detail to what is a larger picture of a communal commitment to martyrdom as a resistance to forced conversion. It seems that martyrdom, for the writers of these accounts, is not simply an ideal realized only by a

[106] Eidelberg, 22.
[107] Ibid., 23.

community's leader, but by the community as a whole. Grossman notes that the chronicles "preferred to emphasize the portion of everyday people and of women in order to emphasize the general readiness of the members of the community to offer their lives al kiddush hashem."[108] The communal nature of these acts of martyrdom and the ability for even the most ordinary person to sanctify God's name with his death may serve as motivation for Jews to resist the pressure to convert even if by force. One does not need to be a great leader to be remembered as a martyr. According to these texts, the act of choosing death over conversion makes the most ordinary person into a venerable hero.

Just as many of the texts depicting the martyrs of this period stress the communal nature of their martyrdom, they also are careful to indicate the significance of the timing of these acts of martyrdom. The significance of time in many of these stories is, most likely, not for purposes of historical accuracy but instead to instill a sense of greater significance to the actions of the martyrs.[109] The martyrs' deaths took place in the context of Jewish time, and the timing of their deaths holds eternal significance. Examples of this phenomenon abound, but the stories of the martyrs of Xanten and the martyrdom of Master Isaac the Parnas provide two different pictures of how the martyrologists used time to add significance to their descriptions of martyrdom.

The story of the martyrs of Xanten, as recorded in the chronicle of Solomon bar Simson, begins "On the sixth day of the week, the fifth day of the month [Tammuz], on the eve of Shabbat at twilight."[110] The timing of the events, occurring just as Shabbat

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[108] Grossman, 60.

[109] Cohen, for example, notes that the story of the martyrs of Xanten actually conflates the timing of the events, recording days of the week that do not match up with their dates on the Hebrew calendar. See Cohen, 77.

[110] Adolph Neubauer and Moritz Stern, eds. *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während der Kreuzzüge.* Quellen der Gerschichte der Juden in Deutschland 2. (Berlin: L. Simon, 1892), 21.

began, is mentioned repeatedly in the narrative yet vacillates between the eve of Shabbat and Shabbat itself, between the events taking place on Friday or on Saturday. Both Cohen and Israel Yuval argue that the significance of time in this narrative is symbolic. Cohen writes that "just as Rabbi Moses the priest prodded his followers to exchange life in this world for life in 'that world of eternal daylight', so did classical rabbinic traditions cherished by medieval Jews commonly compare salvation both to a world of unending daylight and to a world of unending Sabbath rest."[111] Yuval adds to this that "the noting of liminal time between Friday and Shabbat could possibly awaken positive association to the ten wonders of nature . . . that were created 'on Shabbat eve at twilight'" according to the Mishna.[112] Both Cohen and Yuval note that the timing of the events adds a dimension of significance to the narrative. As Cohen writes, the placing of the events at the tipping point between Friday and Shabbat means that the martyrs "straddled the proverbial fence between one world and the next: the world of Friday, of physical existence, of a gloomy, tiresome lack of fulfillment on the one hand, and the radiant world of the Sabbath, of eternal light, repose, and salvation on the other hand."[113] These Jews faced the choice of being baptized and living on Friday, a weekday symbolizing the profane, or else taking their lives as martyrs and entering Shabbat, a symbol of eternal holiness.

While the day of the week in the story of Xanten holds symbolic importance, the date of the martyrdom of Master Isaac the Parnas on the Hebrew calendar is symbolic of the greater meaning of his death. According to the chronicles, Master Isaac's martyrdom

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[111] Cohen, 78.
[112] Y. Yuval, "The Language and Symbolism of the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles," in *Jews Facing the Cross*, ed. Yom Tov Asis et. al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000), 103. Cf. M. Avot 5:6.
[113] Cohen, 79.

takes place on the evening of Shavuot, the commemoration of God's revelation of Torah on Mount Sinai. Cohen notes that "the timing of Isaac's martyrdom is laden with symbolic baggage. It comes at a critical moment, when, as with the exodus from Egypt, the revelation at Sinai, and the birth of the savior - fateful moments of salvation, election, and redemption - the destiny of the Jews hangs in the balance."[114] While Shavuot commemorates Israel's entering into the covenant with God on Mt. Sinai, Master Isaac affirms that covenant by choosing to die as a martyr rather than convert to Christianity and transgress the covenant. The symbolism of time in the story of Master Isaac is not as impactful as the story of Xanten, but it demonstrates how the chroniclers of these events depicted the martyrs as falling into the greater scheme of Jewish history. Martyrdom fit both into the scheme of holy and profane that is represented by the opposition of the weekdays and Shabbat, but also into the holiness and profanity of time as marked by the giving of Torah. Rather than reject the covenant through baptism, going back to that time before Israel received the gift of Torah, Master Isaac affirms the covenant and his martyrdom is yet another event of Jewish history marked with the observance of Shavuot.

The very notion that the Jewish martyrdom during the Crusades was brought about by the same heightened sense of messianism and religiosity which motivated the Christians to launch the Crusades points to the close relationship between Jews and Christians in this period. Though the exact nature of the relationships between Jews and Christians differed from place to place in Europe, even the attempts by the Jews in 1096 to seek refuge with local Christian leaders indicates that not all relations were hostile. Indeed, it is evident that Jews possessed significant knowledge of Christian culture and symbolism, and much of this knowledge is reflected in martyrdom narratives. Perhaps

[114] Cohen, 98.

the most significant recurring theme of these narratives is the use of Christian symbolism in descriptions of Jewish resistance to forced conversion.

Just as Jewish time was used in a symbolic manner, so too was the Christian calendar used in a polemical sense. The attacks on Jews in the town of Neuss took place on a Christian holiday[115], which Yuval identifies as the festival celebrating the birth of John the Baptist. The story is filled with martyrs who took their lives by throwing themselves into the Rhine and drowning. The timing, according to Yuval, "explains the frequently repeated emphasis in these stories of martyrdom by water. . . that is to say, by the same means that the Jews were demanded to convert, they sanctified God's name."[116] Yuval's analysis points to a double co-option of Christian symbolism for polemical use. The timing is significant, because of the festival celebrating John the Baptist, and the baptism is significant because the martyrs chose to by sanctified in the water via martyrdom rather than baptism.

Baptism is generally a Christian idea that is often repurposed in this literature for polemical use. One example, which appears in the story of Master Isaac the Parnas, is the notion of baptism being a kind of death in and of itself. To understand the use in the story, it is helpful to recount some more of the details of Master Isaac's martyrdom. The narrative begins:

> On the fifth day of the month of Sivan, the Eve of Pentecost, two saintly men – Master Isaac, the pious, son of David, the *Parnass*, and Uri, son of Joseph – acknowledged their Creator and greatly sanctified the Name of their Maker. For on the third day, when the entire community had been wiped out, these two pious men had been spared for Hell, as the enemy

[115] Neubauer and Stern, 18.
[116] Yuval, 105.

had defiled them against their will. They therefore now accepted upon themselves a fearful death not recorded in any of the admonitions.

Master Isaac continued his repentance for accepting baptism by sacrificing his children before the ark in the synagogue and burning down his father's house with his ailing mother inside. The narrative continues with Master Isaac's death:

> The pious Master Isaac returned to the synagogue to set it aflame, and he kindled the fire at all the doors. He went from corner to corner, his hands outspread Heavenward – to his Father in Heaven – praying to God out of the flames in a loud and sweet voice. The enemy shouted at him through the windows: "Wicked man, escape the flame; you can still save yourself." They extended a pole toward him in order to draw him from the flames, but the saintly man did not want to grasp it, and died in the flame, an innocent, just, and God-fearing man. And his soul has found shelter in the precincts of righteousness in the Garden of Eden.
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> Master Uri, too, was involved in the plan to burn the synagogue, for they had heard that the enemy intended to erect either a house of idolatry [i.e. a church] or a mint on the site. When Isaac set his father's house and the synagogue aflame, Uri was in another house. He had wanted to aid Isaac in the burning of the synagogue, and to be consumed in the conflagration, so that they would thus sanctify the Name of God together. However, he was unable to reach him because the enemy, awakened in the middle of the night by the flames, apprehended and slew him before he reached the fire. Master Isaac was, however, consumed in the flames.
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> Thus they both fell before God, with one accord, whole-heartedly, for the sake of the Name of Him Who is called [Lord of] Hosts. And it is of them and their like that it is written: "He who offers the sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me." Some are of the opinion that the forced converts had heard of plans to convert the synagogue into a mint, and that is why the pious man set it afire – himself perishing in the blaze. Others

> say they heard that the enemy intended to convert the synagogue into a church, and that is why they burnt it.[117]

One of the unique features of this particular narrative of martyrdom is that Masters Isaac and Uri are originally and temporarily "saved" through baptism yet are ultimately saved through martyrdom. Shepkaru notes that throughout the many martyrdom narratives in the chronicles, the notion of dying twice is repeated frequently. Although it is not mentioned as specifically in this narrative, Shepkaru argues quite convincingly that the reader is meant to understand the initial baptism as a death of sorts and the eventual martyrdom as Isaac and Uri's second deaths. He notes, for example, that the text mentions that the two would die a "fearful death not recorded in any of the admonitions," yet death by the force of one's enemy is listed in the biblical curses (Lev. 26:36), and this is precisely the means by which Uri is killed. "Therefore," Shepkaru notes, "the would-be martyrs' acceptance of 'a death not written in any of the Reproof [sections],' must refer to their forced conversion and the author's assigned punishment, existence in hell, not to their second redeeming act."[118] According to this interpretation, martyrdom is the means by which a Jew can be saved from the death of baptism. The Jew is then in the unenviable position of dying either way, either the symbolic death of baptism or the meaningful death of martyrdom.

Another reading of this narrative, offered by Jeremy Cohen, also suggests that Isaac's choice between baptism and martyrdom was not such an easy choice to make. Cohen notes that much of the description of Isaac seems to be critical rather than positive.

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[117] Eidelberg, 39-41.
[118] Shmuel Shepkaru. "Death Twice Over: Dualism of Metaphor and Realia in 12th-Century Hebrew Crusading Accounts," *JQR* 93, 1-2 (2002), 225-226.

Isaac walks about the burning synagogue calling to God after having slaughtered his entire family, including his ailing mother. His actions and much of the language is borrowed from a Midrash about the high priest at the time of the Temple's destruction who, as the Temple burns around him, throws up the keys toward God and cries out "Here are the keys to Your House, I have been a deceitful guardian within it."[119] Then, in a moment that Cohen describes by saying that "ironic does not even begin to describe the taunt,"[120] the Christians extend a beam to save him from the fire and call out, "Wicked man, get out of the fire." As Cohen notes, the wording and imagery is significant. The beam may well represent the cross, which can save Isaac from the fire. The word for fire used here is אור, which when vocalized as *ur* means "fire," but can also mean *or*, meaning light. The cross is extended both to save Isaac from the fire but also to remove him from the light. Cohen's analysis of this scene on the basis of wordplay and of an intertextual reading with the midrashic literature emphasizes the complex imagery used by the chronicler. He argues that by presenting this scene in this way, the writer has presented Isaac as "torn between *ur* and *or*, between fire and light . . . and between survival as a temporary Christian and martyrdom as a Jew," and then asks "what course does our hero steer? In fact, he chooses both, first one and then the other."[121] According to this reading of the narrative, what seems like an entirely complimentary depiction of the martyrs is actually much more ambivalent toward their martyrdom than first meets the eye.

The repeated emphasis on the communal nature of martyrdom, the significant timing of these actions, and the use of Christian imagery all reflect the difficulty of

[119] Pesiqta Rabbati, pes. 26.
[120] Cohen, 103.
[121] Cohen, 102.

creating meaning out of these events. On the one hand, the communal nature seems to indicate that the martyrologists, writing at a time when Jewish conversion was still a significant risk, wanted to provide motivation for resisting the pressures to convert.[122] In addition to using the martyr's death as a motivation for resistance, the writers attempted to place these events into a greater context of Jewish time. Finally, through their use of Christian symbolism and imagery, the writers indicate that the martyrs' choice of death over conversion was not an easy one. Indeed, while the texts do ultimately celebrate these martyrs as heroes, they are presented as having faced an impossible decision. Both baptism and martyrdom were forms of death, and the fire which killed Master Isaac was also opposed to the light of Christianity which could have saved him. These themes reflect the ambivalence of writers who must find meaning in the face of unspeakable tragedy.

