

# Exploring the Israeli Narrative Beyond Mass Media

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## **Abstract**

In this essay I will explore the relationship between media representation of a culture and country and the role of place in its history. This case study will focus on the country of Israel and make the argument for visiting a country before judging it based on current events. I will look at three locations (1) Masada, (2) The Western Wall, and (3) Yad Vashem in order to examine the history of the state of Israel and its significance amongst Jewish people. By exploring these places and understanding the Israeli initiative of the Birthright Program, we can see that it is necessary to stand where our ancestors have in order to fully comprehend their narrative.

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## Introduction

Learning about a country and its history is complex because the stories are not our own. More times than not, our opinions have already been skewed by reports we see in the news or posts we see on social media. We create a bias without even realizing what we are doing. Not only are our imaginations typically inaccurate, they create unfair images of the people who are at the root of our judgments. By conducting a quick search in the New York Times's archive, the majority of modern articles written about the state of Israel have to do with the current political climate relating to the United States involvement in their conflict with Palestine. Though this information is important to the current news, it infiltrates our mind and takes away the complex reality and rich history of Israel.

National narratives are complicated and require action in order to understand. Israel is not just a warzone. There is so much more than what the media can report. What we do not see are the beautiful farms that provide for the people or the countless cities and homes that are scattered across the land. Yes, the country has expansive deserts, but it is anything but a desolate host for conflict. In fact, Israel is home to some of the most well-known and well-loved landmarks in the Middle East. The history of Israel is defined by these places and "the evolving local geographical context as well as its performative history continually reshapes the significance of [these] sites" (Feldman 1150). As this suggests, without visiting the physical locations, it is nearly impossible to comprehend the ideals for which they stand.

Every monument has its own story that warrants acknowledgment. Whether it is a preserved site or a constructed memorial, that specific spot has tremendous significance. To put this into context within the United States, the Washington Monument and the

Lincoln Memorial are visual reminders of the founding fathers' passion for building a free nation and Lincoln's devotion to preserving those ideals during the Civil War. This idea can also be applied to the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. These buildings were representative of national ideals, so when they were attacked on September 11, 2001, it shook the nation. The impact of losing our symbols of great strength and power was devastating. Nations around the globe have similar sites that represent their narratives, so they must be recognized as vital to understanding a society.

While in Israel during the summer of 2019, my guide Ronny Simon named the three monumental locations in his homeland that shape his people. These places are Masada, The Western Wall, and Yad Vashem. Each of these locations has its own history that stands today as a national symbol. Masada was a military base where an Israeli community was said to have committed mass suicide in order to keep from being overtaken. The Western Wall has the most important religious significance to the Jewish population in Israel because of its relation to the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Yad Vashem is the Holocaust memorial that offers the citizens of Israel and visitors alike the opportunity to reflect on the horrors of the Holocaust. Although there is a lot to learn from history being created today, it overshadows the origin of the strength of Israel. To better understand this nation and any country with a complicated narrative, it is imperative to travel and walk in the footsteps of the citizens and their ancestors. Without visiting Israel myself, my idea of the country would still be clouded by the news stories I hear daily in the United States. Because of my experience abroad, I see why modern arguments are important and worth discussing, but I also have the knowledge to step back and remember that Israel is much more than its current political climate.

The Middle East has become the center for conversation about war. The rich histories that were experienced in Middle Eastern countries have been intentionally obscured because of the media's obsession with "clickable" headlines. In particular, the state of Israel has endured great tragedy and demonstrated incredible resilience to become the country it is today, but modern conflict overshadows its memories. Their background is represented by some of the most well-known landmarks in the region that provoke emotion simply because of the land on which they stand and the history they represent. In order to completely comprehend the Israeli narrative that is hidden behind mass media, the role of place characterized by these sites must be explored and understood.

## Role of Place in History

History cannot simply be defined as the story of a person, place, religion, or nation. There has to be more. If the story was all that mattered, our past would feel unreal and detached from the people we are today. When I think about my history, I am immediately drawn to memories based in other locations. Whether it be my grandmother's house across the street from the K-Mart in Monroe or my high school in the middle of Nashville, I cannot separate myself and my story from those places. They have become quintessential landmarks in my development and when I visit them, I am immediately reminded of everything I did there and how it has affected me. These places remind of what I believe in and the people I am willing to fight for, so I cannot fathom the idea of letting that attachment go.

“Space is dynamic like history and society” (Feldman, 2007, 1150). Though the K-Mart by Grammie's house has closed and I no longer know the students who attend my high school, my memories remain the same. The story does not change just because the physical appearance has altered. Revisiting those places is enough. In similar ways, we can think of historical monuments. “Surrounding landscape and ceremonial commemorations at memorial sites may undergo changes which both reflect historical developments and give rise to changing understandings of death and national sacrifice,” but their original intentions and overall representation does not change (Feldman, 2007, 1148). These physical representations of our past make our memories come to life and act as a reminder to continue to live a certain way or that we learned a certain lesson. What makes physical places even more special than just word of mouth, they let other people immerse themselves in the struggles, happiness, or fear that you experienced



there. “The symbolic forms positioned in space and orchestrated in ceremony are not merely external expressions of ideological commitments; rather, they make remembering in common possible” (Feldman, 2007, 1150). It is just as important for one to be reminded of one’s story as it is for other people to be involved in the retelling of it. Some stories are not meant to be forgotten and without going back, standing in those exact places, and sharing the story with anyone who will listen, they will become obsolete.

