

**COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND**

# **Recovered**

**THE MAKING OF ISRAELI**

# **Roots**

**NATIONAL TRADITION**

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#### TO EVIATAR

Who has shared my journey to the past  
with love and understanding

# Four

## THE BAR KOKHBA REVOLT

About sixty years after the defeat of the Jews' Great Revolt against the Romans and the destruction of the Second Temple, and a few decades following the failure of a revolt by Jewish communities in the Diaspora (A.D. 115–17), Judaea took to arms again, rebelling against the Roman Empire. This revolt, which broke out in A.D. 132 and lasted three years, is identified by its leader, Bar Kokhba. Having initially encountered success in liberating parts of the country from the Roman garrisons, the rebels established Bar Kokhba as *nasi* (president) of Judaea. Yet with the mobilization of additional troops to this area the Romans managed to suppress the Jewish revolt and ended this short-lived liberation.

In Zionist collective memory the Bar Kokhba revolt symbolizes the nation's last expression of patriotic ardor and the last struggle for freedom during Antiquity. As such it became an important symbolic event for the Jewish national movement. The fact that the revolt was commemorated did not constitute a dramatic change from Jewish tradition. Jewish memory continued to mark the fall of Betar, Bar Kokhba's last stronghold, as an important historical event. Yet the Zionist representation of the revolt differed considerably from that constructed in Jewish tradition and thus transformed the meaning of this event and the nature of its commemoration.

The written sources about the Bar Kokhba revolt are scant and provide only fragmentary information. They include works by Roman and early church historians, most notably Dio Cassius's account, some Samaritan sources, and several brief narratives in the rabbinical and talmudic literature that are more legendary than historical in character. Until the unearthing of archeological evidence from the Bar Kokhba period, including letters and coins bearing Bar Kokhba's name and complex subterranean constructions designed for hiding, little was known about the identity of the leader of the Jewish uprising, the popular following he had enjoyed, the organization and development of the revolt, and the extent of the destruc-

tion that Judaea suffered in its aftermath. Even with this additional evidence, information about the event is still limited.<sup>1</sup>

The available sources suggest that Jews took to arms in the year 132. Their revolt may have been triggered by their outrage at the emperor's plans to rebuild Jerusalem as a Roman city and erect a temple for Jupiter at the site of their own destroyed Second Temple. The Romans' prohibition of circumcision is likely to have been another reason for the outbreak.<sup>2</sup> It appears that initially the Jews succeeded in defeating the Roman army stationed in Judaea. The coins and letters from that period bear evidence that the rebels were successful in establishing their own government and administrative structure.<sup>3</sup>

Faced with the rebels' initial success, the Roman emperor Hadrian sent additional legions to Judaea and assigned his capable general Julius Severus as their commander. According to the Roman historian Dio Cassius, Severus's tactics were to progress slowly, besieging the rebels and destroying Jewish villages as his forces pushed ahead. Although these tactics prolonged the war, they eventually proved successful. Bar Kokhba and his men withdrew to a nearby mountain town, Betar. The Romans besieged this last Jewish stronghold and eventually overcame the rebels.

Both Jewish and non-Jewish sources describe the enormous scope of destruction and bloodshed during that war, although the numbers given are probably exaggerated. Dio Cassius writes that the Romans destroyed 985 settlements and "nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate," 580,000 Jews fell in battle, and many others died in starvation and illness.<sup>4</sup> The Bar Kokhba revolt was crushed in 135. According to Jewish tradition, this happened on the ninth of the Hebrew month Av.<sup>5</sup>

Both Jewish and non-Jewish sources reveal that the revolt was also kindled by an upsurge of messianic hopes. In his history of the church Eusebius writes that the man who led the revolt was named Chochebas (star) and that he persuaded his people that he had come from heaven.<sup>6</sup> Rabbinical sources recount that Rabbi Akiba, the most prominent scholar of the period, attributed to Bar Kokhba the saying "A star shall step forth from Jacob." Alluding to the leader of the revolt as the "King Messiah,"<sup>7</sup> he articulated the belief that the revolt was not only a war of liberation from the Roman rule but also the first phase of the much anticipated messianic redemption.

### *Dual Image and Transformed Memory*

Since the Bar Kokhba revolt is the only ancient war that is identified by a single leader,<sup>8</sup> his image plays an important role in the construction of the

memory of this event. It is therefore interesting to note that the Jewish sources indicate a highly ambivalent attitude toward this leader, appearing to be far more negative than positive. This ambivalence is clearly expressed in the names attributed to the leader. While the name Bar Kokhba by which he is currently known was transmitted by non-Jewish sources, early and medieval Jewish sources called him Bar Koziba, which derives from the Hebrew word *kazav* (lie):

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Rabbi would expound "A star shall step forth from Jacob," thus do not read "star" [*kokhav*] but "liar" [*kozev*]. Rabbi Akiba, when he saw this Bar Koziba, would say: "This is the King Messiah." Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Torta said to him: "Akiba, grass will rise from your cheeks and the son of David will not yet have come."

The two names thus articulate diametrically opposed perceptions of the revolt's leader. One is highly laudatory, relating to him as the Messiah; the other is extremely derogatory, accusing him of being a liar and betraying his people's trust and hopes. Prior to the discovery of the Bar Kokhba letters, the leader's actual name was an enigma; the letters revealed that his name is Shimon Bar Kosiba (or Koseba). On the basis of this recent information it appears that Bar Kokhba and Bar Koziba were both improvised forms that his followers and opponents, respectively, applied to him in order to convey their opposing views of his leadership.<sup>10</sup> That the glorifying name (Bar Kokhba) was preserved by non-Jews whereas Jewish sources until the sixteenth century referred to him exclusively as Bar Koziba is indeed striking.<sup>11</sup>

Only recently did the image of Bar Kokhba in the ancient and medieval Jewish sources become the focus of systematic inquiry. In his detailed study of the development of this image from Antiquity to the premodern period, Richard G. Marks demonstrates how the Jewish sources relate to Bar Kokhba as either a false messiah or a national hero, with only a few attempts to merge these two conflicting images.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, the early rabbinical references recreate Bar Kokhba in the image of the biblical heroes who have extraordinary strength, courage, fighting ability, and charisma, but who also suffer from overconfidence and lack of sophistication, which lead them to disobedience to God. The rabbinical stories describe how Bar Kokhba "would catch the stones of the catapults on one of his knees and throw them back, killing many of [the Romans]," or would kill a man by the force of his kick. They imply that his enemy could not harm him and that he was eventually killed by a snake and not by a human. But Bar

Kokhba is also portrayed as a vain man who relied too much on his own power, challenging God not to interfere in the process of the war. "When he would go out to battle," the story goes, "he would say, 'Master of the world, neither help [us] nor shame [us].'" Bar Kokhba, according to those stories, was highly demanding of his men, testing their courage and commitment by requiring them to cut off one of their fingers, a demand that provoked the rabbis' rebuke. He was also described as a short-tempered, impulsive man who kicked and killed Rabbi Elazar of Modi'im upon hearing (unfounded) allegations that he betrayed the rebels. Betar's downfall is described as a punishment for this act of wrath, thus attributing the failure of the revolt to Bar Kokhba's character flaws and transgressions.<sup>13</sup>

These stories reveal admiration for Bar Kokhba's heroism but put an even stronger emphasis on his personal shortcomings. The tendency to dwell on the negative image may be more pronounced in the Babylonian than the Palestinian Talmud,<sup>14</sup> yet both sources indicate that he failed both as a person and a leader. Moreover, they ultimately show more appreciation of the rabbi than the leader of the revolt, suggesting that Rabbi Elazar of Modi'im, who was sitting in sackcloth and praying for God's help, contributed more to the revolt's potential success than Bar Kokhba.<sup>15</sup> These stories therefore imply that the way to redemption should follow the route of reliance on God, piety, and prayers.