Poetic Accounts of Martyrdom

Despite the fact that the majority of the Jewish martyrdom literature of the medieval period is poetry, until recently scholars have focused considerably more on the prose accounts, especially the Hebrew Crusade chronicles. There are a number of reasons for the disproportionate focus on these prose accounts. The chronicles are easier to read than many of the poetic accounts of medieval Jewish martyrdom, and the genre distinction leads Western scholars to believe that the chroniclers were focused on an accurate depiction of historical events, whereas the poets are more concerned with the aesthetics of their literature. As we have seen, though, the chroniclers themselves were

[122] Grossman, 58.

heavily concerned with the literary quality of their accounts and as scholars increasingly analyze the chronicles through the lens of literary criticism, the gap between the historical value of poetic and prose accounts narrows. The poetic accounts, like the chronicles, can allow us to understand how medieval Jews interpreted the violence around them and how they read their own experience into Jewish sacred texts and earlier Jewish martyrdom literature.

There is a considerable amount of Jewish martyrdom poetry from the 12th through the 14th centuries which survives in anthologies and in manuscripts, and undoubtedly much more that has not survived. Those medieval Jews who recorded the martyrdom of their communities in poetry chose this medium intentionally, and thus the poetic accounts of martyrdom seem to accomplish some goal which could not be achieved by prose accounts alone. Despite the genre difference, though, the medieval martyrdom poetry repeats many of the same themes and motifs of martyrdom that were recorded in the prose, while also introducing additional themes and motifs. The poetry also describes a larger number of historical events than the Hebrew Crusade chronicles record, and thus the poetry reflects the ways that Jewish understandings of martyrdom changed in the centuries following the First Crusade.

The scholarly focus on the Hebrew Crusade chronicles may in part be a result of the fact that prose accounts of past events were a notable form of literature because of their rarity, whereas poetry was the more common method of memorializing and lamenting martyrs in medieval Europe. Indeed, while it is unclear how the Hebrew Crusade chronicles were used by medieval Jews in the synagogue or in study, the poetic accounts likely enjoyed more exposure. Susan Einbinder argues that "the vast majority of

medieval Jews encountered martyrological texts in the synagogue – that is, as liturgical poetry – and not in prose at all."[123] The popular exposure of these texts as liturgy means that the poems were understood differently by different segments of the Jewish community. Einbinder refers to "two audiences" for this literature:

> "One was the larger lay male community of Jews, who would have been impressed by the dramatic imagery of the poetry even if they did not understand the erudite allusions of the texts. Yet a second audience was the circle of Tosafist scholars and students who could decode the poetic texts. For these men, the reflection of their own image in depictions of heroic martyrdom reinforced a sense of their own importance."[124]

The two-leveled understanding of these texts does not seem to be terribly different from the way the chronicles would have been understood. Though it is unclear what exposure the average Jew had to the chronicles, only someone extremely learned in Torah and Rabbinic literature would have been able to understand the allusions of those texts, just as only learned men would understand the poetic allusions. As a result, the significant difference between the prose and poetic accounts of martyrdom is that the latter were read, performed, and appreciated more commonly by a larger portion of the Jewish community because of their liturgical function.

The martyrdom poetry of this period includes many of the same themes and motifs as the prose accounts, but also introduces new themes and motifs as Jewish notions of martyrdom change following the Crusades. The poetry, like the prose chronicles, stresses the cohesion of the Jewish community in its response to conversionary pressure and violence, and it includes polemical attacks on Christianity featuring the denigration of Christian ideas and symbols. Einbinder notes that the poetry

[123] Einbinder, 6.
[124] Ibid., 51.

stresses this cohesion even more as the Jewish communities grow increasingly fractured due to increased pressure to convert. She argues that the theme of Jewish cohesion "increased over the thirteenth century in tandem with the rise in conversions and the escalation of social, economic, and religious measures designed to achieve them."[125] The poets further intensified some of the chroniclers' themes and motifs as the social conditions to which they were responding changed.

The poets' other response to changing social and cultural conditions was to introduce new themes into the Jewish literary depiction of martyrdom. Einbinder identifies several of these new themes, and I will concentrate on three of them. First, I will discuss the Tosafist ideal of the "scholar-martyr," which stands in contrast to the ideal of the average Jew as martyr presented in some of the Crusade chronicles. Next, I will discuss what Einbinder refers to as the "incombustible martyr," the martyr who in numerous ways and to varying extents is able to avoid death by fire. Finally, I will relate the theme of the incombustible martyr to the notion that the martyr's death reveals a message from God in parallel to God's revelation on Mt. Sinai.

Much of the martyrdom poetry represents a gradual shift from depictions of communal acts of martyrdom, such as those presented in the chronicles and other literature of the first Crusade, to acts of martyrdom performed by communal leaders. Beginning in the late 12th century, Einbinder argues, the French poets tend to ". . . abandon the earlier emphasis on demographic diversity to focus on an elite corps of scholar-martyrs, and they introduce new motifs for the representation of martyrdom..."[126] In 1171 in Blois, there was a mass arrest of Jews following the rumored murder of a

[125] Einbinder, 21.
[126] Einbinder, 18.

Christian woman, and many of them were executed. Many letters, lists, and poems were written to commemorate the martyrs' deaths, and "without exception, the poems elevate the scholar-rabbi to the post of ideal martyr. As the typical Blois martyr was not a scholar, the literary ideal suggests the authors' desire to reinforce traditional authority and institutions in times of upheaval."[127] In addition to reinforcing the communal structure and emphasizing the authority of the rabbis, this shift to an idealized martyr may have reflected historical changes in the pressure to convert. Many scholars have noted that young, educated Jews as well as rabbis were under especially intense pressure to convert.[128] This shift to depictions of rabbi-martyrs, then, reflects not just a literary change but an historical one as well. Martyrdom poetry functioned at least in part as a literary response to conversionary pressure. As the pressure changed, the literary response changed as well.

Another new motif that appears in the martyrdom poetry is the notion of martyrs who are immune to death by fire. There are many examples of martyrdom poems, especially those describing the events in Blois, which depict the martyrs as flame-resistant.[129] Einbinder argues that this motif is rooted in a common notion, held by Christians and Jews alike, that the bodies of the righteous are immune to fire and relates the theme to two biblical stories, that of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from Daniel as well as Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron who were consumed by fire.[130] While this notion may originally have served to prove the righteousness of the martyrs, many of whom were the victims of judicial violence by this time, the notion of the fireproof

[127] Ibid., 51.
[128] Einbinder, 72; Grossman, 58.
[129] A list of examples can be found in Einbinder, 51.
[130] Einbinder, 54-55.

martyr may take on even more significance in later texts. The renewed significance is found in relation to yet another theme of martyrdom poetry, in which the martyr's death serves as a reenactment of Sinai.

In many of the martyrdom poems which feature martyrs immune to death by fire, the accounts include a description of the martyr speaking to the assembled crowd from within the flames. The image of the martyr who burns but is not consumed is a striking reference to the burning bush on Mt. Sinai. In one poem, Meir of Rothenburg's *"Sha'ali serufah ba-esh"* (Ask, O You Who Are Burned in Fire), the poem draws on the images of the martyrs who are resistant to fire in a martyrological lament for the burning of the Talmud.[131] The poem cries out, "How could she [Torah] who was given by the flaming God be consumed by the fire/Of mortals, while the foes were not scorched by your embers?" and later says, "Did my Rock [appear] in flame and fire to give you/Later to another fire to blaze at your hems?/O Sinai, was this why the Lord chose you, disdaining/Greater mountains to shine within your borders?"[132] Here the language of fire is used in clear connection with the imagery of Sinai. Furthermore, while a more learned reader may grasp the individual biblical allusions included in these verses, the more widespread audience which heard these poems could appreciate an even larger metaphor. Just as the bush on Sinai burned but was not consumed, the Christian oppressors could burn the Jews' rabbis and holy books, but Judaism would not be consumed.

One theme which is present in the medieval prose martyrdom literature but emphasized even further in the poetry is the notion of martyrdom as an act of atonement

[131] While it may seem that this poem is not martyrological literature because it mourns the loss of a book and not a person, Einbinder notes that the desecration of sacred Jewish texts is a common theme in martyrological poetry of the period, and thus it does not seem to me that it would have been considered unusual that Meir mourned the burning Talmud as if it were a martyr. See Einbinder, 82.
[132] Ibid., 76. This is Einbinder's translation, as the poem does not appear in any of the anthologies.

for sin. In Chapter 1 I noted that already in the Tanakh, especially in the passage from Isaiah, martyrdom was understood as a means of vicarious atonement in which the martyr's death serves to expiate the sins of others. In the medieval literature, both prose and poetry, this takes the form of the martyr as sin-offering. The medieval martyrdom literature is filled with imagery of *shekhitah*, of ritual slaughter. In the prose literature, this is again present in the story of Master Isaac, who after slaughtering his children before the holy ark of the synagogue spills out their blood and cries, "May this blood be the atonement for all of my iniquities."[133] In the poetry, the theme of atonement through martyrdom is not only present in the literature but in its liturgical function as well. Many of the martyrological poems serve as *slichot*, penitential prayers which ask God to forgive the sins of the congregation on behalf of the martyrs who came before them. One example, which plays on the theme of the Binding of Isaac as well, comes from Rabbi Eliezer bar Nathan.

> The covenant and the oath/That You promised to Abraham is known/When he ascended with his only son . . .
> The mourners mourned over his stock/Even when they sinned they obtained pardon/Your word is forever destroyed/Put aside our guilt in the valleys of the depths
> Look, they have grown too numerous to count/those who are bound in the year *tatku* and *tanot* (1146 and 1096)/If for one of them you brought forth mercy/Then for all of them, pardon iniquities
> Remember, their souls awoke to death/this one to be killed and slaughtered; Your word they kept/look, they offered all of their fat/see their blood, as on the base they poured out . . . [134]

[133] Haberman, 37.
[134] Ibid., 107-108.

Here the poet indicates that God ought to forgive the sins of Israel based on the promises that God made to Abraham when he (almost) offered a human sacrifice to God. Additionally, Eliezear bar Nathan describes the deaths of the martyrs as similar to an offering in the Temple, where the fat would be burned and the blood poured out at the base of the altar. Thus the medieval martyrdom poetry was not only used polemically as an attempt to persuade Jews to resist conversion to Christianity. It also played a liturgical, penitential role, in which the martyrologists made sense of the martyrs' deaths by depicting them as sin offerings. These poets found meaning in the martyrs' deaths by depicting their deaths as atonement for Israel's sins.

Just like the Hebrew Crusade chronicles, the poetic accounts of medieval Ashkenazi martyrdom mourn the loss of martyrs in an artistic setting filled with polemical attacks on Christianity, rife with religious symbolism, and featuring various allusions to other sacred texts. Also like the chronicles, the poetry reflects the social and cultural conditions of its time. Since the poetry was written over a longer period of time than the chronicles, the poetry changes, reflecting the changing social and cultural conditions to which it reacts. Additionally, the poetry served an identifiable liturgical function, which contributed to its use in motivating Jews to withstand pressure to convert. Thus while the poetry was more widely written and appreciated, it depicts martyrdom in much the same way as did the chronicles. Indeed, yet another genre of writing, legal argumentation, depicts the positive view of martyrdom as an ideal response to conversionary pressure that was so pervasive among medieval Ashkenazi Jews.

Martyrdom in Medieval Halakhah

The medieval halakhic discourse on martyrdom is a relatively small corpus of texts, especially in comparison to the numerous examples of prose and poetic literature of medieval Ashkenaz discussed above. Indeed, all of the medieval halakhic discussions of martyrdom appear some time after the events of 1096, and as I will seek to demonstrate, many are written in reaction to those events.[135] The significance of the medieval halakhah on martyrdom is most directly seen in the contrast between the great legal authorities of medieval Ashkenaz, the *Tosafists*, and the authority of Sephardi Jewry, Maimonides. The difference between the *Tosafists*' rulings and Maimonides is representative of the distinct ways in which their two communities viewed martyrdom in the medieval period.