Monuments are often constructed as physical reminders of historical events or the memory that was made on that particular spot. The monument is not meant to be the center of attention. “Rather, monuments may be constantly re-invested with new emotion, through fresh losses, other sacrifices, whose memory condenses on the surface of older monuments” (Feldman, 2007, 1167). They are meant to stand in the place to give people an obvious sign of the pain or glory that occurred on that ground and can be interpreted differently depending on the observer. Since symbols change over time, it is important to consider the current events when constructing or rededicating monuments. “In his discussion of memorials in post 9/11 Washington, DC, Geoffrey White reminds us that ‘the ground of public memory is always in motion, shifting with the tectonics of national identity’” (Feldman, 2007, 1166). As the country grows and its people shift their attention to new concerns, monuments and memorials have to change with them. We are constantly influenced by what we see on social media or hear on the news. Because of this, we must be aware of the information we are being fed. We must not forget the origin of the monument even if the current events paint it in a different light because they represent a history that shaped a nation.

Unfortunately, the state of our society tends to ignore the past because of the constant inundation of new information. “We live in an age of instant communication and progressive technology. The world is rapidly advancing through the third millennium under the pressure of an open-market economy, hyper-consumerism, a world communications revolution and a flood of boundary-reducing tourism” (Shalev, 2020). When we want to know something, it takes a quick search on our cell phones and we have an answer that we deem sufficient because we did not have to work for the response. This tampers with our ideas of what history at its root truly is. As a people, it is our responsibility to learn from our past and respect those who have made sacrifices in the process of creating the lives we have today.

## Media Representation of Israel

With a plethora of media sources, it is easy to get lost behind the façade of new flashy headlines. “Collective memory thus continuously negotiates between available historical records and current social and political agendas. In this process of referring back to history, collective memory shifts its interpretation, selectively emphasizing, suppressing, and elaborating different aspects of those records” (Zerubavel, 1994, 73). This means that the stories we hear about the past, present, and even future are being controlled by some other power than ourselves since it has become uncommon to do our own research and develop our own ideas, we succumb to what those around us are telling us. This is why Zerubavel said, “...today, poets and writers, journalists and teachers may have more decisive roles than historians in shaping popular images of the past” (Zerubavel, 1994, 73). I find this detachment from historical record frightening and want to demonstrate the importance of understanding a nation’s past through more than what I read in the media. This includes doing my own research in order to understand the people and, most importantly, putting myself literally in their shoes to walk through the landmarks that make them who they are.

When attempting to learn about a country, it is easy to do a quick google search and read the first few headlines that appear. Whether the articles come straight from Israel or are American reports, most current information is about the conflicts that have been ongoing for years. In regard to Israel, the media focuses on its feuds with Palestine, Lebanon, or even recently how the country is responding to Covid-19. The current political climate of the country paints an entirely different image of the culture found across the sea. It is unfair to assume that a country’s narrative is defined by recent events

because it discounts any and all trials that they have overcome in the past. If I were an outsider and read the news about the United States, I would be terrified of what I may find. The upcoming election and current pandemic has been the topic of conversation for the past few months. None of the media outlets have focused on much else and it paints a negative picture of the United States. This happens for so many countries and it hinders the world's ability to think of places as more than their current events. For example, some of the headlines in the New York Times recently are "Israel and United Arab Emirates Strike Major Diplomatic Agreement,"<sup>1</sup> "For Palestinians, Israel-U.A.E. Deal Swaps One Nightmare for Another,"<sup>2</sup> and "The Israel-U.A.E. Deal and the Beirut Blast Both Box in Iran."<sup>3</sup> If I were to form an opinion about Israel based on my research solely on accessible media, I would be worried about what I might find in the country. In my mind, Israel would be under constant attack from its neighbors, there would be daily rioting against the government, and the economy would create a dangerous and unwelcoming environment. This is what is being fed to the people of the United States and all other countries around the globe. These assumptions that are formed from such a limited source of information obscure our ability to fully comprehend the complexity behind their way of life.

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<sup>1</sup> Baker, Peter, et al. *Israel and United Arab Emirates Strike Major Diplomatic Agreement*. 13 August 2020. September 2020. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/13/us/politics/trump-israel-united-arab-emirates-uae.html?searchResultPosition=1>>.

<sup>2</sup> Rasgon, Isabel Kershner and Adam. *For Palestinians, Israel-U.A.E. Deal Swaps One Nightmare for Another*. 18 August 2020. September 2020. <[nytimes.com/2020/08/14/world/middleeast/palestinians-israel-uae-annexation-peace.html?searchResultPosition=2](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/world/middleeast/palestinians-israel-uae-annexation-peace.html?searchResultPosition=2)>.

<sup>3</sup> Kirkpatrick, Farnaz Fassihi and David D. *The Israel-U.A.E. Deal and the Beirut Blast Both Box in Iran*. 16 August 2020. September 2020. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/16/world/middleeast/the-israel-uae-deal-and-the-beirut-blast-both-box-in-iran.html?searchResultPosition=1>>.