A few medieval references to Bar Kokhba depart from this earlier, more negative approach, referring to the ancient leader as a king who had enjoyed glory and power for a relatively short time but who ultimately failed.<sup>16</sup> The great medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides wrote that Rabbi Akiba was *nose kelav* (armor-bearer) of Bar Koziba and that he "would say about him that he was the King Messiah and he and all the sages of his generation held the opinion that he was the King Messiah, until he was killed in his iniquities."<sup>17</sup> Bar Kokhba, according to Maimonides, was a promising hero who at the end turned out to be a false messiah.

As Marks points out, the twelfth-century scholars clearly focus on the messianic hope associated with the Bar Kokhba revolt. In describing Bar Kokhba's heroic image along with his emergence as a false messiah, they attempt to address issues pertaining to messianism that underlay their own polemics with the Karaites, Christians, and Muslims.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the sixteenth-century references to Bar Kokhba deal with the man and his revolt in the context of the Jews' latest trauma of expulsion from Spain and Portugal. Whether they focus on his heroic stature and his revenge on his opponents or emphasize his role as a false messiah, they aim at encouraging exiled Jews by implying that redemption is possible and discouraging them from turning to false messiahs.<sup>19</sup>



bolic figure was an important feature of the Zionists' revival of what they regarded as the suppressed heroic national past. Yet some ambivalence underlies the representation of this transformation. Along with the desire to dramatize the departure from the traditional rabbinical attitude toward him, the Zionist commemoration of Bar Kokhba also implies that he had always been a folk hero. The most popular children's song about Bar Kokhba asserts that "the whole nation loved him."<sup>34</sup> Gershom Scholem, the famous student of Jewish mysticism, claims that "popular tradition did not subscribe to the rabbinic disparagement of Bar Kokhba's memory. He remained a kind of a hero-saint."<sup>35</sup> The archeologist Yigael Yadin makes a similar statement that Bar Kokhba's name was preserved by folk tradition but almost lost to authenticated history.<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere he remarks that the folk attachment to Bar Kokhba would withstand the pressure of historical inquiry, much as it resisted the rabbinical opposition to him.<sup>37</sup> In this statement Yadin asserts the primacy of collective memory over history in preserving a long, if at times suppressed, tradition of heroism around Bar Kokhba's folk image.

The Zionist elevation of Bar Kokhba and his revolt as a major turning point in Jewish history focuses on the act of initiating an armed struggle for national liberation. Zionist collective memory clearly preferred to dwell on the rebels' courage, determination, love of freedom, and readiness for self-sacrifice as a manifestation of the national spirit of Antiquity. Although the course and scope of the war are not clear, Hebrew educational texts state that Bar Kokhba freed Jerusalem, and highlight the initial successful phase of the revolt.<sup>38</sup> In this construction, the outcome of the war, the defeat, is clearly perceived as secondary to the symbolism of choosing to fight for national freedom and responding to oppression by taking up arms. In fact, in his address to the second Zionist Congress, Max Nordau went so far as to state that the Bar Kokhba war was superior to the Hasmoneans' victories.<sup>39</sup>

Various strategies are employed to diminish the significance of the defeat. One such strategy has been to demonstrate that the Romans also suffered heavy losses in the war. In reviewing the scant sources about the revolt, Yadin states:

But perhaps the most important piece of information in Dio's description is recorded at its end and deserves verbatim quotation: "Many Romans, moreover, perished in this war. Therefore, Hadrian in writing to the Senate did not employ the opening phrase commonly affected by the Emperors: 'If you and your children are in

health it is well; I and the legions are in health.'" Hadrian must have suffered heavy casualties indeed if he was forced to omit the customary formula.<sup>40</sup>

Another means of playing down the defeat is to show that the Romans' victory was short-lived from a historical perspective. In a polemic essay on the significance of the revolt Yisrael Eldad points out that Hadrian's statue is now standing in the garden of the Israel Museum in the capital of the State of Israel, after being unearthed by Bar Kokhba's descendants. In a triumphant tone he points out that now Israelis can "peek in the eyes of the 'victorious' Hadrian and pose the question, 'Where are you and where are we?'"<sup>41</sup>

The contrast between traditional Jewish memory, which highlights the outcome of the war and emphasizes Bar Kokhba's negative image, and the Zionist commemoration of his revolt is indeed striking. Rabbinical tales gloss over the rebels' initial success and provide harrowing descriptions of the massacre and destruction that the revolt brought upon Judaea: "And [the Romans] went on killing them, until horses waded through blood up to their nostrils. And the blood rolled rocks weighing forty 'seah' [an ancient measure], until the blood reached the sea forty miles away."<sup>42</sup> In the same vein, some later sixteenth-century sources dwell on the suffering, bloodshed, and persecution brought by the revolt. As Marks observes, this focus on Betar as one of the most horrifying examples of Jewish suffering inflicted by Gentiles was triggered by their recent memories of the expulsions from Spain and Portugal.<sup>43</sup>

The commemoration of the Bar Kokhba revolt during the annual festival of Lag ba-Omer reinforced the dramatic transformation of its traditional Jewish commemoration. Jewish tradition fixes the fall of Betar on the fast day of Tish'a be-Av (the ninth of Av) along with the destruction of the First and Second Temples. The commemoration thus focuses on the end of the revolt and its consequences and counts them among the most traumatic disasters of Jewish history and a major cause for collective mourning. Zionist collective memory, on the other hand, associates the Bar Kokhba revolt primarily with the celebration of the Lag ba-Omer holiday. This festive holiday shifts the commemoration from the outcome of the revolt to Bar Kokhba's victory over the Romans during the initial stages of the revolt. Since within the holiday framework itself there is no obligation to expand the commemorative narrative beyond that specific time, Lag ba-Omer serves to enhance the importance of the uprising and obscures the fact that the victory was short-lived. The revolt is transformed from a cause for collective mourning to a cause for collective celebration. For the ma-

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majority of secular Israelis who do not observe the traditional fast of Tish'ba-be-Av, Lag ba-Omer becomes the exclusive commemorative setting for the revolt. As we shall see in chapter 7, this change has had far-reaching consequences for the memory of the Bar Kokhba revolt.

### *Archeological Findings and Symbolic Roots*

The 1960s witnessed a new development in the rise of the Bar Kokhba revolt as a major national event from Antiquity. The impetus for this development came from archeological discoveries providing further evidence about the revolt that made Bar Kokhba and his men emerge as historical figures. Although letters from the Bar Kokhba period had been discovered in the early 1950s in Vadi Murabbat, these discoveries were not made by Israelis. In May 1960 Yigael Yadin, a professor of archeology at the Hebrew University and a former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, turned an archeological discovery into a major national event.

In a meeting at the home of the president of Israel, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, in the company of the prime minister, cabinet ministers, members of the parliament, and other important guests, Yadin made public a "momentous secret," a discovery he had made in the Judean desert only a few weeks earlier. In the opening of his book on Bar Kokhba, Yadin describes his dramatic buildup of this scene.