Generally speaking, the *Tosafists* approved of martyrdom as a response to conversionary pressure and even permitted the killing of one's family members to prevent forced apostasy. Haym Soloveitchik argues quite convincingly that the *Tosafists* approved of the actions of the martyrs described in the Crusade chronicles, but that they did not do so out of an objective reading of the halakhic literature. Indeed, Soloveitchik notes that the *Tosafists* do not even mention martyrdom in their commentary on the one relevant halakhic discussion of the topic, that of Tractate Sanhedrin discussed in chapter 2.[136] Instead, he writes,

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[135] H. Soloveitchik. "Halakhah, Hermeneutics, and Martyrdom in Medieval Ashkenaz (Part II of II)." *JQR* vol. 94 no. 2 (2004). On p. 279 Soloveitchik notes that "not a single line . . . discussing martyrdom has been found in the literature [of the pre-Crusade Ashkenazi Jewish community]." Most of the argument which follows will draw mostly from part I of this article, in the preceding volume of *JQR*.

[136] H. Soloveitchik. "Halakhah, Hermeneutics, and Martyrdom in Medieval Ashkenaz (Part I of II)." JQR vol. 94 no. 1 (2004). p. 81.

> "Both their (the *Tosafists*') justification of suicide when fearing that one might yield to torture and apostatize and their even more surprising defense of parents slaughtering infants to prevent them from being reared as Christians were *post facto* justifications of the conduct of Jewish communities during the First Crusade. To have ruled otherwise the *Tosafists* would have had to conclude that the venerated martyrs of 1096 whose actions had been held up as an ideal of Jewish conduct in time of persecution were, in reality, suicides and murderers who should either be denied burial in a Jewish cemetery or be buried with criminals at its far end."[137]

The *Tosafists* paid no attention to the one halakhic discussion of martyrdom that appears in the Talmud. They read the *aggadot* about martyrdom, such as the stories of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Haninah b. Teradyon and seemed to believe that their martyrdom was precedent that demonstrated the permissibility of the actions of the Crusade era martyrs. Yet the two are hardly analogous. Akiva and Haninah's deaths were punishment for breaking a persecutory law, not an alternative to forced conversion. Even a more analogous Rabbinic story, that of *Gittin* 57B in which a group of children jump to their death to avoid a life of forced prostitution, is misread by the *Tosafists* to prove their point. Both the *Tosafists'* failure to comment on the *halakhic* discussion of martyrdom and their misreading of the *aggadic* tales of martyrdom indicate that they were not willing to condemn the medieval martyrs by acknowledging the *halakhic* challenges to their actions.

Maimonides, on the other hand, does discuss the *halakhah* regarding martyrdom and begins his rulings on the subject with a paraphrase of the passage found in the Talmud:

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[137] Ibid., 79.

> The entire house of Israel is commanded regarding the sanctification of the great name, as it is said: *I have been sanctified among the Israelites* (Lev. 22:32), and are warned not to profane it, as it is said: *you shall not profane my holy name*. How? When a gentile forces an Israelite to transgress upon any of the commandments recorded in the Torah or be killed, he should transgress and not be killed, as it says regarding the commandments: *which man shall do and live by them* (Lev. 18:5). *Live by them*, and not die by them. If he dies in order not to transgress, he owes a life.[138]

In his very first statement on the matter, Maimonides already warns against acts of martyrdom that are not required by the law. He places the warning against profaning God's name as a clear parallel to sanctifying it through martyrdom, and he understands that allowing oneself to be killed rather than transgress when inappropriate amounts to an act of bloodshed. Maimonides' position is not diametrically opposed to that of the *Tosafists*. Like them, Maimonides references the *aggadot* about Rabbi Akiva and the others and praises them for their martyrdom.[139] He does believe that martyrdom is sometimes obligatory, and holds that it is required even of women. He agrees with the Talmudic statement that in a time of official persecution, one must martyr himself rather than transgress any commandment. He even notes that one who does not martyr himself when required has transgressed both the positive commandment of *kiddush hashem* and the negative commandment of *hillul hashem*.[140]

In two ways, however, Maimonides presents an attitude toward martyrdom which opposes the *Tosafists* and typifies the medieval Sephardi view. First, Maimonides agrees with R. Yishmael's minority opinion in the Talmud that idolatry only requires martyrdom

[138] *Hilchot Yesodei Torah* 5:1.
[139] Ibid., 1:4.
[140] Ibid.

when performed in public. Maimonides understands that the reason one is required to die rather than worship an idol is not because of the danger of idolatry itself, but of the threat to Judaism if the act is performed in public. Second, Maimonides argues that despite the fact that one who commits one of the three sins of bloodshed, idolatry, and sexual impropriety is guilty of both *hillul hashem* and a failure of *kiddush hashem*, he is not to be punished, for ". . . they do not flog or execute him unless he transgressed out of his own will."[141] The act of acquiescence is considered *hillul hashem* and is punishable. The transgression itself, performed by force, is not punishable.

Maimonides repeats this leniency for one who is compelled to transgress in his Letter on Apostasy. There, he cites a statement from the midrash, which states that "Anyone who acknowledges idolatry, it is as if he has doubted the entire Torah."[142] Maimonides notes that in this case, the Rabbis offer no "distinction between one who acknowledges idolatry without compulsion, but rather by his soul's desire, . . . and one who says regarding a certain person that he is a prophet, necessarily, from fear of the sword."[143] Here, Maimonides makes two arguments. First, one cannot view apostasy performed freely in the same light as apostasy performed under threat of violence. Second, his statement points to the fact that forced conversion to Islam is not idolatry *per se*, but rather the recognition of a false prophet.[144] In this letter, Maimonides continues to demonstrate how the individuals in Torah and Talmud who have been punished for such

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[141] Ibid.
[142] *Letters of Rambam*, 31. cf. Sifrei D'varim par. 54.
[143] *Letters of Rambam*, 31.
[144] It is widely understood that Christianity was more closely associated with idolatry than Islam, both because of the possibility that a Trinitarian view was not monotheism, and because of the use of iconography by the church. Islam, on the other hand, never claimed that Muhammad was a deity but only a prophet. Additionally, Maimonides may have had personal reasons for his view. Many scholars believe that Maimonides converted to Islam earlier in his life and briefly practiced his Judaism in secret. See the introduction to *Letters of Rambam*.

actions are the ones who have done so freely, not those who have been forced. Furthermore, he notes, there is precedent for the approval of Jews who under persecution practice their Judaism in secret, like the Jews from the days of Hanukkah.[145]

Both in the *Mishneh Torah* and in his Letter on Apostasy, Maimonides not only lays out a *halakhic* justification for a secretive practice of Judaism rather than martyrdom as a response to conversionary pressure, he also rules that martyrdom when not absolutely required is a capital offense. It seems evident that the cultural factors which motivated the *Tosafists* to accept the *halakhic* viability of martyrdom did not reach him in Egypt. Indeed, either Maimonides was relating to an entirely different set of cultural pressures, or his work created a culture in which outward conversion coupled with a secretive practice of Judaism was the preferred method of responding to forced conversion. While this generally remained the case, eventually Ashkenazi notions of martyrdom did reach Spanish Jewry, resulting in the less-often discussed phenomenon of Sephardi martyrdom.

Sephardi Martyrdom

Much of the scholarly literature on Jewish martyrdom has, until fairly recently, centered on the martyrs of Ashkenaz. While the Crusade chronicles and subsequent laments weighed heavily on later medieval Ashkenazi Jews, these texts did not seem to have the same effect on Maimonides and other Sephardim. There is good reason to make this generalization, as Miriam Bodian indicates. She notes that

> Spanish Jewry did not. . . create a literature comparable to the powerful martyrdom literature of the Franco-German Jews. This may be related to the fact that after the violent events of 1391, whose character may have

[145] Ibid., 42.

> been such as to trigger a less extreme tendency to martyrdom than the Crusades, Spanish Church authorities waged a long, slow, demeaning, but largely nonviolent campaign to bring about Jewish conversion.[146]

The generalization that martyrdom played a more central role in the medieval Ashkenazi Jewish worldview, then, may be true but it does not mean that there is no tradition of martyrdom amongst medieval Sephardim. Although it receives little focus compared to Ashkenazi responses to the violence of the Crusades, martyrdom does play a role in Sephardi reactions to their own tragedies.

Martyrdom in Spain shared many similarities to the martyrdom of Ashkenaz, although many substantive differences exist between the two as well. One similarity is the gradual inclusion of the recitation of the blessing *al hashchitah* before the act of martyrdom, a common theme in Crusade martyrdom literature, which probably marks a growing influence of Ashkenazi martyrdom literature on the Jews of Spain. Another similarity between the Sephardi and Ashkenazi martyrs is that both were influenced by the martyrdom of their Christian oppressors. As noted previously, Ashkenazi martyrs were strongly motivated by the same religious *zeitgeist* as the Crusaders themselves, who viewed their valiant death in battle over the holy land as martyrdom. Sephardi Jews, on the other hand, took an example from the Christian martyrs dying as a result of the Reconquest. Bodian argues that the "sacred value accorded by Catholics to the violent death of the martyr . . . stirred a competitive response among Spanish Jews, who did not want to appear less committed than their gentile neighbors."[147] While notions of Christian martyrdom differed in these two times and places, both the Ashkenazi and

[146] Miriam Bodian. *Dying in the Law of Moses.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 4.
[147] Ibid., 5-6.

Sephardi martyrs were influenced by the martyrdom of the very persecutors whose violent actions brought about their own martyrdom.

The stories of the martyrs of medieval Spain are not recorded in anything resembling the prose chronicles of the First Crusade, but there are some poems which record their fates. One such poem, an untitled elegy to the martyrs of Toledo who perished in 1391, includes many similarities to classical Rabbinic martyrdom as well as medieval Ashkenazi martyrdom. It includes the notion of pure and pious martyrs atoning for all of Israel: "Righteous women/Observant of merciful commandments/Who were fitting/To atone for the Israelites."[148] Like the Rabbinic Legend of the Ten Martyrs, this elegy includes not only the Christian notion of a martyr atoning for the sins of the community, but also the parallel to Joseph's brothers' fratricide. The poet writes, "They cast them into the pit/And did not allow them to be buried/Along with the Israelites."[149] There is even mention of pious Jews killing their families and offering them as sacrifices, as when it notes that "Rabbi Yehudah was first/He was a man of praise/He sacrificed his wife as a burnt offering/And his sons among Israel."[150] In perfect rhyme and meter, this poet recorded the deaths of the martyrs of Toledo using much of the same imagery as used by the Ashkenazi martyrologists over a century earlier.

Although martyrdom in Spain mirrored the martyrdom of northern Europe in these ways, the political, cultural, and social context of 14th and 15th century Spain differed from the Crusade-period Rhineland enough to create a fairly different form of martyrdom. Bodian writes that in Spain, "Martyrdom in the classic manner . . . was

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[148] Cecil Roth. "A Hebrew Elegy on the Martyrs of Toledo, 1391." in *JQR* Vol. 39, No. 2 (Oct., 1948), pp. 123-150. p. 137, stanza 14.
[149] Ibid. 138, stanza 19. I translated here with the word "pit," though this is the textual variant. Roth's manuscript read "Nile."
[150] Ibid., 137, stanza 15.

impossible: a converso did not have the option of demonstrating steadfastness by resisting baptism. But in the new circumstances, a new model of martyrdom emerged: the accused crypto-Jew could choose death rather than reconciliation with the Church by admitting to judaizing and refusing to repent."[151] Though there is some evidence of Jews taking their own lives and their family's lives rather than accept forced baptism in Portugal in 1497,[152] most of the martyrdom of Sephardim took place in this manner. This phenomenon would only increase with the inquisitions launched in the late 15th and early 16th centuries in both Spain and Portugal. Many of the Jews who were burned at the stake for alleged clandestine Jewish practice were referred to by their fellow Jews as martyrs.[153]

Thus while martyrdom was most certainly a more prevalent phenomenon among medieval Ashkenazi Jews, the martyrs and martyrologists of northern Europe influenced the Jews of later medieval Spain, some of whom followed in their footsteps. In the medieval period, martyrdom for both Ashkenazim and Sephardim was concerned with forced conversion. The circumstances under which they took their lives, the methods by which they did so, and the literature which recorded their actions differed greatly from the martyrs of the Rabbinic period before them. Still, those who recorded their fates looked to the stories of Rabbi Akiva and others in order to place the martyrs of their own day into a tradition of Jewish martyrdom.