As a technologically advanced society, we are constantly inundated by new information. Computers and laptops are readily available to almost every person and in the age of the smart phone, we have tiny computers in our pockets at all times. This ease of access has changed how we approach the information we receive. “However, the benefits to be garnered from the free flow of diverse information are counterbalanced by an unavoidable side effect: the creation of short memories” (Shalev, 2020). Instead of taking the time to understand what is being presented, we often take it immediately as a fact. Whether it be from a trustworthy source or an angry fan on Twitter, it is easy to forget that not everything we see or read is true or accurate.

If we want to truly learn about another country, we must take the time to read a book or a long article. Unfortunately, we live in an age of immediate gratification, so taking the time to digest real information is no longer palatable. Behind the media mirage of constant unrest and unhappiness, there lies a rich culture that can be seen in the people’s devotion to their nation. Without visiting the places that hold the history of the Israelis, there is no way to fully understand their narrative. The media can do its best to provide current information and there are plenty of resources to read about the history, but nothing compares to standing in the places of antiquity.

“Many youths today regard history not in the sense of where they have come from, but rather as a bygone series of events that are "past," while they themselves are living "post." This viewpoint is dangerous in that it is disjunctive rather than connective” (Shalev, 2020). Instead of feeling the history that we came from, it is easy to compartmentalize the information we take in and only think about the stories that are the

easiest to process and understand. The media allows us to focus on the present issues and conflict without considering the circumstances from which our lives stem.

From my own experience, I have found myself judging people and places based on what I see in the news or especially on social media. If a topic is trending on Twitter, I dive headfirst into the recounting of information from users that have no more of an idea of the situation than I do. This is how I managed to build up a prejudice and fear of Middle Eastern countries. When I would see on the news or on social media that another war was happening in the Middle East, it seemed normal, but since I wasn't being directly affected by it, it meant nothing. The more news and stories that came to the surface, the deeper my bias became. Growing up in the United States post 9/11 my opinion of countries like Israel, Lebanon, and Syria was altered because of the current political climate. To me, these were countries that couldn't seem to work out their government and were under terrorist rule. I couldn't imagine associating myself with a place that sounded horrible to be in. I am ashamed about the way I imagined an entire region because it is so far from the truth

I was developing opinions based on sources I believed to be accurate and unbiased, but often times the news does not reflect the reality of a country. It is our duty to discover more about a place than just their popular news. The richness and beauty of a country is not enticing to a journalist when a war will draw more attention. It is important to see how the land and physical locations significantly affect the actions and decisions made by the people daily. Israeli nationalism is very strong, but without having visited the country and talking to the people firsthand, it would be impossible to make that discovery and reverse the bias I created over the years.

## Timeline of Israel

In order to understand the three significant places I will later explore, it is necessary to see where in the Israeli narrative they fit. Though the Western Wall and Masada have a deep physical history within the country, Yad Vashem represents the most tragic piece of Jewish history. The following timeline will help to guide your understanding of the narrative as a whole.

<i>Before Common Era</i>	<i>BIBLICAL TIMES<sup>4</sup></i>
<i>c.17th century</i>	Abraham, Isaac, Jacob - patriarchs of the Jewish people and bearers of a belief in one God - settle in the Land of Israel. Famine forces Israelites to migrate to Egypt.
<i>c.1440</i>	Exodus from Egypt
<i>13th-12th centuries</i>	Israelites settle in the Land of Israel
<i>c.1020</i>	Jewish monarchy established; Saul, first king.
<i>c.1000</i>	Jerusalem made capital of David's kingdom.
<i>953</i>	First Temple, the national and spiritual center of the Jewish people, built in Jerusalem by King Solomon.
<i>920</i>	Divided kingdom: Judah and Israel
<i>586</i>	Judah conquered by Babylonia; Jerusalem and First Temple destroyed; most Jews exiled.

<sup>4</sup> All dates in the timelines come from the following two sources:  
Simon, Ronny. *The Story of Israel*. Jerusalem: Ronny Simon, 2008  
Israeli Embassy of South Korea. *History of Israel: Timeline*. n.d. 1 September 2020.  
<<https://embassies.gov.il/seoul-en/AboutIsrael/history/Pages/HISTORY-of-Israel-Timeline.aspx>>.

The biblical era is important to know because it is the foundation of the Jewish religion. During this time, the Jewish people underwent extreme prejudice and were enslaved by the Egyptians. This first account of domination led them to the land of Israel where they were able to escape their captors and begin to make a life of their own. They began to develop their sense of national and religious pride that would later culminate into the state of Israel we know today.

*THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD*

538-142	Persian and Hellenistic periods
538-515	Many Jews return from Babylonia; Temple rebuilt.
332	Land conquered by Alexander the Great; Hellenistic rule.
63	Jerusalem captured by Roman general, Pompey.
63 BCE-313 CE	Roman rule beginning with Herod, Roman vassal king, rules the Land of Israel; Temple in Jerusalem refurbished
<i>The Common Era</i>	
c. 20-33	Ministry of Jesus of Nazareth
66	Jewish revolt against the Romans
70	Destruction of Jerusalem and Second Temple
73	Last stand of Jews at Masada

During the Second Temple period, the Jewish people were constantly under the control of some other kingdom that never fully understood their religion and definitely did not respect their differences. The city of Jerusalem was taken away by the Romans and they lost their sacred Second Temple to Roman desecration. This was a blatant act of disrespect and power hungry behavior that led the Israeli people to take the mountain of



Masada for themselves. This last stand at the mountain of Masada became a foundational and fundamental act of nationalism from which the people draw confidence.