A screen had been erected at Mr. Ben-Zvi's house, and when my turn came to report, I projected onto the screen through a film slide the colored photograph of part of a document and read out aloud the first line of writing upon it: "Shimon Bar Kosiba, President over Israel." And turning to our head of state, I said, "Your Excellency, I am honored to be able to tell you that we have discovered fifteen dispatches written or dictated by the last President of ancient Israel eighteen hundred years ago."

For a moment the audience seemed to be struck dumb. Then the silence was shattered with spontaneous cries of astonishment and joy. That evening the national radio interrupted its scheduled program to broadcast news of the discovery. Next day the newspapers came out with banner headlines over the announcement.<sup>44</sup>

Yadin's skills in dramatizing the announcement about his finding clearly contributed to its impact. But the discovery of the Bar Kokhba letters turned into a national sensation because the ancient hero occupied a major

symbolic place in the Israeli pantheon of ancient heroes. It is also important to note Yadin's rhetoric of continuity, linking the ancient past with contemporary Israel as he transmits a letter from "the last president of ancient Israel" to the current president of modern Israel. In this act he thus symbolically erases the rupture of eighteen hundred years of life in Exile.

Yadin's rhetorical skills are also evident in his writing about the expedition. The Hebrew title of his book *Ha-Hipusim Ahar Bar Kokhba* (The Search for Bar Kokhba) reads like that of an adventure story, and the drama is accentuated by chapter titles such as "Behind the Legend," "The Curtain Rises," and "Rays of Hope." Similarly, Yadin invites the reader to join in the explorers' disappointments and hopes, their moments of extreme difficulties and excitement, adding to the dramatic unfolding of their discoveries.

Yadin's presentation had great appeal for the elite audience at the president's house and the Israeli public at large because it was nurtured by Israelis' long-standing interest in archeology. For Israelis, archeology is like a "national sport."<sup>45</sup> They volunteer to participate in archeological excavations, make pilgrimages to reconstructed archeological sites, and visit museums that display archeological findings, as if through these activities they ritually affirm their roots in the land. That the archeological excavation was considered a major national mission is evident also from the extent to which the military was involved in its planning and in carrying it out. According to Yadin's testimony, the idea of searching the caves for archeological remains was suggested to him by Israel's chief of staff in 1959. At the time Israeli politicians and archeologists were deeply concerned about the Bedouins' access to caves within Israel's territory where they found archeological remains, which they later sold outside the State of Israel. When the Israel Defense Forces were ordered to increase their patrol in that area, the chief of staff recommended a shift from a defensive strategy to "an all-out archeological offensive." "Why be on the defensive?" he argued, "the best defense is, after all, attack!" (32).

The military proved to be of vital help in the preparations for the excavation: the extremely difficult conditions of the terrain in which the archeologists were to work, the desert environment, and the proximity to the Jordanian border all required that involvement. The army's considerations dictated the duration of the excavation, and the minister of defense was to approve the archeologists' plan. The Israel Defense Forces also supplied helicopters for the exploration of the steep slopes of the canyons where the caves are located, prepared the sites for archeologists' overnight camps, and provided transportation, communication equipment, and security. Soldiers' involvement continued throughout the excavation, and in fact, some

of them volunteered for dangerous assignments or provided useful technical assistance to the archeologists (42–46).<sup>46</sup>

The merging of the military and the archeological dimensions of this national project is manifested in Yadin's rhetoric. Not only was the archeological dig conceived in terms of an "attack" rather than "defense"; in describing the preparations for the excavation, Yadin resorts to paramilitary rhetoric, referring to the date for its beginning as "D-Day" (32–40). Moreover, he intersperses the narrative about the excavation with nationalist themes that emphasize the direct continuity between contemporary Israeli explorers and the ancient fighters for freedom. After describing the fellow who first discovered a fragment of a scroll, a red-haired, North African immigrant nicknamed Gingi (Ginger), Yadin adds: "I can still see his shining eyes as I write these lines. Alas, Gingi is no more; he was killed in the Six-Day War of 1967. He fought gallantly, and I am sure he visualized himself as a descendant of the Bar Kokhba warriors" (113–14).

Yadin himself, like another former chief of staff, Moshe Dayan, represents the integration of the military and the archeological. Both men belonged to the "Palmah generation" educated by the prestate national Hebrew schools; both reached the highest rank as the Israeli Defense Forces' chief of staff and had an intense interest in archeology, Yadin as a professional archeologist, Dayan as an aggressive amateur. Both men also ended their careers as politicians. Indeed, Yadin's embodiment of the "Palmah spirit" is visually represented in the photographs included in his book, displaying him wearing the Palmah's famous wool hat (*kova gerev*) as he examines unearthed artifacts from the Bar Kokhba period.

The symbolic dimension of Yadin's career was later used by others as a way of enhancing the direct continuity between ancient and modern Israel.

Bar Kokhba's army was the last national Jewish army, and Bar Kokhba was the last chief of staff of the historical armies of Israel. And he wrote letters, some of which survived hidden in a vessel, and the vessel was hidden in the Judaeen desert and there they waited for 1830 years until they were discovered and deciphered. And by whom? By the one who in effect served . . . as the first chief of staff of the new army of Israel, Yigael Yadin . . . And is it not the act of God that the Bar Kokhba letters reached Yigael Yadin's hands as letters from one chief of staff to another?<sup>47</sup>

Yadin himself concludes his narrative with a personal statement imbued with a strong nationalist flavor.

Archeologists are also human beings, and as human beings they are often emotionally attached to the history of their own people.

Descending daily over the precipice, crossing the dangerous ledge to the caves, working all day long in the stench of the bats, confronting from time to time the tragic remains of those besieged and trapped—we found that our emotions were a mixture of tension and awe, astonishment and pride at being part of the reborn State of Israel after a Diaspora of eighteen hundred years. Here were we, living in tents erected by the Israel Defense Forces, walking every day through the ruins of a Roman camp which caused the death of our forefathers. Nothing remains here today of the Romans save a heap of stones on the face of the desert, but here the descendants of the besieged were returning to salvage their ancestors' precious belongings. (253)

Archeology thus becomes a national tool through which Israelis can recover their roots in the ancient past and the ancient homeland. The excavation itself symbolizes the historical continuity between Antiquity and National Revival, which the Zionist collective memory constructs and the archeologist's narrative reinforces. To participate in the archeological excavation—whether in person or symbolically, by reading Yadin's account—is to perform a patriotic act of bridging Exile to reestablish the connection with the national past and authenticate national memory.



# Seven

## BAR KOKHBA, THE BONFIRE, AND THE LION

### *From Mourning to Celebration*

The transformation of Bar Kokhba from a dubious leader of a failed revolt to a prominent heroic figure from Antiquity is an important feature of the Zionist reshaping of the past. While Jewish memory preserved both positive and negative images of the ancient leader, it was nonetheless the latter that had the strongest impact on Jewish tradition. Jewish memory recognized the significance of the revolt, but its focus was quite specific: it commemorated the revolt as a turning point that led to the destruction of Judaea and to the beginning of the period of Exile. Jewish tradition thus marks the fall of Betar, Bar Kokhba's last stronghold, on the annual fast day of Tish'a be-Av. Commemorating the greatest historical catastrophes in Jewish life, Tish'a be-Av focuses on the grim outcome of the Bar Kokhba uprising. That the same commemorative setting mourns the fall of Betar and the destruction of the First and Second Temples provides a measure of understanding of the traumatic impact of the end of this revolt.