[151] Bodian, 14.
[152] Ibid., 21.
[153] Ibid., 17.

Chapter 4 - Modern Conceptions of Jewish Martyrdom

Jews responded to modernity in many different ways, and the various Jewish reactions to modernity yield diverse modern conceptions of martyrdom. In this chapter, I will look at the way a few different modern Jews related to the concept of martyrdom. I will begin with the way that the modern Jewish historians of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, the scientific study of Jewish history, related to Jewish martyrdom of the past. I will then look at how some prominent modern Hebrew writers dealt with the concept in their writings, and the impact of both the *Wissenschaft* historians and the Hebrew writers on the Zionist conceptions of history and martyrdom. Finally, I will describe the role that martyrdom has played in the various Jewish responses to the Shoah.

Wissenschaft and Martyrdom

Before the development of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, most depictions of Jewish martyrdom were polemical, poetic, and liturgical, but not historical. Even the Crusade chronicles, as we have seen, provide a polemical depiction of Jewish martyrs rife with symbolism and allusion. As 19th century non-Jewish German academics began incorporating the history of Jews into their writings, they avoided viewing Jews' deaths as martyrdom. "To characterize somebody as a martyr," argues Nils Roemer, "would have involved the acknowledgment of the value system to which the death of the martyr bore witness. For German historians, martyrdom unsurprisingly was restricted to

Christians."[154] Furthermore, for most non-Jewish historians, Jewish history was fairly marginal to the main text of world history. To view the many Jews who died in the towns of Europe during medieval riots as martyrs, it may have seemed to them, is to overstake the significance of this rather small community.

In addition to the lack of Jewish martyrdom in non-Jewish histories of this period, some Jewish historians also avoided explicit reference to Jewish martyrdom. The early reticence to refer to the martyrs of Jewish history was likely the result of a variety of factors. It may have been partly the consequence of a bias among these scholars toward what they viewed as the more enlightened medieval Sephardi communities and away from the seemingly backward medieval Ashkenazi communities. Some of the early *Wissenschaft* scholars were also involved in the movement for religious reform, which sought to shorten and refine the synagogue service by removing the liturgical poems, or *piyyutim*, which were the central expression of martyrological sentiments.[155] Additionally, Roemer argues that at least one *Wissenschaft* historian, I.M. Jost, avoided discussing martyrdom because the emotional nature of the term would detract from the strict, objective rationality of his historical account. In the 1820's Jost offered an economic explanation for the anti-Jewish violence of the Crusades which left little room for the sentimentality of martyrdom.[156] Despite all of the factors which limited the role of martyrdom in early *Wissenschaft* historiographical works, the significance of martyrdom not only grew in later 19th century Jewish historical consciousness, but it soon found a most prominent place.

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[154] Nils Roemer. "Turning Defeat into Victory: "Wissenschaft des Judentums" and the Martyrs of 1096." *Jewish History* 13,2 (Fall 1999) pp. 65-80. p. 66.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid., 69. Roemer argues that Jost most likely struggled with this and was horrified by the violence against the Jews, but did not want the emotional considerations to detract from his economic analysis.

The significance attributed to martyrdom in the latter half of the nineteenth century takes the form of both the lachrymose conception of Jewish history and a surge in the publishing of scholarly anthologies of martyrological literature from the medieval period. Writing around the same time as Jost, the early *Wissenschaft* historian Leopold Zunz was already arguing for a central role for the Crusades and their anti-Jewish riots in the place of Jewish history. Yet, as David Myers argues, "If Zunz laid a solid foundation for the lachrymose motif in Jewish historical writing, Heinrich Graetz constructed an entire edifice."[157] Graetz argued explicitly against the lack of emphasis on Jewish martyrdom by general world historians. In an 1846 article entitled "The Structure of Jewish History," he writes that, "The stylus of the world historian races cursorily over the martyrdom of Jewish history, as if he feared to arouse through these bloody recollections the conscience lulled to sleep by sophistry, as if he feared to conjure the spirits of vengeance through a loud word."[158] Graetz unabashedly raises the moral concerns of writing about Jewish martyrdom, essentially accusing Christian historians of cowardice for their reluctance to face the history of Christian violence against Jews.

In opposition to this cowardice, Graetz's conception of Jewish history was in large part the story of Judaism's survival against persecution. Describing a major era of Jewish history, Graetz wrote:

> If we should briefly delineate the content, the basic difference and, in general, the character of the period of the Diaspora, it would consist of the following aspects: the historical activity of Judaism in the seventeen hundred years of its dispersion was theoretical, directed to the intellectual

[157]David N. Myers. "'Mehabevin Et Ha-Tsarot': Crusade Memories and Modern Jewish Martyrologies." *Jewish History* 13,2 (Fall 1999) pp. 49-64. p. 52.
[158] Graetz, "The Structure of Jewish History." *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*. trans. Ismar Schorsch. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1975. p. 94.

> formulation of its teachings and contents, an activity which would not let itself be disturbed and overpowered by the tragic blows of history.[159]

Graetz viewed the violent persecutions against the Jews as no match for the intellectual and religious creativity of the Jews. Martyrdom was an essential part of this process for Graetz. He writes, for example, that

> Most of the martyrs of the Hadrianic period bled solely for this theoretical activity, for the forbidden study of the Law, for the proscribed assemblies of teacher and students, as, for example, the staunch R. Hananiah ben Teradion, the glorious R. Akiba, even the so-called ten martyrs . . . with all their students.[160]

Similarly, in the introduction to the fourth volume of his *History of the Jews,* Graetz presents another articulation of the relationship between martyrdom and Jewish innovation:

> The long era of the dispersion, lasting nearly seventeen centuries, is characterized by unprecedented sufferings, an uninterrupted martyrdom, and a constantly aggravated degradation and humiliation unparalleled in history – but also by mental activity, unremitting intellectual efforts, and indefatigable research. . . . If the Judaism of this era presents the most glorious martyrs, compared to whom the persecuted sufferers of other nations and creeds may almost be pronounced happy, it has also produced eminent thinkers, who have not remained an exclusive ornament of Judaism.[161]

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[159] Ibid., 94-95.
[160] Ibid., 101-102.
[161] Graetz. "Introduction to Volume Four of the *History of the Jews*." The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays. trans. Ismar Schorsch. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1975. p. 125-126.

Graetz repeatedly describes this lachrymose conception of Jewish history, in which nearly all of Jewish history amounts to a celebration of Jewish survival and ingenuity in the face of oppression, persecution, and violence.

Graetz's lachrymose conception of Jewish history and its focus on martyrdom had a strong influence on the rest of *Weissenschaft* scholars contributing to the academic study of Jewish history. In the second half of the nineteenth century, in response to Zunz's statements of the need for more primary source tools to facilitate the growth of *Wissenschaft* and shaped by Graetz's writings, several anthologies of the Hebrew Crusade chronicles and the *piyyutim* describing the martyrs of the medieval period were published. These include the works of Neubauer and Stern (1892), Jellinek (1854), an edition of Joseph ha-Kohen's *Emek habacha* (1858), as well as several others. Although these works are simply collections of primary sources, their presence is a display of the influence of the lachrymose conception. As Myers notes,

> At one level, these texts often aspire to be, and assume the form of, critical scholarly works that stand at a far remove from the Hebrew Crusade chronicles themselves. At another level, though, the modern anthologies attest to and reinforce the importance - even centrality - of the catastrophic in Jewish historical consciousness, especially in the Ashkenazic world where tragedy has been a recurrent feature from medieval to modern times.[162]

Myers articulates the notion that although the *Wissenschaft* scholars seek a scholarly, objective, and rational analysis of the martyrological literature, their scholarly work is actually a reaction to some very similar social conditions that the martyrologists they study reacted to earlier.

[162] Myers, 51.

In the previous chapter, I noted that two of the central themes of the crusade-period martyrologies were their polemical attacks against Christianity and their use as motivation for Jews to withstand the pressure to convert to Christianity. If poetic accounts of Jews choosing violent deaths over baptism motivated medieval Jews to avoid the pressure to convert, it seems that scholarly study of those accounts was intended to protect modern Jews from the pressure to assimilate. The focus on medieval martyrdom literature sent a message that if one's ancestors were willing to accept death rather than abandon their Judaism, how could modern Jews abandon their Judaism because of mere social and economic pressure? Similarly, just as the medieval chronicles and *piyyutim* displayed the cruelty of the violence against the Jewish community, their publication in scholarly anthologies did the very same thing. Roemer describes the dual goal of these scholars in fighting against the dual threat of modern antisemitism and assimilation:

> The Crusade chronicles together with the sixteenth-century historical works represented first of all a way to combat the revival of anti-Semitism in the second half of the nineteenth century, providing an illustration of the gruesome results of anti-Semitic prejudice. . . . It was during this period of crisis, when the achievements of emancipation seemed particularly vulnerable, that the chronicles also played an important role in the internal struggle against assimilation and the strengthening of German Jewish identity from within.[163]

The *Wissenschaft* scholars who wrote nineteenth-century historiographical works and published the primary source anthologies were motivated by the social, political, and religious pressures of their own day. Just as Graetz viewed the intellectual achievements of medieval Judaism as a victory over persecution, so too was the birth of the scholarly

[163] Roemer, 68.

study of Judaism in the face of antisemitism and assimilation a form of victory. Yet the lachrymose conception of Jewish history and the use of historical themes of martyrdom to combat antisemitism was not the only intellectual reaction to Jewish martyrdom in the modern period.

Martyrdom in Modern Hebrew Literature

Some of the most notable writers of Modern Hebrew literature in this period also subscribed to the notion that Jewish history was simply a long period of persecution and oppression, but they did not view the martyrs of the earlier period as heroes nor did they see the intellectual achievements of the past as a victory over oppression. Instead, some of these writers sought to break what they viewed as a cycle of Jewish martyrdom and the Jewish tendency to succumb to violence and oppression. These writers used the tradition of Jewish martyrdom to criticize the Jewish reaction to violence both historically and in their own day.

In his book *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature,* Alan Mintz argues that the works of three writers of this period, Sholem Yankev Abramovich (often known by the pseudonym Mendele Mocher Sforim), Saul Tchernichowsky, and Hayyim Nachman Bialik, "constitute an investigation and a subversion of the reversion to martyrological models."[164] Each of these writers appears to be heavily influenced by the focus on the martyrologies of the medieval period. In his 1897 story, "Hanisrafim," Abromovich uses one of the themes of the medieval martyrologies, the notion that the

[164] Alan Mintz. *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. p. 116.

martyrs die within the context of Jewish time. In this story, a fire becomes a catastrophe for the residents of Kabtziel which mimics the catastrophic nature of the Temple's destruction. In the story, the town's destruction occurs on Lag B'Omer, the one joyous day during a mournful period on the Jewish calendar.[165] The symbolism of this date, it seems, is part of Abramovich's critique of the mournful nature of Jewish culture. Abromovich places the catastrophe on Lag B'Omer to indicate that instead of rejoicing on this one day and mourning the other forty-nine of this period, they now must mourn all fifty. In stark contrast to Graetz's lachrymose view, which celebrates Jewish creativity in the face of persecution, Abromovitch describes how the increasing obsession with Jewish suffering can stifle even the last vestiges of joy in Judaism.

In another story, "Beseter ra'am" (Secret Thunder), he presents a satirical lament for the town of Kabtziel, in which he mocks the hyperbolic nature of Jewish lamentations by ascribing infinite significance to a fairly insignificant event.[166] Mintz describes the message of the satire, noting that Abromovich held that:

> A national literature that makes no discriminations and absorbs every negative event into the rhetoric of absolute catastrophe, that rushes to idealize and beatify what was destroyed, that takes off into the heavens of inflated ornamental language --this is not a national literature that well serves the nation.[167]

Unlike Graetz who believed that memory of Jewish suffering would preserve Judaism against the threats of modern culture, Abromovich believes that such focus on suffering serves to undermine the reality of that suffering, turning reality into lore or mythos. Such focus on suffering, for Abromovich, did not serve to motivate Jews to withstand the

[165] Mendele Mokher Sefarim. *Kol Kitve Mendele Mokher Sefarim* (in Hebrew). (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1956), 444.
[166] Ibid., 384.
[167] Mintz, 118.

pressures of antisemitism and assimilation. Instead, it created a sickly and weak people, wallowing in its own suffering.