*FOREIGN DOMINATION*

<i>313-636</i>	Byzantine rule
<i>636-1099</i>	Arab rule
<i>692</i>	On site of First and Second Temples in Jerusalem, Dome of the Rock built by Caliph Abd el-Malik.
<i>1291-1516</i>	Mamluk rule
<i>1517-1917</i>	Ottoman rule
<i>1914-1917</i>	World War I
<i>1917</i>	The Balfour Declaration
<i>1918-48</i>	British rule
<i>1936-39</i>	The Arab Revolt
<i>1939</i>	Jewish immigration severely limited by British White Paper.
<i>1939-45</i>	World War II; Holocaust in Europe.
<i>1947</i>	UN proposes the establishment of Arab and Jewish states in the Land.

The period of foreign domination proved to be a great time of unrest and conflict for the Jewish people. The land on which their temples stood was taken over by the Muslim rulers and the Dome of the Rock was constructed. During this time, they also survived the first and second world wars which ultimately laid the groundwork for the development of the state of Israel. After the first World War, "...the intent was to create a state in areas where Jews constituted a majority of the population" because they had no

place of refuge from their suppressors, so a place to be free of that prejudice was absolutely necessary for survival (Gordis, 2016, 98). It became clear that they would be forcibly removed from their homes. “That the Jews would have a national home in Palestine was not only British Policy—it was the express position of the victors of WWI” (Gordis, 2016, 103).

*STATE OF ISRAEL 1948*

<i>14 May 1948</i>	End of British Mandate State of Israel proclaimed
<i>15 May 1948</i>	Israel invaded by five Arab states Israel Defense Forces (IDF) established
<i>May 1948-July 1949</i>	War of Independence
<i>1949</i>	Jerusalem divided under Israeli and Jordanian rule First Knesset (parliament) elected.
<i>1967</i>	Six-Day War; Jerusalem reunited—reclaiming the Western Wall which was lost in 1948
<i>1979</i>	Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty signed
<i>1982</i>	Israel's withdrawal from Sinai Peninsula
<i>1995</i>	Broadened Palestinian self-government implemented in West Bank and Gaza Strip
<i>2005</i>	Israel carries out the Disengagement Plan, ending Israel's presence in the Gaza Strip.

Based on the history outlined above, Israel has repeatedly had to defend itself and stand up for the land that was stripped away from them and finally returned through a

combination of diplomacy and war. It is home and their refuge. Because of that, they will go to any and all lengths to protect the land that they love.

## Exploration of Three Israeli Sites

### Masada

A very strong example of Israeli nationalism comes from the last stand at Masada. Though the story that was born at this historic landmark is only partly accurate, it remains a major inspiration for the people. The history of Masada begins with King Herod “The Great” who originally took over the mountain top as a place of reprieve from the Jewish people in Jerusalem. He knew that his beliefs did not align with Judaism and he knew he ruled a powder keg. When he asked permission from Rome to build this fortress, he said that it was to protect the Eastern border when in reality it was to escape his people (“Virtual Tour of Israel—Masada” 2020). The location of the fortress was unique because of its lack of available resources. Food, water, and supplies had to be brought over by foot through a vast desert which meant that a great deal of effort went into keeping Masada habitable.

In the year 66 CE, during the Jewish-Roman war, a group of Jewish zealots took over the stronghold and adapted the architecture to fit their needs. The families of the soldiers lived in the walls surrounding the main community area and it then became a safe haven for the zealots under persecution by the Romans (“Virtual Tour of Israel—Masada” 2020). Many people fled their homes and found solace in Masada with a group of people all enduring the same trials. After successfully procuring enough supplies and food to live healthy lives, the zealots under the guidance of Elazar Ben Yair found themselves under attack by the Romans yet again. The siege consisted of 20,000 men under Flavius Silva in which “the [Roman] camps surround[ed] the base of the mountain, guarding potential routes of escape” (Magness, 2019, 7). The Romans constructed a

massive ramp to allow them to move closer and closer to the people over the course of five months.

During this time, the men of Masada developed a plan to outsmart the Romans. The idea was that of a mass suicide. “First each man put his wife and children to death. Then the men drew lots, and the ten of them killed the others. The remaining ten men drew lots again, and the one who drew he last lot slew the other nine” (Magness, 2019, 192). When it came down to it, they burnt every building they could except for their shelters full of food and supplies as a way to tell the Romans that they could have lasted much longer, but they chose to die free men and not take the abuse from another ruler.