It is therefore highly significant that this outcome, which is at the center of the traditional Jewish commemoration of Bar Kokhba, was marginalized within Zionist collective memory. National pride was a central Zionist theme, and the revolt was important because it symbolized the ancient Hebrews' proud and courageous stand that led them to defend their nation's freedom at all cost rather than yield to their oppressors. The Zionist commemorative narrative thus shifts its focus from the *outcome* of the revolt to the *act* of rebelling; it emphasizes the initial success that brought about the liberation of Judaea rather than the defeat that led to exile.

Such a major shift in collective memory clearly required a new commemorative event. The tragic character of Tish'a be-Av, so bluntly associated with the definition of the revolt as a national trauma, obviously hin-

dered this desired transformation. It was therefore critical to the Zionist collective memory that the Bar Kokhba revolt become affiliated with another temporal marker that would make room for a new interpretation. The emergence of the festival of Lag ba-Omer as the primary commemorative event for the ancient revolt was thus a vital dimension in the reshaping of its memory.

Indeed, Lag ba-Omer offered an excellent occasion for the new commemoration of the Bar Kokhba revolt. A minor holiday of rather late origin, obscured by various traditions regarding its origin and significance, it was relatively open to yet another reconstruction of its meaning. The ambiguous nature of the holiday thus lent itself well to a modern nationalist reinterpretation: it provided both a traditional ritual and the flexibility of a loose meaning. Like other instances in the making of a new tradition, this combination legitimizes the new commemoration and makes it seem a generations-old tradition.<sup>1</sup> To appreciate the significance of this transformation of the commemorative locus of the Bar Kokhba revolt, it is important to understand the meaning of Lag ba-Omer in Jewish tradition.

Lag ba-Omer literally means the thirty-third day of a seven-week (fifty-day) period between the Jewish holidays of Passover and Shavuot. (This period, which is called Sefirat ha-Omer [counting of the sheaf] is often called simply Sefira [the counting].) The meaning of Lag ba-Omer is linked with that period. Although the biblical reference to this period associated it with the spring harvest,<sup>2</sup> the Sefira became a period of semimourning during the talmudic period, and various prohibitions against marriage, hair cutting, working during the evenings, and playing musical instruments marked its austerity.<sup>3</sup> Although the precise reason for the emergence of these mourning customs is not clear, the rabbinical account relates them to the death of 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiba who died in a plague during that time of the year, and explains the plague as a punishment for their maltreatment of each other.<sup>4</sup>

The designation of Lag ba-Omer as a unique date within the Sefira period is of even later origin. The first clear reference that singled it out is in a European Jewish source dating from the thirteenth century. Noting the festive character of that day, it suggests that the plague that had killed Rabbi Akiba's students stopped on that day.<sup>5</sup> Only in the sixteenth century did Lag ba-Omer become popular in Palestine, and its celebration was widely accepted only from the eighteenth century on,<sup>6</sup> recognizing the suspension of the Sefira mourning customs on that day.<sup>7</sup>

The reference to the halting of the plague that killed Rabbi Akiba's students became the standard explanation of the festival. In fact, Lag ba-Omer was also called "scholars' day," during which students did not study but

were allowed to be outdoors and to participate in various sports, including play with bows and arrows.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the end of the plague was not the only reason given for Lag ba-Omer's emergence as a festive day. Some modern scholars argue that the story of the plague was fabricated in an effort to legitimize a folk ritual that had originated outside the Jewish religion but later became popular among the Jews.<sup>9</sup> Another early tradition attributes the Lag ba-Omer celebration to the beginning of the falling of manna in the desert following the biblical Exodus.<sup>10</sup>

A later mystical tradition that arose among the Kabbalists of Safed identified Lag ba-Omer as the date on which the great mystic Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai (a student of Rabbi Akiba to whom tradition attributes the writing of the mystical book *Ha-Zohar*) died. In Palestine a new pilgrimage tradition to the rabbi's grave in Mount Meron emerged in the fourteenth century but became fixed only in the seventeenth century. Called *Hilula de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai*, this celebration marks the merging of the rabbi's departing soul with the heavenly world with great festivity, including lighting bonfires, singing, dancing, and burning clothes. The mystical account according to which Lag ba-Omer revolves around Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai gradually spread to other Jewish communities that marked it by lighting candles in his honor and by visits to the other great rabbis' graves in those localities. The theme of fire and light was explained as symbolizing the light emanating from the rabbi upon his death, while the children's custom of playing with bows and arrows was accounted for by the legend that during his lifetime no rainbow ever appeared, as a sign of his greatness.<sup>11</sup>

Within this context of diverse traditions relating to Lag ba-Omer's origin, it is quite revealing that Zionist collective memory promotes a new commemorative locus, linking the holiday to the Bar Kokhba revolt through an allegorical interpretation of the rabbinical tradition relating to the plague. Given Rabbi Akiba's enthusiastic support of Bar Kokhba at the time, it suggests that the "plague" was used as a cryptic reference to the revolt when Judaea was still under Roman domination.<sup>12</sup> Although Zionism did not create this explanation,<sup>13</sup> it promoted it as the primary interpretation of Lag ba-Omer.

In his massive and influential compilation of sources about the origins of the holiday and its diverse customs, Yom Tov Levinsky confesses that "[w]e have no historical source that would withstand a critical historiographic examination for the celebration of Bar Kokhba on this particular date." But, he adds, "a folk tradition that has been transmitted from one person to another, from one generation to another, does not need a certificate of birth and a genealogical table."<sup>14</sup> The Zionist interpretation is thus

sanctified as an ancient tradition. A recent brochure for Lag ba-Omer points out to students of the general public schools that

[t]he Zionist movement . . . considered the holidays of a central national significance, and therefore added to them values that it regarded as important. Lag ba-Omer was among other holidays that the Zionist movement cherished since it was associated in the folk's mind with a revolt that had combined spiritual and physical heroism. Hence the Zionist movement turned it into a holiday [that promotes] national values: the struggle for freedom, the military heroism, and the hope for redemption.<sup>15</sup>

The emergence of Lag ba-Omer as the commemorative festival for the Bar Kokhba revolt is thus legitimized as the triumph of "folk memory" over an "official" rabbinical attempt to suppress it. During Exile, the memory of the revolt was encoded and preserved in the Lag ba-Omer ritual of children's play with bows and arrows. Although this custom is not central to the traditional holiday celebration, the Zionist collective memory uses it as an important foundation for its account of the holiday. This development led to changes in both the character of Lag ba-Omer and the memory of the revolt.