If Abromovich wrote these stories in response to the pogroms of the late nineteenth century, as Mintz believes, then his literary response to catastrophe does indeed mark a transition. Whereas Graetz found value in emphasizing the significance of individual Jewish martyrs, exemplary of a commitment to Judaism at all costs, Abromovich was much more conflicted. While in the second half of "Hanisrafim," he presents a much more sympathetic view of Jewish suffering, throughout his works he is critical of the concentration on the subject. He does not concentrate on cases of individual martyrdom, yet he draws on some of the same themes as the medieval martyrological literature of which he was surely aware. Abromovich represents a transition toward a growing rupture with the Jewish view of martyrdom as developed in the medieval period and affirmed by the *Wissenschaft* historians.

This rupture is fully evident in the works of another modern Hebrew writer, Hayyim Nachman Bialik. One of Bialik's most famous works, the poem "B'ir Haharegah" (In the City of Slaughter), was written in response to the Kishinev Pogrom in 1903. Bialik had been sent to Kishinev to investigate the damages, yet the four notebooks he wrote from his survey and his interviews with witnesses and survivors were never published. Instead, he published "B'ir Haharegah," which Mintz notes is a poem "founded upon a lie."[168] Bialik intentionally ignored much of the eye-witness testimony of the pogrom when constructing his poetic account of it. As Mintz notes, "Bialik wished to make Kishinev stand for something massive and millennial, and the 'higher truth'

[168] Ibid., 131.

superseded the contingent truth of the note books."[169] Like Abromovich, Bialik wrote in response to pogroms, but Bialik's critique of Jewish society is much more intense, and he criticizes the martyrological ideal directly.

In "B'ir Haharegah" Bialik alludes to martyrdom several times identifying martyrs of the pogrom as *kedoshim*. The term *kedoshim* is simply one of the many words he uses to refer to those who died in the pogrom and does not always describe the means by which they died, but is not used in a particularly complimentary manner. Some of the martyrs are not portrayed as heroic but rather as "mournful and empty souls."[170] At the end of the poem, the narrator describes a pitiful scene in which the wounded beg for help from the wealthy members of the community, appearing with the "eyes of slaves beaten by their masters," and crying out, "My skull is broken, my father a martyr, grant me their reward!"[171] The martyrdom of the poor, wounded men's fathers is simply another way for them to receive sympathy from the wealthy and the powerful, much like a fractured skull. The scene seems reminiscent of the traditional Jewish concept of *zechut avot*, in which God is asked to extend kindness to the people based on the merits of their fathers (i.e., the biblical patriarchs). Yet here, the begging for favor based on the merit of the father appears pathetic, as it is paralleled with a fractured skull.

One scene in particular seems to describe Bialik's view of Jewish martyrdom, in which his sharp critique of Jewish victimhood echoes a passage from one of the crusade chronicles. Below is the complete stanza from A. M. Klein's masterful translation, with my own line numbers added for reference:

1 Descend then to the cellars of the town,

[169] Ibid.
[170] Hayim Nachman Bialik. *Shirim* (in Hebrew). (Berlin: Benjamin Heretz, 1923), 240.
[171] Ibid., 250.

There where the virgin daughters of thy folk were fouled,
Where seven heathen flung a woman down,
The daughter in the presence of her mother,
The mother in the presence of her daughter,
Before slaughter, during slaughter, and after slaughter!
Touch with thy hand the cushion stained; touch
The pillow incarnadined:
This is the place of the wild ones of the wood, the beasts of the field
With bloody axes in their paws compelled they daughters to yield:
Beasted and swined!
Note also, do not fail to note,
In that dark corner and behind that cask
Crouched husbands, bridegrooms, brothers, peering from the cracks,
Watching the martyred bodies struggling underneath
The bestial breath,
Stifled in filth, and swallowing their blood.
Watching from the darkness and its mesh
The lecherous rabble portioning for booty
Their kindred and their flesh.
Crushed in their shame, they saw it all;
They did not stir or move:
They did not pluck their eyes out, they
Beat not their brains against the wall,
Perhaps, perhaps, each watcher had it in his heart to pray,
A miracle, O Lord, and spare my skin this day!
Those who survived this foulness, who from their blood awoke,
Beheld their life polluted, the light of their world gone out –
How did their menfolk bear it, how did they bear this yoke?

30 They crawled forth from their holes and fled to the house of the Lord,
31 They offered thanks to Him, the sweet benedictory word.
32 The *Cohanim* sallied forth, to the Rabbi's house they flitted:
33 *Tell me, O rabbi, tell, is my own wife permitted?*
34 And thus the matter ends, and nothing more;
35 And all is as it was before.[172]

The stanza begins with a scene in which the women of Kishinev are gang raped (lines 1-6). The stanza's opening includes two allusions to the medieval martyrdom literature. The notion of rape is hinted at throughout the crusade chronicles, in the many times in which Jews were "forced" to do something. The Hebrew word used for "forced," is נאנס, which also means "raped." Furthermore, the stanza's opening makes reference to necrophilia (line 6), a charge that the chronicles often bring against the crusaders as a vulgar polemic against their love of Jesus, who is dead.

The most striking portion of the stanza, however, may be the contrast drawn between the women who are raped, killed, and called martyrs (line 15), and the men, who hide and cower (beginning with line 12). The chronicles also include a scene in which the courageous martyrdom of a woman is contrasted with the cowardice of a man. In the story of Master Isaac the Parnas, discussed in the last chapter, Isaac's wife dies a martyr's death while Isaac, at least initially, accepts baptism. As Jeremy Cohen notes regarding that story, one might think that the men would die a violent death and the women more passively accept baptism, but "this narrative appears to reverse their traditional roles. Isaac's wife Skolaster dies a martyr's death with the rest of Mainz Jewry on the third of

[172] Quoted in Mintz, 134-135. The italics are included in Mintz's reproduction, and seem to reflect the use of quotation marks in the Hebrew text, except where they are used to indicate the transliteration of a Hebrew word.

Sivan, while Isaac submits to baptism so that he can look after the children."[173] Similarly, Bialik contrasts the actions of the women who die to the men who cower and hide. The critique does not extend to the martyrs themselves. Instead, Bialik critiques the martyrologists. After watching their wives and daughters raped and murdered, the cowardly men of the poem run to the synagogue, offer a prayer, and ask the rabbis if the halakhah allows them to be intimate again with their defiled wives, and then return to their usual routines (29-35). Bialik criticizes the traditional methods of responding to tragedy by reciting *piyyutim* in the synagogue, and uses the halakhic issue to point out the selfishness of the survivors of the tragedy.

Bialik's writing marks a sharp contrast with many earlier conceptions of Jewish martyrdom and directly contradicts the notion of vicarious atonement. Many of the texts that I have analyzed find meaning in the martyr's death by presenting the death achieving a higher purpose. In the case of vicarious atonement, such as the passage in Isaiah 53 or the Legend of the Ten Martyrs, the martyr's death is justified because it expiates the sin of others. For Bialik, however, the oppressed Jews die in vain. In another poem written around the same time, "Al Haschitah" (On the Slaughter), Bialik writes from the perspective of a Jew being executed. In clear opposition to the traditional notion of *tzidduk hadin* in which he who dies (or those who mourn him) accept the just nature of the situation, Bialik's poem challenges the fairness of this suffering. The poem begins doubting not only God's justice, but God's very presence, as the poem cries out, "Heavens! Beg mercy for me!/ If you contain a God and if that God which you contain has a path/but I have not found it/let you pray for me!"[174] The poem doubts that justice

[173] Cohen, 98.
[174] Bialik, 237.

can be found amongst the suffering. It continues in the third stanza, "And if there is justice, let it appear at once!/But if only after my destruction from under the sky/justice appears/let its throne be cast down forever!"[175] In a final statement of the cruelty and injustice of Jewish suffering, the final stanza of the poem states, "Cursed is the one who says: Avenge!/This kind of vengeance, the vengeance of a small child's blood,/Satan has not yet created."[176] Bialik states that the violence against the Jews is so cruel that no one could be cruel enough to avenge it.

Unlike some of the *Wissenschaft* historians who seem to celebrate the Jews' passive response to violence during the Crusades, Bialik criticizes traditional Jewish responses to suffering. "On the Slaughter" is not a martyrdom text because to view Jewish suffering through the lens of martyrdom is to grant some legitimacy to the violence. For Bialik, there is no silver lining in the violence against the Jews. In "On the Slaughter" he criticizes the unfair nature and intense cruelty of that violence, and in "In the City of Slaughter" he attacks the passive nature of those Jews who responded to violence by lamenting over martyrs. Bialik's criticism would heavily influence the Zionist movement, which developed its own complicated relationship with the notion of Jewish martyrdom.

Zionist Martyrdom

Bialik's denigration of traditional responses to Jewish suffering relates to one of the major Zionist conceptions of historical Jewish martyrdom as a passive and impotent

[175] Ibid., 237-238.
[176] Ibid.

response to persecution. Zionist conceptions of history divided Jewish history into two large periods, consisting of antiquity and exile, and viewed the Jewish return to Israel as the beginning of a third period.[177] This conception denigrated the period of exile, and often as a central component of the Jewish experience in exile. This idea is presented famously in Haim Hazzaz's story "The Sermon." The story's protagonist, Yudke, is a strong but simple worker on a kibbutz who works breaking stones. When he is given the opportunity to speak before the kibbutz's committee, he exclaims, "I am opposed to Jewish history."[178] Hazzaz places the Zionist conception of Jewish history into the mouth of the simple yet passionate Yudke. He describes his opposition to Jewish history by saying: "I do not respect it! Look! What is in it? Decrees, libels, persecutions, and martyrdom. And again, decrees, libels, persecutions, and martyrdom. Over and over and over again, infinitely. This is what it is, and nothing else!"[179] Hazzaz describes martyrdom as part of the cycle of victimhood and passivity that marks Jewish existence in exile. In this view, martyrdom is defined as the Jews' tendency to passively accept their fate, even when that fate includes violence and persecution.

Despite the Zionists' denigration of historical Jewish martyrdom, I intend to demonstrate that the Zionists themselves used martyrdom as an ideological tool to create the mythology and civil religion of the emerging modern Jewish state. The Zionists could not accept traditional terms and notions of Jewish martyrdom which, like Yudke, they viewed as a paradigm of Jewish victimhood. Instead, Zionism inverted earlier notions of Jewish martyrdom. Earlier martyrdom literature was tragic, depicting Jews

[177] Yael Zerubavel. *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18-19.
[178] Hayim Hazaz. *Avanim Rutchot* (in Hebrew). (Tel Aviv: Am Over, 1965), 229.
[179] Ibid. 231.

passively accepting death rather than baptism. The Zionists disparaged such passivity, but they honored those who died in the process of offering physical resistance.

Despite the fact that many Zionists turned traditional conceptions of martyrdom on their heads, in doing so they created their very own conception of martyrdom. Indeed, in a few instances, Israeli and Zionist rhetoric even maintains the same terminology. Through the 1970's, for example, IDF officer training courses included training on the notion of kiddush hashem, which Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya attribute to the fact that "Israeli soldiers who die in battle are assumed to have died for Kiddush HaShem."[180] For the most part, though, the Zionists avoided the religious rhetoric of traditional Jewish martyrdom, including the term "kiddush hashem," and often distanced themselves from the imagery of traditional Jewish martyrs. For Zionism to build a new sense of Jewish martyrdom, it would need some new martyrs. The Zionists found their martyrs in two ways: by finding a new martyr in their own day and by looking back in time to reconstruct a martyrdom story from the period before the exile. The former approach is represented by the emerging legend of Tel Hai and its notorious martyr, Yosef Trumpeldor. The second approach is used by those who reshaped the Masada story into a tale of martyrdom.

