

To the best of our knowledge these remarks by the late M. B. Mencher, addressed to Jews but of general relevance, have not been published, but if any copyright is infringed we apologise. How old the essay is we do not know, but certainly it predates the ending of the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip. The essay is itself prophetic in the sense it assumes, and therefore permanent.

## Josephus and the Jews

These are the words of the covenant, which the LORD commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, beside the covenant which he made with them in Horeb.

2 And Moses called unto all Israel, and said unto them, Ye have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt unto Pharaoh, and unto all his servants, and unto all his land;

3 The great temptations which thine eyes have seen, the signs, and those great miracles;

4 Yet the LORD hath not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day.

(Deuteronomy xxix)

I inforced myself to repress the seditious, and exhorted them to change their opinions, representing before their eyes the quality of those, against whom they enterprised their War, with whom they might neither compare in experience of War, neither in good fortune: For this cause I advised them, not to hazard and overthrow their Country by their rashness and rage, and with it their Posterities and themselves.

(Flavius Josephus, first century A.D., English translation by Tho. Lodge)

JOSEPHUS has generally had a bad press among Jews. He is seen as a traitor, a Romanising quisling. Yet his judgement was absolutely sound. In rebelling against their Roman overlords, the Jews were (as he said) hazarding their very existence, the existence of their posterity, the existence of a Jewish state, no matter how bound in fealty to Rome that state necessarily was. What is more, if he is to be believed, the “seditious”, as he calls them, were a bloodthirsty and ungovernable rabble, not at all like the dedicated followers of Josephus’s own famously revered ancestors the Maccabees, who successfully opposed the Syro-Greeks. And, as Josephus correctly judged, the state of Judaea was crushed, overwhelmed by the Roman armies, whose greater skill and better organisation prevailed over the often courageous but in the end suicidal endeavours of their Jewish enemies.

That heroism was, it is generally agreed, most clearly but poignantly displayed in the tragic outcome of the siege of Massada. Josephus, though he describes the Jewish Zealots as being essentially a band of cut-throats, cannot help letting his admiration of them seep through his would-be objective account, so convincing in its detail and understanding of military strategy: but then, had he not been Commander of the Jewish forces in Galilee? I think, myself, Josephus has a good claim to be considered a minor prophet, except that he does not rail against his coreligionists so much for their slackness in ritual practice or moral depravity as for their political ineptitude and criminal behaviour. One cannot help feeling that, in the end, what he most deplores is their failure to live up to the Roman standard of civilisation. Though a proud Jew who took it upon himself to demonstrate, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, that he belonged to a people at least as historically venerable as the Greeks, and though he claimed descent, not only from Jewish royalty but from the House of

Aaron, he emerges as a scholar, a secular Governor, and a shrewd politician. And his *Jewish Wars* remains the classic history of that fateful time. Reading him, you feel you are in touch with a *modern* mind.

And it is precisely for that reason that I choose to draw attention to him now. Taken together with Moses’s reminder that God did not give His people “an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, UNTO THIS DAY . . .”, Josephus’s warning went unheeded, and Judaea fell. But it is not only secular seers such as Josephus who, from time to time, have counselled patience and discretion. Jeremiah himself advised King Zedekiah not to resist Nebuchadnezzar.

11 But the nations that bring their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him, those will I let remain still in their own land, saith the LORD; and they shall till it, and dwell therein.

12 I spake also to Zedekiah king of Judah according to all these words, saying, Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live.

13 Why will ye die, thou and thy people, by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence, as the LORD hath spoken against the nation that will not serve the king of Babylon?

(Jeremiah xxvii)

Now it is my contention that the present policy of the Israel government towards the Palestinians is foolhardy, whatever its moral nature may be. I do not speak of the hot pursuit of armed soldiery, whether they be called freedom fighters or terrorists. Terrorists are quite simply those who choose civilian targets and thus perpetrate atrocities. Let us not pretend that the indiscriminate bombing of cities during the Second World War was not an atrocity. We are told how Abraham disputed with God about the city of Sodom:

24–25 Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city; wilt Thou indeed sweep away and not forgive the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? . . . shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly? (Genesis xviii)

However, the root of the problem is the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. I know God promised the land to His people, but are we worthy? Were the Jews who fell under the sway of Nebuchadnezzar or of the Emperor Vespasian worthy? Are we not taught that our possession of the land is dependent on our good behaviour towards God, which in turn depends on our good behaviour towards our brothers and sisters and towards “the stranger that is within [our] gates”? Otherwise, the land will “vomit” us out, as it vomited out those who settled it before we did.

If we leave this running sore of resentment in Arab breasts, sooner or later there will be a reckoning. It doesn’t need a prophet to know that. And it will be with those notorious “weapons of mass destruction”. The Middle East will be aflame, and perhaps much of the rest of the world too. We shall no doubt die heroically. But no more than the heroic suicides of Massada will it restore our land.

M. B. Mencher