The explicit association of Lag ba-Omer with the Bar Kokhba revolt was greatly elaborated within secular national Hebrew culture. Songs, poems, stories, and plays for the celebration of Lag ba-Omer increasingly focused on Bar Kokhba and his revolt. While the rabbinical literature focused on Rabbi Akiba as the most prominent figure of that period and the principal historical figure associated with Lag ba-Omer, and the mystical tradition focused on Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai, secular national Hebrew culture elevated Bar Kokhba as the main historical actor associated with that holiday.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, secular textbooks assigned Rabbi Akiba, the most prominent rabbi of the period, a secondary role, recasting him as Bar Kokhba's follower and admirer.<sup>17</sup> Within this context Rabbi Akiba's memory was subordinated to the memory of the revolt. The mystical tradition relating to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai was usually presented as more esoteric, appearing only after the discussion of the Bar Kokhba revolt.<sup>18</sup>

The new Hebrew tradition revolving around the figure of Bar Kokhba thus marginalized the two rabbis that dominated the traditional accounts of the holiday while it promoted Bar Kokhba as the military commander of the revolt and its political leader. In 1927 this transformation of the meaning of the holiday in Palestine was noted in an article in the daily *Ha-Aretz*: "Lag ba-Omer is actually not the quiet holiday we would think, given its

celebration in exile. Lag ba-Omer is not only a holiday in which the author of *Ha-Zohar* died; Lag ba-Omer is first and foremost the holiday of the revolt, the holiday of the uprising against the Romans."<sup>19</sup>

Zionist youth movements in Europe and in Palestine continued the tradition of Lag ba-Omer as a free day for students and enhanced its activist spirit by organizing sports, parades, races, and competitions.<sup>20</sup> For the emergent Hebrew society in Palestine, the new commemoration of Lag ba-Omer turned it into a highly symbolic day for military or paramilitary matters. Thus, the headquarters of the Labor-affiliated underground, the Haganah, passed the resolution to form the Palmah youth underground as well as paramilitary training for schools (the Gadna) on Lag ba-Omer of 1941; and in 1948 Israel's provisional government approved the establishment of the Israel Defense Forces on Lag ba-Omer.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to note, however, that this transformation received great impetus within the new Hebrew culture and was not largely shared by Jews outside of Israel, except for members of Zionist youth movements. This was quite evident in my interviews, where parents who had been educated in Jewish schools abroad continued to refer to Bar Kokhba as Bar Koziba and referred to the rabbinical or mystic traditions for the Lag ba-Omer celebration. Parents who had a secular education abroad knew little or nothing about Bar Kokhba and his revolt, or had some vague notion about it from their Israeli-educated children. Similarly, all the Lag ba-Omer stories at the Israel Folktales Archive at Haifa University, recorded from Jews who grew up abroad, refer to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai or to visits to other sages' graves, and none refers to Bar Kokhba.<sup>22</sup>

Like other changes that the Zionist collective memory introduced to traditional Jewish memory, the new significance attributed to the Bar Kokhba revolt was seen as a measure of success of the Zionist national revival. The reinterpretation of Lag ba-Omer shifted the focus of the holiday from major rabbinical figures to a national military hero, from "scholars" to "soldiers." This transformation provided an opportunity to articulate the important differences between these two representations. In a historical play on Bar Kokhba written by Avraham Goldfaden, the figure of Rabbi Elazar of Modi'im (whom Bar Kokhba is reported to have killed when he suspected him of treason) was contrasted to Bar Kokhba and the more militant Rabbi Akiba. Whereas the playwright portrays Elazar as calling his brethren to reconcile with the oppressive Roman rule, thus representing the passivity of rabbinical Judaism, Bar Kokhba calls his brethren to action, arguing that "our ancestors would have remained Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt to this day if Moses had not taken them out of there with a strong arm."<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, Moses, not God, brought the redemption from Egypt; by

analogy Bar Kokhba becomes the national leader who could lead his people to redemption.

### *The Lag ba-Omer Bonfires*

In the Hebrew youth culture the most important ritual of Lag ba-Omer is kindling bonfires on the holiday eve. The bonfire has become the high point of the Lag ba-Omer celebration in secular national Hebrew culture. The association of bonfires with the holiday was not a new feature, but it highlighted the interplay between the traditional anchoring of the ritual and its new character and interpretation. As I mentioned earlier, kindling a large bonfire is one of the features of the Hilula de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai on Mount Meron since the High Middle Ages, and bonfires may have been lit in addition to candles in other places. Those bonfires, however, are associated with the kabbalistic tradition relating to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai. In contrast, the secular Israeli ritual of bonfires is explained by the ancient Hebrews' method of communicating news at the time of the revolt. "We all know," a children's book for the holidays states, "that we light these bonfires to commemorate the bonfires kindled by the Hebrew freedom-fighters who were camping on mountains and communicating with other rebel groups, informing them of the Roman legions' movements."<sup>24</sup> Readers for the (nonreligious) public schools point out a more specific message of victory: "One of Bar Kokhba's major victories occurred on Lag ba-Omer Eve, and Rabbi Akiba's students kindled bonfires on top of all the mountains around—and there was light in the whole country. To commemorate this victory, schoolchildren celebrate the Lag ba-Omer holiday, singing and dancing around the bonfire."<sup>25</sup>

In 1926 and 1927 the Hebrew daily *Ha-Aretz* reported on the spreading custom of kindling bonfires on Lag ba-Omer Eve.<sup>26</sup> That the newspaper found this custom newsworthy seems to indicate that bonfires began to be part of the Hebrew Lag ba-Omer tradition in Palestine in the mid-1920s. In examining the Hebrew children's literature for Lag ba-Omer, it is striking to see how many songs and stories revolve around the bonfires, reflecting and reinforcing their centrality to the youth's experience of the holiday.<sup>27</sup>

Wood is a relatively scarce resource in the Middle East, and in a culture that celebrates planting trees as a major patriotic act, the idea of chopping trees for fire is inconceivable. Gathering enough wood for a large bonfire that would go on for hours at night is therefore no small challenge for Israeli youth. In the days preceding Lag ba-Omer, children begin to look

for scraps of wood and carefully hide or protect their findings because of the harsh competition over a limited supply. Humorous Lag ba-Omer lore describes the parents' need to protect their furniture from their children's overly zealous efforts to find materials for the bonfire.<sup>28</sup>

While younger children attend bonfires with their parents, older children celebrate with their friends from the neighborhood, the youth movement, or school. This form of partying around the bonfire, singing together, joking, frying potatoes, eating, and drinking is a youth ritual known as *kumzitz*. When performed by adults during trips or on special occasions such as Lag ba-Omer, the *kumzitz* is often imbued with some nostalgia for this youthful experience and attempts to recapture its spirit. On Lag ba-Omer Eve the *kumzitz* may go on for hours, and often until dawn.

The symbolic merging of the memory of the Bar Kokhba revolt with the youth movement spirit and experiences thus reinforces the symbolic continuity between the ancient fighters and Hebrew youth. The national dimension of the Lag ba-Omer bonfire was sometimes accentuated through the burning of an effigy of a leading enemy (Hitler during the 1940s, and either Hitler or Abdel Nasser during the 1950s and the 1960s). It is possible that the performance of this custom was borrowed from an earlier custom of burning an effigy of the Jews' archenemy Haman on Purim; or perhaps it developed from the burning of clothes in the Hilula celebration on Mount Meron.<sup>29</sup>

The burning of those symbolic figures of hostile leaders in the Lag ba-Omer bonfire demonstrates how collective memory often subverts historical time by collapsing different events into the same commemorative setting. It also indicates how the Zionist interpretation of Jewish holidays, further developed in secular national Hebrew culture, reinforced a sense that Jewish history is underlaid by repeated conflicts with enemies who wished to destroy the Jews.