On the eleventh of Adar, 1920, the Jewish agricultural settlement of Tel Hai was attacked by a group of armed Arab villagers. The circumstances of the attack remain somewhat unclear, though at the time northern Palestine was controlled by the French and it appears that the Arabs believed the Jewish settlement was harboring French soldiers. In the ensuing fight five of the settlers of Tel Hai were killed and the group's

[180] Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya. *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State.* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1983), 179.

leader, Yosef Trumpeldor, was gravely wounded. Trumpeldor died on the way to receive medical attention at the nearby Kibbutz K'far Giladi. Shortly before his death, when the doctor caring for him asked him how he was doing, he responded "ein davar, kedai lamut be'ad ha'aretz (never mind, it is worthwhile dying for the land)."[181] Soon afterward the phrase was altered and is now universally recognized as "tov lamut be'ad artzeinu (it is good to die for our land)."

Trumpeldor's death and the way in which it is commemorated and remembered illuminates how the Zionist movement invented a new Jewish conception of martyrdom, drawing a sharp contrast with past Jewish martyrdom. Whereas past martyrs were praised for their piety and religious commitment, Trumpeldor is praised for his courage. Trumpeldor was by no means the first person to die in the Zionist struggle, but he became a symbol for the active resistance which marks the Zionist conception of martyrdom. The difference between Trumpeldor and the martyrs of both Jewish and Zionist history is described shortly after Trumpeldor's death in the words of Professor Yosef Klausner:

> The Zionist movement, from the days of the 'Bilu' until today, knows many sacrifices. Many of the first builders of the land, among the farmers and the workers, gave their lives for the land by their effort to give life to its wilderness and make it Hebrew. . . . Indeed Judaism has known passive heroes in all generations, the Yishuv has known hero-sacrifices since the days of the Old Yishuv, by way of the members of Bilu, the heroes of Petach-Tikvah and Hadera and the first 'Shomrim.' Yet Trumpeldor was not simply a sacrifice. He is no passive hero. He is an active hero...[182]

Klausner not only describes the distinction between Trumpeldor and other Jewish martyrs, but he even reflects the Zionist ambivalence toward martyrdom with his rhetoric.

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[181] Nakdimon Rogel. *Tel Hai: Hazit b'li Oref* (in Hebrew). (Tel Aviv: Yariv-Hadar, 1979), 190.
[182] Gershon Rivlin, ed. *Morshet Tel Ḥai* (in Hebrew). (Tel Aviv: Ma'arakhot, 1969), 134.

Describing the earlier Zionists who died, he uses the traditional terminology of "gave their lives" (מסרו נפשם), which is used in Rabbinic literature before the term "kiddush hashem" takes on the meaning of martyrdom.[183] Klausner then progresses to referring to earlier Zionists as "passive-heroes" (גיבורים סבילים) and "hero-sacrifices," (גיבורים-קורבנות). It was during the Crusades that the Jewish martyrs were referred to as sacrifices and offered the blessing over the sacrifices before martyring themselves. Trumpeldor, however, is not passive and is no sacrifice, but is rather an "active hero" (גיבור פעיל). There appears to be a progression from martyr to hero. Both die for a cause, but the former does so passively and tragically, accepting death in cowardice. The latter, like Trumpeldor, does so actively and bravely, accepting death only insofar as he risks his life fighting to defend the land.

Tel Hai became a major symbol in Israeli culture, and Trumpeldor a major figure. A statue known as the Roaring Lion, inscribed with Trumpeldor's altered last words, now stands at his grave and was the first monument built in modern Israel. Additionally, the eleventh of Adar was designated as Tel Hai Day:

> Every year on the eleventh of Adar, many local communities and public institutions held commemorative ceremonies for the fallen heroes of Tel Hai. These activities and the public speeches delivered on that day received wide coverage by the press. Public schools devoted special classes to the defense of Tel Hai and to Yosef Trumpeldor's heroic figure and held memorial ceremonies to honor the dead. Similarly, youth movements held educational programs and special activities for that day. The establishment of Tel Hai Day thus made room for an annual ritual that provided the occasion to shape and reinforce the memory of this event."[184]

[183] See chapter 1.
[184] Zerubavel, 42.

Trumpeldor's death was thus infused with meaning. Yet Zionist culture did not recall him the way that traditional Jewish culture mourned its martyrs. Traditionally, Judaism has memorialized its martyrs in prayer through the use of *piyyutim*, and often the memorials take place on Tisha B'Av which has become a catch-all for mourning Jewish catastrophe. Yet Trumpeldor is remembered by a statue and with a unique day on the calendar. As Trumpeldor became the very model of the new Jew, he additionally became a model for the new martyr, valorized for different reasons and by different means.

Another difference between Trumpeldor and traditional Jewish martyrdom is the notion that his death sanctified not God, the notion standing behind the idea of kiddush hashem, but rather that it sanctified the land. At an assembly of youth marking the events of Tel Hai, David Ben-Gurion stated the lessons of the events and the meaning of Trumpeldor's death:

> For this generation that lives with us, . . . for Trumpeldor and Sarah Chizik, this land is holier than it was for any of the tens of generations of Jews, who believed in its historical and religious sanctity, for it has been sanctified also with our sweat, our labor, and our blood. Yet we have a greater sanctity – the sanctity of the Jewish people, the sanctity of its life and its honor. For what purpose do we have this land, from its mountains to its valleys, if the Jewish people will not find in it its redemption?[185]

Ben-Gurion's words carry the political connotation of asserting a Jewish right to the land, with the sweat and blood of the Jews adding even more weight to the historical connection between the Jews and the land of Israel.[186] It seems that Ben-Gurion's words held greater meaning than a mere political message; the death of Trumpeldor and the tilling of the land both were redemptive acts. Ben-Gurion's speech served as a charge to

[185] Rivlin, 142.
[186] Liebman and Don-Yehiya, 45, Zerubavel 45.

the youth in attendance. They have been given this land through the sacrifice of Trumpeldor and his comrades, and now they must use this gift to ensure the redemption of their people.[187]

The story of Tel Hai and of Trumpeldor's death was given meaning as it was used to offer an alternative to traditional Jewish martyrdom. Trumpeldor became the active martyr, who did not die by submitting to the enemies' sword but rather died while drawing his own. His final words served as an inspiration to many, and his sacrifice was used to inspire a greater connection to land and country. Despite the Zionists' rejection of traditional Jewish notions of martyrdom, Trumpeldor became the typos for the new Zionist martyr, the courageous fighter willing to risk his life for his nation. Just as Trumpeldor became this new kind of martyr for the Zionist movement, the Zionists also reclaimed figures from Jewish history who had been ignored during the period of exile.

In the first chapter, I noted that Masada is representative of the gap, ever present in martyrdom, between an historical event and the way that it is remembered. There, I noted that traditional Judaism did not view Masada as a heroic story of Jewish martyrdom. Masada is not mentioned in Rabbinic literature, and until the medieval popularity of *Josippon*, the story of Eliezar ben Yair and his fellows only existed in the works of Josephus, which were kept by the Church and were not widely read by Jews until the nineteenth century.[188] Despite the fact that the Masada narrative was not widely

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[187] Ben-Gurion's use of religious rhetoric in this speech is indicative of the secular martyrdom that Zionism created. Ben-Gurion was not religious, yet he couched his description of Trumpledor's heroism in religious terminology. Indeed, his rhetoric is reminiscent of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the founder of religious Zionism. For more on the notion of Zionism as an act of redemption, see Aviezer Ravitzky. *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). I will reference Ravitzky's work below in reference to the associations made by some, including Kook's son Tzvi Yehuda, between the Shoah and the messianism of Zionist and anti-Zionist thinkers.

[188] See Zerubavel, 63. She credits the sudden interest in Josephus' work among Jews to the work of the first critical Jewish historians, and points out that Josephus' work was first published in Hebrew in 1862.

known previously, it became emblematic of Jewish defiance and the new Zionist form of martyrdom.

I have identified two ways in which the Masada narrative represents a Zionist conception of martyrdom. First, I will demonstrate how the Zionists altered Josephus' account of the Masada story to fit their ideological needs, thus infusing new meaning into the deaths of those who died upon the mountain. It is through this changing of the narrative that Zionism was able to find new meaning in the Masada story. Second, I will argue that the most significant literary contribution to the role of Masada in Israeli culture refers both to traditional Jewish martyrdom and also references the figure of Trumpeldor within the context of martyrological imagery.

The challenges of explaining and analyzing the emergence of Masada as a significant cultural relic are described by Nachman Ben-Yehuda:

> The key to this . . . lies, first, in viewing the Masada mythical narrative as a deviation from Josephus and, second, in the question we ask, preferably along the time continuum: *What* do Israelis know about Masada, and *how* have they acquired this knowledge. These are the questions relating to how what looks like a myth developed.[189]

The questions raised by Ben-Yehuda point to the significance of the gap between the Zionist "myth" about Masada and Josephus' account. Some scholars hold that the significance of the Masada mythology is found in the ways in which the Zionist movement altered the meaning of the events at Masada.[190]

The central way in which the Zionist movement changed the meaning of Masada was through their attempts to turn attention away from the mass suicide atop Masada and

[189] Ben-Yehuda, 18.
[190] See, for example, Ben-Yehuda p. 21, Zerubavel pp. 68-69.

toward the battle between the Jewish holdouts and the Roman military. Zerubavel writes that:

> the myth narrative elaborates where Josephus is silent and silences some of his more elaborate descriptions: the ancient historian does not mention a direct confrontation between the besieged Masada people and the Roman soldiers, yet he does provide a long and detailed description of the collective suicide.[191]

Although no battle is mentioned in Josephus' writings, Masada becomes a relevant martyrdom narrative for the Zionist movement only when it ceases to be a story of mass suicide and becomes a fight to the finish and a refusal to surrender. In order to do this, some of the perpetuators of the Zionist Masada narrative have denied the historical truth of the suicide, some have tried to argue that the suicide was justified as kiddush hashem, and others have simply avoided emphasizing it.[192] The common theme throughout these strategies is that "the commemorative narrative plays up the defenders' *readiness to die* as an ultimate expression of their patriotic devotion. . ."[193] Ironically, while there is no historical evidence for a fight to the death upon Masada, the Zionist narrative adds one, while they ignore the actual references to the resistance by some Jews as described in the crusade chronicles.

Masada plays a role in the new understanding of martyrdom expressed by Zionist thinkers through their recasting of Masada as a tale of active rather than passive martyrdom. Another link between Masada and traditional Jewish martyrdom is found in one of the most famous literary treatments of Masada, Isaac Lamdan's 1927 poem

[191] Zerubavel, 69.
[192] Ben-Yehuda, 45-46.
[193] Zerubavel, 69. Italics in original.

entitled "Masada." The lengthy, epic poem is an allegory for Lamdan's own struggle and eventual *aliyah* to Palestine, and more generally, as Leon I. Yudkin describes in his analysis of the poem, "Masada is intended in the poem to symbolize the modern Zionist struggle for Palestine."[194] The poem is a significant expression of the Zionist view of martyrdom because of its influence on Israeli culture, its mention of Trumpeldor in relation to the Masada narrative, and its description of classical Jewish martyrdom. The influence of the poem on Israeli culture was enormous. The poem was mandatory reading for children in Israeli public schools and was quoted extensively in many of the Passover Haggadot published by the kibbutz movement.[195] Though its influence has waned and it is no longer part of the curriculum in many schools, the poem's effect still lingers in Israeli society and is known by almost all for its famous statement, "Masada shall not fall again!"[196]

Lamdan's most pointed reference to classical Jewish martyrdom in the poem is couched in the dual symbolism of bonfires. The passage, in Yudkin's translation, reads:

> 1 Bonfires, like eternal avenues, are planted on all of Israel's paths, bonfires – the marks of every path that ascends to Masada . . .
> 2 From bonfires did our orphan-cry 'Hear O Israel' go out, and was hung as a shaming earring on the uncircumcised of the world . . .
> 3 From bonfires did the script of our burnt scrolls fly up: at the light of bonfires, let us now gather up the letters that have flown away . . .

[194] Leon I. Yudkin, *Isaac Lamdan: A Study in Twentieth-Century Hebrew Poetry*. (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1971), 49.
[195] Nachman Ben-Yehuda. Masada *Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 223.
[196] References to the Hebrew text of Lamdan's poem comes from Isaac Lamdan. *Masada*. (Jerusalem: Shachrut, 2011), 70.