“The Masada episode, [marked] the end of the Jewish Revolt against the Romans, embodied the spirit of active heroism, love of freedom, and national dignity that, according to Zionist collective memory, had disappeared during the prolonged period of Jewish life in Exile” (Zerubavel, 1994, 75). To this day, Masada stands as a demonstration of what it was like to have lived on a barren mountain. In addition, it is an active archaeological site that continues to reveal a deep history of an intense and strong group of people. “The mass suicide story is the reason for Masada’s popularity as a tourist attraction today” (Magness, 2019, 192). Much of the history has been proven through journals left behind and the digs that reveal old buildings and artifacts that match with the story, but Masada’s most interesting tale will remain a mystery forever. “The status of Josephus as the only surviving literary account does not render it an objective account” (Green, 1996, 412). Since there are no other written stories about the mass suicide, it is disputed whether or not Josephus exaggerated or even crafted the experience. Though Josephus is generally believed to be a reputable source, some

historians, like Ben Yehuda, discuss this account with caution because they do not believe there is enough proof to say that this actually happened. This is okay because the point of Masada is not just the controversial part of the story.

Simply looking at the actions of the zealots, it may be hard to imagine how something so horrific would stand to be a symbol of the Israeli people. If this were to happen in modern times, it can be assumed that the participants would be looked down upon and shunned for their irrational behavior. Despite this present day bias, it is important to set the entire event in context. As previously mentioned, the Jewish people had been persecuted time after time. Their sacred places were overrun and destroyed by oppressors who had absolutely no respect for those who they were dominating. When the zealots saw their opportunity to take control over some aspect of their life, they took it. No longer were they going to be exiled or enslaved on the terms of another ruler. Ultimately, taking their own lives was the strongest stand they believed they could make in order to reestablish their dignity. Though it was obviously an extreme example, the Jewish people were inspired by the courage demonstrated on Masada. Any act of heroism would have been enough for them as they needed something to look to for strength. Rebelling against Roman rule in any form would serve such a purpose.

“...There existed an urgent need for a visual symbol of national heroism as well as of Jewish claims to the land of Palestine, a symbol that could accordingly function as a pilgrimage shrine for the “civil religion” (Green, 1996, 409). The Masada myth was adopted for this reason. In a time when the Jewish people were struggling to find their fortitude, they turned to this nationalistic group of people and the sacrifice they made in order to honor the life they had made for themselves. Though the history of Masada is

interesting, it does not necessarily give much insight into why the site has become an important symbol within the Jewish culture. The basis of this lies within the Masada myth. It does not matter that all of the story cannot be proven to be accurate, the people use it as "...a metaphor for the state of Israel: isolated, besieged, and surrounded by enemies on all sides..." (Magness, 2019, 198). Like Masada, Israel was a place of refuge for an entire group of people who were being unfairly persecuted. It was a safe place where they were free to be themselves and practice their religion. Because of this direct comparative relationship, the Israeli people see themselves as those who lived atop Masada. They no longer want to be controlled by a group of people who do not truly understand who they are and where they come from, so they must be willing to go to any length to keep that from happening. "Masada [is] a historical metaphor for a national struggle for freedom and the readiness to fight for it to the bitter end" (Zerubavel, 1994, 79).

It is not easy to understand this mindset if you just read about a warring country or even a myth that has been repeatedly proven to be inaccurate and made up. There is a major difference in looking at the photos and reading the stories and seeing them come to life in front of you. Without visiting the location, it would be impossible to imagine the grandeur and isolation of the place that supported a community and protected them from their enemies. It is incredibly impressive to see the vast size of the mountain and the lengths that their opponents had to go to try to seize the land. It puts the puzzle together hearing about the places and walking where they walked.

"[They] will recall the memory of the heroes of Masada - the last of a war of freedom, of a nation that is rooted in its land" (Green, 1996, 409). The people look at this

event and declare that something like this will never happen again. “Masada will never fall again” is the official slogan of the site. It is their land and they will go to any lengths to keep it. Nationalism is rooted in the land of Masada, not just the idea of it. That mountain top is the place that means the most to them. The mass suicide was just the means of creating the spirit in them; the real message behind Masada is that it is worth it to give your life for the freedom of your people.

The nationalism founded from the Masada story is that of national freedom and national redemption and not a religious one. The people were deciding between being stripped of their freedom or death and they chose to leave on their own terms. They cannot be bullied out of their homes ever again. They have worked and fought to get where they are today and they take extreme pride in that accomplishment. The Israeli people say that Masada will never fall again and that is how they want the rest of the world to see them, a force to be reckoned with. They are willing and able to withstand attempts of power domination that threaten their country. Masada is not just a piece of history or even beauty, it is a deeply personal symbol.



## The Western Wall

“There is a fairly universal assumption among modern Jews that the Western Wall has been the most sacred Jewish religious site and an object of pilgrimage and veneration for nearly two thousand years, from the time the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the first century until today” (Charmé, 2005, 7). The Western Wall is simply the a section of the retaining wall that surrounded the platform housing the Second Temple. When the Temple was standing, it was the gathering place of the Jewish people and their holiest place. This wall was never meant to become the symbol that it is today because it was the intention of every Jewish citizen to regain the site that had been their own for years. When the Romans took over, conflict overcame the city which resulted in Herod building places like Masada to escape the people and refurbishing the Jewish landscapes to become more Roman. The destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE and the utter destruction of the Temple marked the beginning of an era that thwarted the Jewish people from celebrating their religion as it had been in the past. “...The manifestation of Jewish national and religious existence was aflame” (Simon, 2008, 88).