The shifting of the temporal anchoring of the Bar Kokhba revolt from Tish'a be-Av to Lag ba-Omer made room for a radical change in its commemoration. Not only has the new commemorative locus been transformed from a grim fast day to a festive celebration, it has also shifted the focus from Bar Kokhba's ultimate defeat to a victorious moment during his struggle for liberation. The themes of courage, success, and revenge have become central to the commemoration of the Bar Kokhba revolt, thereby blurring the memory of the massacre, destruction, and exile it brought upon the Jews. Given the early and repeated exposure of the youth to the joyous Lag ba-Omer celebration, it is easy to understand its decisive impact on the memory of this event.

### *Bar Kokhba and the Lion*

As in the case of the Tel Hai battle, the Bar Kokhba revolt gave rise to new literature that revolved around the image of its main hero. Yet Trumpeldor and Bar Kokhba represent two very different cases of historical heroes. While the former is a modern figure whose image was shaped through autobiographical memory as well as other substantial sources of information (recollections of people who knew him personally, his letters, and several biographies),<sup>30</sup> the memory of the ancient hero was primarily encoded in legendary narratives. Whereas the new Hebrew literature about Trumpeldor is characterized by the conscious effort to turn "history" into "legend," the new literature about Bar Kokhba continues a long tradition of creating legends about him. What is unique about this latter case is the radical transformation in tone of the new "legendary" reconstruction as compared to the older legends. While the rabbinical tradition tends to project a negative image of the leader of the failed revolt and to highlight his controversial character, the new Hebrew tradition portrays a heroic image of a courageous and resourceful man who succeeded in rallying the nation behind him in order to liberate it from oppressive Roman rule.

As we saw in chapter 4, Bar Kokhba and his revolt emerged as a favorite subject in European Jewish literature in the second half of the nineteenth century. Within this trend the most interesting literary phenomenon is the emergence of an utterly new and distinct corpus of legends relating to Bar Kokhba and his dramatic encounter with a lion. Although this purely legendary episode appears to be of relatively recent origin, it has nonetheless acquired an ancient appearance, by virtue of both its reference to Antiquity and the successful adaptation of familiar themes of folk literature. The following discussion focuses on this new legendary lore as an example of the role of literature in inventing a national tradition.

Several literary works describe the encounter between the ancient Hebrew hero and a lion. Despite considerable differences in genre, style, and literary quality, these works share a basic plot structure: When the lion and the hero meet, the beast initially threatens the man (or presents a potential threat to him), yet the hero manages to subordinate the fierce animal to his will and thus subverts the threat to his life. The lion ultimately helps the hero (either directly or indirectly) in his pursuit of freedom, hence becoming an instrument of support of the national cause.

The confrontation with the lion highlights Bar Kokhba's positive qualities: he either wins over the lion by his personal charisma and good heart,

or overcomes it by his courage and physical strength. His success in this encounter eventually leads to a more significant development, namely, the beginning of his revolt. The story thus moves from a personal conflict (Bar Kokhba versus the lion) to a collective one (the ancient Hebrew versus the Roman Empire), and the success of the former leads the reader to expect (or assume) the success of the latter.

The best-known version of this fabricated encounter between Bar Kokhba and the lion in contemporary Israeli culture is a song written by Levin Kipnis. Indeed, Bar Kokhba's lion owes much of its fame to Kipnis's extraordinary productivity as well as his prominence as an editor of Hebrew educational literature from the early Yishuv period. Kipnis, who went to Palestine in 1913 as a young man exerted tremendous influence on the development of modern Hebrew literature for early childhood.<sup>31</sup> Concerned with the lack of appropriate songs for Hebrew nursery schools, he soon began to fill this gap. His song on Bar Kokhba and the lion is a testimony to his success: it is part of the standard repertoire for Lag ba-Omer, which Israeli children learn in nursery school, and has virtually acquired the status of a folk song.<sup>32</sup> The song presents a simplified, though dramatic, version of Bar Kokhba's encounter with the lion.<sup>33</sup>

There was a man in Israel,  
His name was Bar Kokhba.  
A tall, well-built, young man  
With glowing, radiant eyes.

He was a hero.  
He yearned for freedom.  
The whole nation loved him.  
He was a *hero*.

One day an incident occurred,  
What a sad incident [it was]!  
Bar Kokhba was taken captive  
and was put in a cage.

How horrible was this cage  
In which a lion raged.  
As soon as it spotted Bar Kokhba,  
The *lion* assaulted [him].

But you should know Bar Kokhba,  
How courageous and daring he was.  
He dashed and jumped on the lion  
And raced [out] as fast as an eagle.

Over mountains and valleys he cruised,  
Raising the banner of liberty.  
The whole nation applauded him:  
Bar Kokhba, *hurrah!*

The song provides the basic plot structure of Bar Kokhba's encounter with the lion. It introduces Bar Kokhba as a popular hero and sets the stage for the drama of his confrontation with the beast. The lion thus enters the scene in the role of the "villain" who challenges the hero. The situation changes, however, thanks to Bar Kokhba's courage and resourcefulness. A swift resolution of the conflict saves the hero and transforms his relations with the lion. At the end the man and the animal are portrayed as united under the banner of freedom, and the nation cheers them both. The melody of the song clearly emphasizes the most basic outline of the narrative, cheerfully rising and repeating the words (italicized in the text above)—"hero," "lion," "hurrah!"

The song provides little information about the specific historical context of the "sad incident." It does not tell who captured the hero and put him in the lion's den, nor why he is hailed as a lover of freedom. In fact, the lack of any allusion to the Romans or the revolt reinforces the legendary aura of this narrative, elevating Bar Kokhba beyond the constraints of time and place. Furthermore, on the basis of this song, one might legitimately conclude that the dramatic encounter with the lion is the single most important expression of Bar Kokhba's heroism and popular appeal.

In writing this song Kipnis was most likely inspired by a historical novel on the Bar Kokhba revolt, written by Israel Benjamin Levner and entitled *Bar Kokhba: A Historical Novel on the Destruction of Betar*.<sup>34</sup> Levner's work appears to be the first narrative in modern Hebrew literature to include the encounter between the hero and the lion. Levner constructs Bar Kokhba's captivity as a noble, voluntary act designed to save a female relative whom the Romans were keeping as a hostage. The author indicates that, even when the hero's followers planned to rescue him from prison, he refused to "run away like a thief" and shame the Jewish people.<sup>35</sup> When Bar Kokhba was thrown into the arena in Caesaria and was confronted with the starved lion, he prayed to God to help him and eventually overpowered the fierce beast with his bare fists.<sup>36</sup>

Levner's account of this dramatic confrontation in the Roman arena was later published as a children's short story for Lag ba-Omer.<sup>37</sup> In this short-story format, as in Kipnis's later song, the encounter ends with Bar Kokhba riding the lion to the rebels' camp, implying a connection to the revolt, yet leaving its precise nature vague. Levner's novel, however, offers a better insight into how the encounter with the lion was placed within the broader

context of the revolt. Although the oppressive Roman rule had inflamed the Jews, the open revolt broke out only after Bar Kokhba's success in overcoming the lion in the Roman arena. Furthermore, the novel gives the lion a central place in promoting the Jewish national cause: it accompanies the hero throughout the war, and its ferocious roar backs up Bar Kokhba's call to arms. The lion's fatal injury is the direct cause of the hero's death: Bar Kokhba is hit by an arrow when he bends down to pet the dying animal.<sup>38</sup> The lion's death thus foreshadows the Jews' ultimate defeat.