4 On nights of terror did bonfires illuminate the dream of Masada from afar; by bonfires let us now illuminate its realization, near at hand . . .
5 Bonfires on Masada's wall are great lamps for the souls of the habitations of Israel raised in bonfires.
6 Into bonfires did our fathers jump with deathful joy to become an enigma; around bonfires now do children dance the dance of the solution.[197]

The symbolism of the bonfires alternates between despair and hope, between the tragedy and sorrow of the violence against Jews and the hope of the future in Palestine. In line 1, the bonfires "mark the path" to the Zionist dream, both in the sense of the Jewish suffering which leads to the need for Zionism and perhaps in the great warmth and light that is the path to *aliyah*. Line 2 represents the tradition of martyrdom, rooted in the martyrdom of R. Akiva in the Talmud, of saying *Shema Yisrael* upon death. The reference to "the uncircumcised" (ערלים) is reminiscent of the way the gentiles are referred to in the medieval martyrologies, a clear reference to Christian persecution of the Jews. Line 3 points to the martyrdom of R. Hananiah b. Teradyon, who was burned alive while wrapped in the Torah scroll as the letters flew up to heaven.[198] Just as fire caused Hananiahh's death, says the poem, and caused the letters of the Torah to disperse, the very same light can allow us to gather them back together, through Zionism. Line 6 summarizes the dual symbolism of the passage. Fire has caused Jewish death and in the past Jewish martyrs met their end in fire. Yet the fires which now blaze on top of Masada are the Jewish protection against that violence.

[197] Yudkin, 212.
[198] B. Avodah Zarah 18A.

Lamdan also mentions the new Zionist martyr, Yosef Trumpeldor, in the poem. The unified symbolism with which Lamdan refers to Trumpeldor stands in stark contrast to the dual symbolism of the flames. Again, from Yudkin's translation:

1 Look ye, something stands out there in the darkness. One erect, quick of step, approaches us from outside the camp.
2 I can also hear the sound of song: 'To the victor, to the victor' . . . It must be that the one walking is singing.
3 . . .
4 And in spite of everything . . . yes, I know: That same unseen great man who told us to ascend will not let us descend.
5 He calls: 'Ascend, ascend!' But I am tired . . . have no strength . . . cannot . . . and yet, in spite of myself, answer: 'Amen!'
6 I am also true to that same calling answer. I? I and not I, someone else in me, one bold, obstinate, blind, answers. . .
7 Look, suddenly illuminated, the dying bonfires move, and an unseen hand again binds crowns of flame to them.
8 And by their light, above the mountains, the mountains of Masada, a figure appears. And the figure has an afflicted smile, a comforting look, and the majesty of might . . .
9 Who watches so? Who smiles? Who is this wondrous person? It is Joseph Galilee![199]

Lamdan does not explicitly use the rhetoric of martyrdom in relation to his description of Trumpeldor. Yet in line 7, the bonfires reappear. It is by the light of those fires (line 8) that the narrator can see Trumpeldor. Without explicitly mentioning Trumpeldor's death, Lamdan makes the connection between Trumpeldor, martyrdom, and the Zionist hope. Trumpeldor can first be heard in darkness (line 1), but cannot be seen until an unseen hand (יד נעלמה) ties (קושרת) crowns of flame (כתרי-להבות) to them.

[199] Yudkin, 230-231. Trumpeldor, who died defending a kibbutz in the Galilee, is often referred to by such monikers in the hagiographic literature.

The language may be a veiled reference to another martyr, R. Akiva, who expounded upon the crowns that God tied to the letters of Torah.[200] Though this connection is admittedly somewhat vague, Trumpeldor still appears in the poem as an almost ghostly figure, as if even in his death Trumpeldor guides his people to the top of Masada.[201]

Martyrdom and the Victims of the Shoah

It has become almost accepted terminology to refer to those who were murdered in the Shoah as martyrs. The official English name of Yad Vashem, the museum and institute dedicated to the memory of the Shoah in Israel, is the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.[202] Similarly, the official English name for Yom HaShoah, the day which commemorates the victims of the Shoah, is the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day.[203] The High Holiday prayer books of nearly all the liberal movements of Judaism and many orthodox movements as well include references to the Shoah in their commemoration of Jewish martyrs. Despite the prevalence of this association, there are some who feel that the designation is inaccurate. This sentiment is stated by the historian Yehuda Bauer, who argues against this usage:

[200] B. Menachot 29B.
[201] The vague nature of the Akiva reference is because the story in Menachot has nothing to do with martyrdom. Still, the Akiva figure is widely connected with martyrdom, so I do think the connection has some sway. Additionally, the passage describing Trumpeldor borrows language and imagery from Judges 13, the story of Manoach and his encounter with the angel of the LORD. "Who is this wondrous person?" in line 9, for example, uses the word פלאי, which is used in the angel's response to Menoach asking his name in Judges 13:18. This indicates that Trumpeldor was either dead or some kind of angel when approaching the narrator, and thus his death was given meaning because even in death he motivated the people to arise and climb Masada. See Lamdan,, p. 126 n. 38.
[202] This is clearly stated on the front page of their website, http://www.yadvashemusa.org/.
[203] http://www.israeliconsulatela.org/index.php/he/featured-stories/item/holocaust-martyrs-and-heroes-remembrance-day-2013

> This represents a certain subtle change in the concept [of kiddush hashem]. The classical examples . . . do not apply to the Holocaust. In the Holocaust, Jews were not killed for what they did or did not believe, and they could not escape death by conversion, apostasy, or change of ideology. They were murdered for being Jews . . . Their forebears, too, were killed for being Jewish, but traditional Jewish martyrdom had an important moral element – voluntariness – which was absent in the Holocaust. There, all Jews were killed, including people who had chosen Christianity or communism and people who were loyal, law-abiding citizens of their communities and countries, as well as Jewish criminals. If they died on Kiddush Hashem, if they were martyrs, they were involuntary martyrs. But all martyrdom is voluntary by definition. A person who does not want to be a martyr and is killed anyway is the victim of murder, not martyrdom.[204]

Bauer accurately identifies the differences between the victims of the Shoah and the martyrs of the Rabbinic and medieval periods, and he also illuminates the central challenge to understanding the relationship between victims of the Shoah and martyrdom: the issue of martyrdom as a voluntary act.

Still, the question of whether victims of the Shoah are martyrs is not that simple. As discussed in the last chapter, not all martyrologists viewed the martyrs whom they memorialized as having a real choice. Symbolically, for example, many of the martyrs of the Crusades chose between a physical death and the spiritual death of conversion. Furthermore, the halakhic literature on martyrdom understands that during periods of persecution, even the simplest commandment requires martyrdom rather than

[204] Yehuda Bauer. *Rethinking the Holocaust*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 205-206.

transgression. Some have argued that there are many instances in which victims of the Shoah met their death because they refused to transgress upon any commandments.[205]

There are examples in which groups have attempted to infuse meaning into the deaths of those who perished in the Shoah. Hasidic responses to the Shoah, for example, seem especially prone to associating the victims with the ideal of martyrdom. Hasidic stories abound of rebbes consoling their communities by describing the great privilege and joy in performing the mitzvah of kiddush hashem.[206] The Lubbavicher Rebbe himself, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, held the view that the victims of the Shoah died *al kiddush hashem*.[207] The Hasidic view is reminiscent of the story of R. Akiva from the Talmud. As mentioned in chapter 2, even in the Rabbinic period there was disagreement regarding the notion that martyrdom is an ideal which one should seek to fulfill. Displaying the same enthusiasm that characterized certain medieval Ashkenazi communities, many Hasidic theologians have attempted to turn the tragic deaths of many Jews in the Shoah into opportunities to commune with God on the highest level, through the fulfillment of kiddush hashem. They ascribe meaning to the martyrs' deaths by depicting their deaths as fulfilling a commandment which few people merit the opportunity to fulfill.

Hasidim are not the only religious group of Jews to regard the victims of the Shoah as martyrs. Ignaz Maybaum, an Austrian-born British Reform rabbi, wrote that the victims "are Jews whom our modern civilization has to canonize as holy martyrs; they

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[205] See Gal Naor, "A Difference of Opinion among *Poskim* Regarding the Parameters of *Kiddush Hashem*" in *I Will be Sanctified: Religious Responses to the Holocaust*. ed. Rabbi Yehezkel Fogel, trans. Edward Levin. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998).
[206] Pesach Schindler. *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust*. (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1990), 61-62.
[207] Bauer, 205.

died as sacrificial lambs because of the sins inherent in Western civilization."[208] In Maybaum's view, major Jewish catastrophes serve to close periods of history and introduce new periods, and the Shoah served to close the medieval period and usher Judaism into a modern period of new possibility. His depiction of the victims as atoning for the wicked sins of medieval Western civilization is reminiscent of the depiction of martyrdom in the early medieval Legend of the Ten Martyrs. There, too, the martyrs died marking the transition from one period to another. Similarly, the Ten Martyrs represented innocent victims bearing the sins of others and dying to atone for those sins. This view of martyrdom sees the martyrs' death as removing guilt from one generation and providing an opportunity for the next generation, which Maybaum viewed as the opportunity of modernity.

In the period following the Shoah, questions of victimhood and martyrdom even had political consequences. Jonathan Heuner writes that the Polish public viewed the Polish gentiles who perished in Auschwitz as martyrs in order to further certain political views. He notes that "The martyrological idiom offered Poles an identity based in common suffering, left room for the sacrificial and messianic traditions in Polish commemorative culture, and at the same time provided a model of national solidarity that could be projected onto the challenges of reconstructing the Polish state and building socialism."[209] Indeed, the notion that the gentile Poles who became martyrs to certain political causes stood in stark contrast, in Polish society following the war, to the Jewish and Gypsy victims. Political prisoners were martyrs for a cause, usually socialism, while

[208] Quoted in *Holocaust Theology: A Reader*. ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok. New York: NYU Press, 2002.
[209] Jonathan Heuner, "Auschwitz and the Politics of Martyrdom and Memory: 1945-1947. *Polin 20* (2008), 149-172. p. 154

the Jews and Gypsies were simply killed for being who they were.[210] This phenomenon points to the political dimension of martyrdom and the Shoah. The choice of which victims to designate as martyrs as well as the meaning that one reads into their death is often a highly charged ideological matter.

Many Zionists also viewed the victims of the Shoah through an ideological lens, and the way in which the victims of the Shoah were or were not considered martyrs is determined by the Zionist perspective on martyrdom discussed above. Liebman and Don-Yehya describe the Zionist perspective on the question as split. On the one hand, victims of the Shoah were viewed as passive, the very model of what Yudke in Hazzaz's story described. "The behavior of the slaughtered," they write, "was viewed as an extension of traditional Jewish passivity. . . . [The Zionists] had experienced shame mixed with anger at the image of their brethren who went 'like sheep to the slaughter.'"[211] The victims of the Shoah, according to this view, are not martyrs because they did not fight back but instead accepted their deaths passively.

However, the shame felt by many Zionists toward the victims of the Shoah stands in contrast to the pride that many Zionists took in those who did offer resistance. The fighters of the Warsaw ghetto and the partisans who fought in the forests of Europe became the heroic figures of the period in the Israeli mindset, and their status as martyrs is evident in the way that the Zionists referred to them. Liebman and Don-Yehiya write that in Israeli circles "analogies were drawn between the fate of European Jewry, especially those who participated in resistance activity, and the fate of Masada's

[210] Ibid., 150.
[211] Liebman and Don-Yehya, 102.

defenders."[212] Those who resisted the Nazis were described in reference to Zionism's great martyrs of Jewish history, the heroes of Masada. Similarly, just as the English name for the Day of Remembrance for the Shoah references martyrdom, as I noted above, the Hebrew name given to the day refers to "bravery." Describing the ideological bent of remembrance practices at the time, Liebman and Don-Yehiya suggest that Israeli and Zionist leaders

> stressed, out of all proportion, the evidence of forcible resistance and rebellion by East European Jewry. It was a sign of their influence that the day memorializing the Holocaust victims was called 'Memorial Day for the Holocaust and Ghetto Revolts.' Yad Vashem's subtitle was 'Memorial Authority for the Holocaust and Bravery. The date chosen for Holocaust Day was associated with the Warsaw ghetto uprising.[213]

While the Zionist circles did not typically use explicit martyrological terms to refer to those who resisted the Nazis, their attitudes toward the victims of the Shoah parallel their attitudes toward Jewish martyrdom in general. They are ashamed of those who died passively, and associate it with a Diaspora mentality of victimhood and weakness, and they celebrate those who died while fighting back.