Since their main place of worship had been destroyed, the Jewish people had to adapt and find new ways to fulfill their religious duties to God. From this point forward, to practice Judaism was entirely different. “The public, social, and religious lives were now focused in the synagogue instead of the Temple...” (Simon, 2008, 92). Prior to this, synagogues were community gathering places for religious education but not worship. Because the Jewish people were consistently ruled by other nations who did not practice the same religion or hold the same ideals, they were forced to make unwanted changes. During the Arab rule in the year 692, the Dome of the Rock was constructed which is the

structure that remains on the Temple Mount today. It is a Muslim holy site standing on the ground of a sacred Jewish space. Despite this, the land on which the Dome stood was still holy to the Jewish people, so they were still determined to worship as close to that ground as possible because “the Western Wall leads into something far greater in size and significance—the Temple Mount” (Cohen-Hattab, 2016, 140). Even though it was not a part of the Temple itself, it stands as a symbol for the Jewish people as the closest section of the retaining wall to the location of the Holy of Holies.

Worship was practiced in front of the Western Wall for many years after and it did not gain much attention until after the reign of Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. Because the Jewish people were a small minority in the empire, the Balfour Declaration at the end of World War I stated that the British empire was in favor of creating a place in Palestine for the Jewish people to live peacefully. This of course did not happen until after World War II, but under the British, the Jewish people felt more free to practice their religion. Because of tradition, “in September 1928, Jews erected a temporary divider in front of the Western Wall so that men and women could pray there separately on Yom Kippur...” (Gordis, 2016, 106). This was not meant to show power over the area at all, but the disagreement about ownership began to spiral. When the Temple was razed and the Dome of the Rock was constructed, the Western Wall area became important to both Jewish and Muslim people. The Muslim leadership believed that the walls surrounding their territory belonged to them, so it was decided that the Muslim leadership owned the wall and the pavement around it, but the Jewish people were to have free access to the area for devotional purposes. From this point on, the wall began to take on not only a religious, but also a nationalist significance.

“Visitors in the mid-nineteenth century viewed the Western Wall as a place of communal gathering, a place where "men, women, and children, of all ages, from infants to patriarchs of fourscore and ten, crowded the pavement and pressed their throbbing foreheads against the beloved stones" (Charmé, 2005, 12). Although, this changed significantly after the second World War. The Allies won and the British finally decided to establish Israel as the national state for the Jewish people. Although, this did not come without a fight from the other inhabitants of the land. The Arab states were quick to invade which caused the War of Independence from 1948-1949. At the end of it all, “the Western Wall—the only remnant of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem—was off-limits to Jews...the Jewish state ironically had sovereignty over no traditionally Jewish sacred places.” (Gordis, 2016, 261). Jerusalem had been split between Israeli and Jordanian rule which left the Temple Mount and everything surrounding it impossible to approach by any Jewish person.

It must not be forgotten that it was not just the Wall they wanted back, it was the land. Mount Moriah, the actual place on which the Second Temple stood, is what holds significance in the hearts of the people. Their passion and longing never ceased and it was in fact heightened by their banishment from this place and led them to revolt in Jerusalem during the Six Day War. When the Israelis were victorious, “for the first time in thousands of years, the Temple Mount and the Western Wall were in sovereign Jewish hands” (Gordis, 2016, 276). Immediately, something within Israel changed. The people were overflowing with emotion and came rushing to touch and see the sacred land that had been entirely off-limits entirely for 19 years, and, for almost all of them and their exiled ancestors, for nearly two thousand years.

“The Western Wall was a sacred place of prayer, although, since the end of the Six-Day War, it had also emerged as a first-rate site for state functions” (Cohen-Hattab, 2016, 137). When they were allowed to openly practice their religion and hold protests again, the Wall acted as their gathering place. It was an area that their opposition and their own support could hear their cries for change. “The Western Wall and the adjacent plaza have, over many generations, expressed the Jewish longing for Zion” (Cohen-Hattab, 2016, 146). They have endured so much hardship and watched their religious symbols and expressions of love be stripped and burned away, so the fact that the Wall holds even a memory of the original temple offers enough hope for them to continue to come back to this place and remind themselves of their passion. The Wall has remained central in the internal Israeli struggle because of its physical location. This same implication is still present today.

Thousands of people come to the Western Wall daily to say prayers and experience the power that is in the area, while the Temple Mount experiences riots and protests. When one walks onto the Temple Mount, the tension is palpable. Both the Muslim and Jewish people venerate the land on which it stands and that devotion cannot be felt without walking on that ground. “The Western Wall...needed to attract attention on its own, in its simplest form” and I think it does that beautifully (Cohen-Hattab, 2016, 139). The Jewish faith demonstrated at the Wall from the time of its construction to the modern day practice is inspiring. There is no need for flashy architecture or over the top decoration because its pure religious and nationalistic significance is what draws the people together. The Western Wall represents their undying faith and unwavering trust

that one day their prayers will be answered to completely take back the place their temple was originally constructed.

## Yad Vashem

“The survival of the name is a dominant Jewish motif for carrying the memory of the dead... Thus the name Yad Vashem is taken from the verse in Isaiah 56:5 addressed to the eunuchs, ‘And I shall give them [the eunuchs] in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name, [Yad Vashem]’” (Feldman, 2007, 1158). Yad Vashem is the newest of the sites discussed in this paper. It was established in 1953 as the World Holocaust Center. It is home to countless relics, journals, clothes, and memories of those who suffered and were lost in the Holocaust. There are multiple memorials within the place of Yad Vashem itself which include, but are not limited to: the Children’s Memorial, the Hall of Names, the Holocaust Art Museum, and the Holocaust History Museum. Each location prioritizes a group of people in order to honor and respect every person who fell during the Holocaust.