Levner's novel serves as a bridge between the traditional Jewish and the new Hebrew construction of Bar Kokhba's revolt. The subtitle of the historical novel follows the traditional focus on the ending of the revolt and the destruction of Betar, but as the title itself reflects, the hero's glorified image looms large throughout the novel and is closer to the modern Israeli portrait of the ancient hero than to the traditional one. Kipnis further modified Levner's description of the encounter between Bar Kokhba and the lion in line with the predominant values in secular national Hebrew culture. His song version therefore ignores the religious theme of the hero's prayer to God and glosses over the revolt's ultimate defeat. By emphasizing the victory over the lion and the nation's love of freedom, Kipnis constructs the legend that articulates and reinforces the Zionist commemoration of the revolt, highlighting the very act of opening the revolt and diminishing the significance of its outcome.

Whereas his song version emphasizes Bar Kokhba's unusual physical strength as the source of his triumph over the lion, Kipnis also wrote another tale, offering a different version of the encounter with the lion. Like his song Kipnis's story enjoyed wide popularity and has been reprinted in textbooks for the primary grades and in special holiday anthologies.<sup>39</sup> In this story Kipnis provides the historical context that is missing from his song version and elaborates his account. The tale identifies the enemy clearly and moves the arena (previously described as in Caesaria) to Rome. This construction allows Bar Kokhba to confront the Roman emperor in person at the very heart of his empire, enhancing the symbolic significance of this encounter.

Kipnis also adds two important episodes prior to Bar Kokhba's public performance in Rome that alter the reading of his confrontation with the lion. According to this version, Bar Kokhba and the lion first meet in the Judaeian mountains. The man and the animal befriend each other, and Bar Kokhba often rides the lion in the wilderness at night. One night Roman soldiers (who were searching for the Jewish hero) catch the lion, and when loyal Bar Kokhba looks for his lost friend, they capture him too and bring him to Rome.

The encounter with the lion in the Roman arena is described here as a result of the Jewish prisoner's direct and daring challenge of the Roman emperor. When the emperor orders Bar Kokhba to bow before him, the defiant hero breaks his chains and then reassures the scared emperor: "Don't be afraid! . . . the hero of Judaea would not hurt anyone, even his enemy, when he is unarmed."<sup>40</sup> He then challenges the emperor to a public duel. The emperor, however, prefers to have the hero fight a starved lion that turns out to be none other than Bar Kokhba's trusted friend. When the lion recognizes Bar Kokhba, it submissively crouches at his feet. The hero then leaps to its back, and the lion takes him out of the Roman arena, back to the rebels' camp.

This tale is fundamentally different from both Levner's earlier version and Kipnis's song version in that it emphasizes the harmonious relationship and intimate bond between the hero and the lion. The Judaeian hero and the king of beasts meet each other as equal leaders who display mutual respect and trust.<sup>41</sup> The man does not use his strength to overcome the beast but rather wins its friendship and support prior to the encounter devised by the Romans. The underlying message of the story, then, is the natural alliance between the Judaeian nation and nature, which Bar Kokhba and the lion represent, respectively. The Romans, whose devious plan is based on their "divide and rule" policy, fail to achieve their goal because they cannot possibly comprehend the special bond between the Hebrew nation and the forces of nature. This story too ends with Bar Kokhba riding the lion out of the Roman arena, rejoining his troops.

A more recent children's story by Shraga Gafni, published in 1976, incorporates the encounter between the hero and the lion in Rome into the narrative of Bar Kokhba's revolt. Gafni explains Bar Kokhba's imprisonment by the Romans as an act of retaliation for his public defiance of the Roman decree forbidding Jews to walk around the Temple's ruins.<sup>42</sup> Like Levner, he takes care to show that Bar Kokhba was not captured because he lacked courage or was careless but because Jewish national pride was more important to him than his personal freedom. Gafni introduces the theme of the lion early in the story, when the Romans announce that Bar Kokhba will serve as "a tasty meal" to a ferocious lion in Rome (22). The narrative includes harrowing descriptions of the cruelty that the hero suffers at the hands of the Romans on the way to Rome, and demonstrates that even these efforts did not succeed in weakening his defiant spirit.

The author attributes Bar Kokhba's triumph over the lion to his extraordinary physical strength. The hero, however, decides to spare the lion because it is not accountable for the Romans' vicious plan. In case the young readers suspect that Bar Kokhba might not be able to carry a fight to its

end, the author hastens to assure them that “if, instead of the lion’s neck, Bar Kokhba were holding Emperor Hadrian’s neck, he would have pressed on and on and strangled him until he was completely dead” (53).

Although the lion leaves the narrative at this point, the confrontation contributes directly to Bar Kokhba’s regained freedom: Hadrian, impressed with Bar Kokhba’s performance (and oblivious to the hero’s innermost desire for revenge, intimated to the readers), grants him freedom and makes him a Roman soldier. The Jewish hero uses this opportunity to return to Judaea and begin the revolt against Rome (50–54). While Gafni carefully builds up the dramatic tension culminating in the confrontation with the lion, his subsequent description of the revolt itself is significantly shorter and less dramatic. Since the book is entitled *Mered Bar Kokhba* (The Bar Kokhba Revolt), the reader is likely to remember the confrontation with the lion as the high point of Bar Kokhba’s single-handed heroism and the climax of the historical event.

Other tales do not explain how the story of the lion is relevant to Bar Kokhba’s experiences but rather assume this relevance as a cultural given.<sup>43</sup> These tales use the lion as a familiar symbolic representation of Bar Kokhba. The lion thus becomes a literary symbol that enhances the hero’s mythical stature, indicating that the Hebrew man-nature bond has been continued and introducing mythical time into historical time. The following examples illustrate the use of the lion in these new Hebrew tales.

In yet another story by Levin Kipnis, Bar Kokhba’s lion wanders about, searching for a hero to replace the dead Bar Kokhba. Having ceased its futile efforts, the lion “freezes” for centuries, until it learns about Trumpeldor and the new settlers of Tel Hai, and comes alive once again. When Trumpeldor dies during the defense of Tel Hai, the lion walks over to his grave and turns into a stone.<sup>44</sup> In another story Kipnis describes how a contemporary Israeli child sees Bar Kokhba riding his lion, urging Rabbi Aki-ba’s students to join his revolt. The child persuades the hero to let him join the rebels’ forces and contributes to the victory. The story ends with the child’s waking up, reframing it as a dream that occurs, quite appropriately, on Lag ba-Omer Eve.<sup>45</sup>

Along similar lines the well-known children’s writer Ya’akov Hurgin wrote a short story in which he describes how a group of the Jerusalem Hebrew boy scouts makes a trip to Betar on Lag ba-Omer Eve. The counselor tells the children about Bar Kokhba and his revolt and refers to Bar Kokhba’s lion. At the end of his storytelling, the child protagonist inquires about the lion’s fate, but this remains a mystery. The child’s concern is later rewarded, however, when he encounters Bar Kokhba’s armor bearer and the lion in a nearby cave at night. The armor bearer tells the Hebrew youth

that both he and the beast “froze” in time and space after Bar Kokhba’s death, but come back to life once a year on Lag ba-Omer. The ancient warrior also adds new information about the lion’s historic role: after the Romans found Bar Kokhba’s dead body, the lion guarded it and buried it in the Judaeian mountains. When the Romans later caught the lion and put it in a cage, together with Bar Kokhba’s armor bearer, hundreds of lions responded to its roar and devoured the Romans. “It was then that I understood,” the ancient warrior explains, “that Bar Kokhba’s lion was the king of the lions.” The beast and the man remained locked in the cage, and the rocks formed a cave around them for their protection.<sup>46</sup>