While secular Zionists viewed those who resisted the Nazis as martyrs, many religious Zionists viewed the death and destruction in messianic terms. The foundations for this thought can be found in the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the propagator of religious Zionism, who in his own day viewed the destruction of the First World War "merely as birth pangs, a cleansing, shaking up, and purification leading to rebirth, a final 'shattering of the vessels' of the culture of the sword" which would pave

[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid., 103.

the way for the messianic era.[214] Later his son, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, would apply the same idea to the Shoah. By viewing those who died as part of the "birth pangs" of the messiah, the younger Kook echoed a sentiment shared, ironically enough, not only with the Reform Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum, but with the *Testament of Moses* mentioned in Chapter 1. Through this association, and without explicit reference to the victims of the Shoah as martyrs, the religious Zionists infused the deaths of those victims with a specific meaning. As part of their eschatological view, the victims of the Shoah died in order to bring about the world's redemption, much like Taxo and his sons in the *Testament of Moses*. In this way, Zvi Yehudah Kook and his followers gave a theological explanation for the destruction of the Shoah by looking to a martyrological theme that can be traced throughout Jewish history.[215]

The religious Zionists viewed the victims of the Shoah as martyrs helping to bring about the final redemption because they believed that Zionism would lead to that redemption, but others held the opposite view. While Kook and his followers argue that it was the sickness of Exile which was excised through the suffering of the Shoah, anti-Zionst religious Jews viewed the Shoah as recompense for the Zionist's forcing of the End. Ravitzky writes that

> It was not that the Exile had become untenable and brought about its own destruction, but that the Zionist betrayal of the Exile had brought catastrophe on the Jewish people. As the Zionists had 'ascended the wall by force,' rebelling against the nations and forcing the End, the nations in turn rose up and violated the one oath to which they had been adjured--'not

[214] Ravitzky, 109.
[215] The idea of martyrdom bringing about the final redemption is also found in medieval martyrdom literature. Recall, for example, the discussion of cosmic time in the Hebrew Crusade chronicles in Chapter 3, which seemed to view martyrdom as possessing a cosmic effect.

> to subjugate Israel overmuch.' So Israel's flesh was stripped away and left to be devoured by wild beasts. Moreover, just as the sin had been a collective one, involving the masses of the Jewish people, so was the punishment collective: once the assailant was given free rein to kill, he no longer distinguished between the righteous and the wicked.[216]

Ravitzky's description demonstrates how, even among Jews who view the victims of the Shoah as having some sort of cosmic significance, this significance is interpreted in opposite ways. While religious Zionists may have viewed these Jews as martyrs helping to bring about the final redemption, the Satmar Hasidim and other anti-Zionist groups viewed the victims as bearing the punishment for those who tried to bring about the End too soon.[217]

These are but a few examples of different notions of martyrdom in the Shoah. Both Jews and gentiles have grappled with the issue of what meaning can be found in the deaths of the victims. The issue raises both theological and political concerns. It can hardly be doubted that the victims of the Shoah are considered martyrs by many, and notions of martyrdom have crept into the colloquial language used to describe this period. The question of whether they should be called martyrs and the question of what the moral, theological, and ideological costs are of reading certain meanings into their deaths is still up for debate. Unlike some other examples of martyrdom in Jewish history, the historical event is very close chronologically to the debates regarding memory. Because of the proximity and the heightened emotions that still exist in the discourse about

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[216] Ravitzky, 66.

[217] I have not found any example of an anti-Zionist group which refers to the victims as martyrs because they bear the sins of those who hastened the End. I imagine this is because the successes of the Zionist movement would dispel such an argument, though it seems like a logical next step for some of these groups to take.

memory of the Shoah, it is difficult to deal with this in any objective fashion. I will allow myself to reflect on the issue subjectively in my concluding remarks.

Conclusion

There has been a tension throughout this work between the significance of the martyr and the significance of the martyrologist, between martyrdom as a person's choosing to sanctify God's name through their death and the work of a later writer who chooses to sanctify God's name by writing about a heroic death. Many examples of Jewish martyrdom represent both sides of this tension, in which an historical figure died for a higher ideal and in which someone else interpreted his death and recorded it to serve such an ideal. Yet the relationship between the martyr and the martyrologist is not always simple. The Crusade chronicles, for example, record the deaths of real historical actors who chose their deaths to make a point, though the chroniclers record their deaths in a way which displays their own attitudes and beliefs. Few instances of martyrdom are purely historical, and few are purely mythical. Historical accounts can be more accurate or less accurate, and martyrdom narratives can take more or fewer liberties with the description of the martyr's death, but none is entirely objective. The past several decades of debate, spurred by the influence of postmodernism, reveal that all reconstructions of an historical event involve the emplotment of the historian's ideological biases into the historical narrative.[218] Accounts of martyrdom, which deal with issues of death,

[218] The notion of "emplotment" is taken from Hayden White. See the introduction to his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. (Baltimore: TheJohns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7-10. I have avoided an extended discussion of the philosophy of history in this work because the fallacy of classical positivist historiography seems to be fairly uncontroversial at this point. The significance of a nuanced understanding of historiography is expressed by Yerushalmi, who notes in specific to the topic at hand that "the divorce of history from literature has been as calamitous for Jewish as for general historical writing . . . because it affects the very image of the past that results. Those who are

theology, and politics are especially laden with ideological baggage. The level of emplotment in a narrative of martyrdom is a function of how the martyrologist navigates the tension between his own ideology and that of the martyr whose death he is recording. The significance of a martyrdom story is found in the conflation of history and memory, the difference between how the martyr died and how we choose to interpret his death.

There are examples of martyrdom narratives which fall on many different parts of this continuum. In Chapter 4, I described how the Zionists found meaning in the death of Josef Trumpeldor. While some accounts of his death may exaggerate a few details, and though his final words were edited down to a better sound bite, for the most part Trumpeldor's martyrdom is based on an accurate portrayal of his death. Therefore, this story lies closer to the historical side of the spectrum. The Crusade chronicles, however, took an actual historical event and changed several details and used many literary devices in order to read more meaning into the deaths of the martyrs that it depicts, as I described in Chapter 3. It falls toward the center. The author of 2 Maccabees, on the other hand, seemed to have invented the characters of Eliezer and the mother and her seven sons, as described in Chapter 2, yet he was able to write meaning into the fictional account of their deaths. Because the martyrs were likely mythical characters, this narrative falls toward the mythical side. Yet how do we assess the different parts of this continuum? Is Trumpeldor a more compelling martyr because his death actually occurred, or do we find more meaning in the less historical but more compelling account of the martyrs from the Crusades? The answer to these questions depends on how much one can tolerate

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alienated from the past cannot be drawn to it by explanation alone; they require evocation as well." Yerushalmi, 100.

deviance from historical reality, and how committed one is to the ideals for which the martyr died.

Speaking personally, I take no issue with a martyrologist shaping a narrative to communicate a given meaning. Few martyrologists claim to be critical historians. The goal of writing a martyrdom narrative is not to provide a descriptive account of an historical event, but rather to draw meaning from that event. If details of a martyr's death were altered slightly in order to better communicate that meaning, it is not a problem because the greater meaning is more significant than the individual details. Martyrdom narratives with a weaker footing in historical reality, like the mother and her seven sons, belong to the realm of myth or fiction rather than history. Surely no one faults a novelist for constructing a story out of her imagination in order to communicate a point, evoke a particular emotion, or communicate a certain message. While ancient and medieval Jewish martyrologists often did not have the benefit of clear distinctions in genre, surely those who invented stories of martyrdom did so for the same reason that contemporary writers write fiction. They were able to express a message that could not be expressed by writing an account of history.

While my research on the history of Jewish martyrdom has alleviated some of my nagging personal issues with the idea, I still remain fairly ambivalent toward the concept. My ambivalence is twofold. My first problem is that too much emphasis on martyrdom seems to lead to a notion of martyrdom as something desirable, that one ought to seek the opportunity of sanctifying God's name by giving up their life even if they must wait for the right opportunity. It is a symptom of the most fundamentalist views of religiosity, yet it strikes me as contrary to the Jewish emphasis on the sanctity of life. The halakhic

literature on martyrdom as presented in Chapter 2, and Maimonides' view on the issue as presented in Chapter 3, both indicate that martyrdom is to be avoided unless one is under a threat to perform the most vile of transgressions. One ought to live by the commandments, to paraphrase the Talmud, and not die on account of them. It is the Jewish focus on the preservation of life, the desire to be a part of this world rather than the world-to-come, that I find so attractive about Judaism. In many aspects of Jewish religion, God is best served by the living. "The dead cannot praise God, nor those who descend into silence,"[219] says the psalmist. It may be comforting to think that someone who died while under persecution and duress was able to sanctify God with his death, but it is not the preferred means to do so.

The second aspect of martyrdom which still feeds my ambivalence is the question of whether the victims of the Shoah are to be considered martyrs. The typical formulation of this question relates to the significance of choice in martyrdom. Yet in the Talmudic discussion of martyrdom, individual choice is not a factor. One must give up his life under certain circumstances, and under any other circumstances one is forbidden to do so. There exists no situation in which one is free to choose whether or not to give up one's life. But there is certainly a middle ground. Trumpeldor did not choose to give up his life, nor did Rabbi Akiva. Yet Trumpeldor chose to risk his life in battle, and Akiva chose to engage in a practice which he knew would subject him to death if it were uncovered. There is no one rule regarding the acceptance of death that can apply to all of the victims of the Shoah. Some were murdered in cold blood, shot in the forests of Europe or deceived all the way to the gas chambers. Yet in other cases, once death was imminent, it was accepted passively or even affirmed. Stories abound of Rebbes leading

[219] Psalm 115:17.

their communities into the gas chambers singing "Ani ma'amin," I believe in the coming of the messiah. For me, I cannot base my decision on whether to refer to the victims of the Shoah as martyrs based on the extent to which they chose their deaths. Instead, I have much more subjective and emotional reasons for hesitating to label the victims of the Shoah as martyrs.

Despite my comfort with the aforementioned tensions between martyr and martyrologist, between the death and the ascription of meaning to that death, I am uncomfortable with ascribing meaning to the deaths of those who perished in the Shoah. When medieval martyrologists embellished stories about real historical figures, they did so to use the deaths of those martyrs to express an important message. But the victims of the Shoah are not just historical figures; they are people that some of us knew, parts of our family. They did not die to teach any messages; they were murdered for simply being born Jewish. To ascribe meaning to their deaths is to make their lives and deaths an abstraction. To find meaning in their collective deaths is to deny their individuality. To ascribe meaning to their deaths strikes me as an attempt to settle our own need to make some sense out of this unimaginable tragedy. We may learn lessons from the Shoah, like the need for a Jewish state with a strong national defense, yet we need not manipulate the memory of those who perished in our efforts to do so. The victims of the Shoah were not mythic martyrs, heroic in death. They were human beings, mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters, whose lives were taken without cause. We should not remember them in whatever way makes us feel better about the historical reality, or to argue for a particular political belief like those who use the victims of the Shoah as pawns in their debates on messianism. We should remember them for who they were.

I have found some peace with the notion of martyrdom simply by placing responsibility for the idea with the martyrologists rather than the martyrs. Martyrdom in Jewish tradition is a conceptual tool used by the living to memorialize those who have died as having died for an ideal. The ideal for which they died varies. It could be it the sanctification of God's name or the defense of the state of Israel. Living for these ideals is always preferable in Jewish tradition, but when impossible, martyrdom offers a means to find meaning in death. The Jewish people have always found meaning in history, and martyrdom is one of the means by which meaning is found. The process of finding meaning in history is central to the continuity of the Jewish people. By finding meaning in its past, even the most painful parts, does a people find inspiration to build a future.

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