The Children’s memorial was constructed with just a few light sources reflecting off of mirrors as “...a tribute to the approximately 1.5 million Jewish children who perished during the Holocaust” (Taglit Birthright Israel, 2020). As you walk through this memorial, the names of all the children are read off one by one. The Hall of Names has a similar idea as the Children’s memorial, but here you walk in a circular room with a domes of photographs hanging over you. All the names are written in the “‘Pages of Testimony’ – special one-page forms designed to restore the personal identity and brief life stories of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their accomplices” (Yad Vashem, 2020). It is home to about 2.7 million original pages. The Holocaust Art Museum showcases pieces that were created during the Holocaust and pieces that are

about the Holocaust. They help to express a more personal emotional experience of that which was endured during that horrendous time.

“Yad Vashem was to gather the memories, if not the absent bones, into the nation,” so the main attraction at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust History Museum, brings that to a full circle (Feldman, 2007, 1153). The physical structure of the museum adds to the journey of exploring every relic and experience. This plays a huge role in establishing the importance of place for Yad Vashem. The museum itself is designed so that you have to walk through every room once you enter. There is no skipping past something that is unnerving, horrifying or sad; the museum loudly displays the horrors that other human beings endured. Closing the book and turning off the news story when something is uncomfortable is not an option. The museum is designed to have guests literally walk through the Holocaust in a snake-like pattern that feels like it might never end. Another beautiful part of the architecture is the reprieve after each room through a breezeway that allows one to look straight through to the end. It is literally the light at the end of the tunnel. This places the visitors into the head space that the persecuted Jewish people must have been in. This kind of empathy could not ever be felt through simply reading the stories because it is easy to separate emotions from the realities that are not personally and physically endured.

“Yad Vashem's Museum Complex reinforces the commitment of Jewish visitors to their people as well as their ethical brotherhood with other nations; non-Jewish visitors, on the other hand, leave with a greater empathy for the fate of the Jewish people, and are hopefully inspired to join the drive towards a more ethical future for humanity as a whole” (Yad Vashem, 2020). The complex is so large and there are so many stories to

read and listen to that it is impossible to properly explore every section in one day. I think that is incredibly powerful. From my own experience, walking through the exhibits and spending a whole day at the complex was not enough time and they accomplished their goal of inspiring me and creating more empathy. I have visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. and learned about the Holocaust many times in history classes throughout the years, but nothing compared to the emotions I felt within the complex.

Yad Vashem specifically remembers the Jewish people and their horrendous treatment during World War II. “Its declared purpose is ‘to gather into the homeland the memory of all those of the Jewish people who fell and gave their lives, fought and rebelled...because of their belonging to the Jewish people’” (Feldman, 2007, 1152). Most of us have at least a vague understanding of the horrors of the Holocaust as we were taught growing up. As I discussed earlier, one of the most important pieces of remembering something in history is being able to share it with others and that is exactly what Yad Vashem does. When I left, I wanted to know even more about the firsthand accounts I encountered in the museum, so I took to the internet. Luckily, I was not bombarded by current events and stories that would detract from my experience. “Yad Vashem continually strives to meaningfully impart the memory and meanings of the Holocaust to future generations” and they have taken that to heart (Yad Vashem, 2020). Their website allows you to take virtual tours of the museum, read every name in the Hall of Names, and watch a huge collection of testimonies from the survivors.

After watching the survivors relive their worst memories and reading even more stories of their liberation from concentration camps, I better understood why the physical country of Israel is so important to these people. Incredible men and women tell of the



horrors that they endured, but so many of them reflect on the good that came after their escape from the Nazis. They turn their suffering into something positive because they had a home. They had finally been reunited with the land of their origins. The passion to protect the land they had lost to unfair control was strengthened to a new level. Like Masada, “never again” is the mantra of Holocaust memory.

The Jewish people have endured just about every kind of prejudice whether it be slavery back in the biblical times to unethical slaughters during the Holocaust, so their pain runs deep. From the beginning of time, they have been told they are wrong and are not enough, but “each year, the President and Prime Minister of the State of Israel, dignitaries, diplomats and leading figures from around the world join survivors and their families at the official Holocaust Remembrance Day events at Yad Vashem” (Yad Vashem, 2020). This keeps their memory alive and well for generations to come. The events are always in the same place around the same time in order to keep the Holocaust fresh in the memories of the youth. Nothing like this will ever happen again especially if there are allies continuously educating and fighting on their side.

## Birthright Trips

The importance of getting to know Israel by visiting the country and meeting the people is not an idea that I alone advocate. In fact, this is passionately supported by Israelis themselves. A philanthropic pair named Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt created an initiative in 1999 to bring Jewish people together from across the globe by sending them on an all-expenses paid trip to their home country. It started as project to reignite the passion for Judaism in Jews from around the globe who wouldn't normally have the opportunity to walk in their history. This philanthropy grew into more than they could imagine. "[Their] mission is to give every Jewish young adult around the world, especially the less connected, the opportunity to visit Israel on an educational trip" (Taglit Birthright Israel, 2020). Their outreach began to grow and become more than they could handle financially if they wanted to continue to expand. When the founders saw the difference they were making in people's lives, they deemed it important enough to bring to the Israeli government to get funding for even more reach within the Jewish community.

The Israeli government agreed to help fund the project. Not only were personal donors continuing to send money and sponsor the youth, but the government was able to help out as well. To me, this demonstration of nationalism speaks louder than any example could. "In 2004, Birthright Israel Foundation was created in order to help raise the funds needed to ensure this trip would be available today, tomorrow, and always" (Birthright Israel Foundation, 2020). This North American group works closely with Birthright Israel to raise funds alongside the Israeli government and the personal donors. It is obvious how important it has become to have people around the world to fully

understand their heritage and walk in the footsteps of their ancestors. The Birthright initiative "...seeks to ensure the future of the Jewish people by strengthening Jewish identity, Jewish communities, and connection with Israel via a trip to Israel for the majority of Jewish young adults from around the world" (Taglit Birthright Israel, 2020). They actively work to keep history alive in the memories of the younger generations. After exploring their website and reading countless testimonies and stories from the youth that have actually benefitted from their experience, I felt even more confident in my argument.

Many of the participants seem to have had similar experiences. Most of the articles were written by Americans who had grown up going to synagogue, practicing their religion as devoutly as a child could, but fell out of the practice when they got into adulthood. They didn't know any more about their Jewish heritage than the average person. It made me sad to think about all the history and culture they were missing out on because they simply lost interest. Based on the blog posts, almost all of the participants returned from Israel with the same fire to continue practicing their religion and they were much better informed on the history and importance of the entire state of Israel. One attendee wrote, "I have a much stronger Jewish identity and have committed to giving my future family an even greater experience" (Allen, 2019). He was able to visit the holy sites and the historical places that tell the narrative of his ancestors. Another post was written by two girls who travelled together and they said of the trip, "The Israeli culture is something that cannot be truly explained without experiencing it for yourself...we could sense the pride they feel for their country and how precious it is for them to share it with us" (Weber, 2019). The Birthright trip is an incredible opportunity for these young

adults to see just how important the country is to their personal story. “Twenty years ago, when Birthright Israel was launched, there was a crisis in the Jewish world – Jews in the diaspora were steadily drifting away from their heritage, their traditions and their community” (Taglit Birthright Israel, 2020). Now they are able to stand in the center of their religion and experience it in the most intense way possible.

## Conclusion

My idea of the Middle East has drastically changed from my former bias because of the trip I took in 2019. Before, the only knowledge I received and knew I had access to was from the media. Though they do their best to bring current events to the forefront, media reports lose integrity by focusing on topics that evoke negative attention on the countries. In the case of Israel, it is easy to think that it is nothing more than a warzone, constantly fighting with its neighbors and struggling internally. The news tells us what is happening right now, but it detracts from the humanity of a country and its culture.

Having the opportunity to walk through Israel and hear firsthand the stories and events that took place right in front of me opened my eyes to the reality of history. Travelling to and standing atop Masada allowed me to place myself in the situation without the disruption of modern times. I could relive the fighting and passion rooted in the land because I was looking right at it and walking on top of it. There was no longer a disconnect in my mind because the place was solid and real. I experienced the same feeling at the Western Wall. Reading and hearing about significant religious places is nothing compared to seeing the place with my own eyes. Watching the devout Jews praying and worshipping at a site that carries an immense amount of longing and love solidified the abstract idea of Judaism in my mind. Lastly, Yad Vashem gave me a sense of understanding of the Jewish people I never thought I could have. I could do nothing but cry while walking through the different memorials and museums on this campus because it literally brings to life the horrors of the Holocaust. Being enveloped by the monstrous amount of lives lost to one group of completely innocent people forced me to think about how the Holocaust affected real people in a real place during a real time.

Using Israel as the case example, the actual place where history took place is just as important as the event itself. The significance of a location is deeper than just the surface story. When I first learned about the state of Israel, I didn't think about the fact that the land always belonged to the Jewish people, I just assumed they were gifted it by the British. There was already a deep rooted home within the country that had yet to be officially established. This physical connection made it the only logical place for the Jewish people to continue writing their narrative. The Second Temple, Masada, and the world in the time of the Holocaust no longer look exactly the same, but these places still capture the essence of what it means to be Jewish. When we learn about history, we ask the questions who, what, where, and when. Every single one of these details must be present in order to fully understand the situation and it has become too easy to dissociate ourselves from the story. It is difficult to imagine a place we have never been or even learned about in a fair, unbiased account. Putting forth the effort to travel to new places and create your own point in the timeline of the country will make all difference.

When I think of Israel as a whole, it is hard to unlink the idea of the country and the land on which it stands. Just because the physical appearance may have changed, the land is where the history is laid. Memories are burned into locations by those who make them and respecting and understanding the underlying significance is necessary. When we look at places like Israel, it is impossible to separate their journey from the region in which it took place. After a establishing a history as a complex and beautiful as the Israeli narrative, "...the state and the land are henceforth one essence" (Gordis, 2016, 286).

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