Tamar Bornstein’s story “The Escape of the Golden Arrow” uses an arrow as a bonding device that leads a contemporary modern Hebrew child to the ancient warrior on Lag ba-Omer. The child recognizes Bar Kokhba immediately because he is accompanied by a lion. The ancient hero reveals to the child that every year on Lag ba-Omer he reappears in order to tour the land, and offers him a ride on the lion. Before disappearing, Bar Kokhba tells the child that the arrow—once his—belongs to the heroes of Israel and asks him to keep it.<sup>47</sup>

Although the literary lore on Bar Kokhba’s lion is of relatively recent origin, the encounter with the lion was quickly established as part of the story of Bar Kokhba’s revolt in modern Israeli children’s literature. The visual image of the ancient hero riding the lion became a common representation in the Lag ba-Omer materials (see example reproduced here). Tales that simply take the lion’s association with Bar Kokhba for granted indicate the success of the invented tradition. The modern Hebrew legends about Bar Kokhba’s lion thus serve as an excellent example of how a new tradition is constructed in support of a national ideology.

Since most of the traditional Jewish sources on Bar Kokhba are of legendary character, the new legends do not introduce a change in quality but rather transform the content of this legendary literature. As a result the lion story can be seamlessly woven into the Bar Kokhba lore without indicating the temporal gap between the old and the new legends. Hurgin’s story “Bar Kokhba’s Lion” illustrates this point. After describing the scouts’ celebration, with singing and dancing around the bonfire, the author summarizes the guide’s story about Bar Kokhba.

Their guide got up and recounted for them Bar Kokhba’s deeds: how he scared the great Roman emperor to death, how he swiftly rode the giant lion, looking like an angel of terror. And the guide told them about [Bar Kokhba’s] heroic soldiers who uprooted cedars as they rode their mighty horses. But the Samaritan’s treason brought their

doom. One after another, the heroes of Israel fell. And as they were dying, they killed thousands of enemy soldiers. Their blood flowed in the valley as a powerful stream until it reached the faraway sea. But the cruel enemy was not satisfied with the heroes' death. They looked for Bar Kokhba. They were afraid of him. But they could not find him among the dead. Only in the evening were they able to find his giant body with a snake wrapped around its neck. All the enemy's troops could not harm him. A snake had bitten him and he died.<sup>48</sup>

The new tradition was thus incorporated into the story along with a selection of older traditions that seem to glorify the leader of the revolt. Israeli children can thus assume that the story of the lion is part of centuries-old tradition about the ancient revolt.

In light of the lion's persistence in the Lag ba-Omer materials, it is often the very first association that Israelis have when thinking about Bar Kokhba. Indeed, as my interviews indicated, this association may be far better established in Israelis' mind than the actual outcome of the historical revolt.

### *Invented Tradition: The Old and the New*

The success of the new tradition about Bar Kokhba's lion in taking root in Israeli culture is, to a great measure, a function of its skillful adaptation of traditional tale structures and motifs, which lend it an aura of antiquity and credibility. At the same time the new lore adapted the traditional motifs to contemporary Zionist views to assure the desired ideological message. Ironically, this new literature used familiar folkloric forms to create a tradition that would reinforce an antitraditionalist ideology.

In its basic plot structure the new Bar Kokhba lore conforms to a familiar structure of heroic tales, in which the hero encounters and overcomes major obstacles on the way to fulfilling his major mission. In the new Hebrew tradition Bar Kokhba's imprisonment by the Romans and subsequent confrontation with the lion constitute obstacles that the hero needs to overcome before he can openly approach his main mission and challenge, namely, to start the revolt against the Romans.<sup>49</sup> This sequence is important, since the familiarity with the deep structure of heroic tales conditions us to expect that the victory over the lion foreshadows the successful resolution of the subsequent confrontation with the Romans.

The struggle with a lion, the symbol of mastery and might, is also a popular folk motif that is used cross culturally to glorify heroes (Gilgamesh and Hercules are two notable examples) and appears in traditional Jewish

tales. In overpowering a lion with bare hands, Bar Kokhba follows the example of two famous biblical heroes, Samson and David.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the literary descriptions of Bar Kokhba's impressive body and extraordinary physical strength appear to draw upon Samson's legendary image. Furthermore, in a few stories Bar Kokhba, like Samson, manages to break his chains.<sup>51</sup> And in Levner's tale Bar Kokhba's prayer to God before the confrontation with the lion echoes Samson's prayer to the Almighty to allow him a final show of strength in front of the enemy.<sup>52</sup>

Like other biblical heroes—Samson in his encounters with the Philistines and David's duel with Goliath—captive Bar Kokhba faces the Roman enemy alone. In all these cases, however, the significance of the heroes' success supersedes their individual fate: their victory has direct implications for the nation as a whole. In the case of Samson, as in Bar Kokhba's case, the tendency to elaborate on the heroes' earlier victories blurs the memory of their ultimate defeat.

If the heroic narrative tradition helped shape the new Bar Kokhba lore, the new tradition nevertheless departs from traditional Jewish tales in its distinctively secular tone. Although Levner's early version (which was written in exile) about Bar Kokhba's encounter the lion includes the hero's prayer to God, this theme dropped out of Hebrew tales written in the pre-state period in Palestine. In light of the insistence of traditional Jewish heroic tales upon divine support of victories, this change is highly significant. The biblical stories of Samson and David attribute the heroes' ability to overcome the lion to God's help. Thus, "the spirit of the Lord came mightily" upon Samson as he killed the lion with his bare hands (Judges 14:6), whereas David tells King Saul that "the Lord who saved me from lion and bear also save me from the Philistine" (1 Samuel 17:37).<sup>53</sup> In contrast the new Hebrew texts attribute Bar Kokhba's success to his daring spirit, physical strength, resourcefulness, and strong bonding with nature (the lion), qualities that the new Hebrew culture associates with the ancient as well as the new Hebrews.

The secularization of tradition that this new lore reflects is typical of a broader cultural trend during the Yishuv period. It is interesting to note, however, that with the weakening of the secularist orientation of Israeli society during the 1970s and 1980s and the rise of a nationalist religious trend, Gafni's story (published in 1976) reintroduced Bar Kokhba's religious observance into the story. The hero, according to Gafni, risked his life when he refused to work on the Sabbath and preferred to starve rather than eat pork before the fight with the starved lion.<sup>54</sup>

As we have seen, the new tradition about Bar Kokhba's encounter with the lion emphasizes the cooperation between the human leader and the king of beasts. In the depiction of the lion as an agent of help, the modern



Hebrew tales draw upon other international tale motifs that are particularly popular in traditional Jewish tales: the lion does not harm a saint, the lion lies down at the saint's feet, the lion helps a saint out of trouble.<sup>55</sup> The new Hebrew tradition thus highlights Bar Kokhba's superior qualities as it describes how the lion crouches at his feet, licks him either in submission or gratitude, helps him out of captivity, and supports his fight for freedom.<sup>56</sup> In a typical departure from the traditional lore that describes how a lion helps highly observant Jews, the new Hebrew lore shifts to the leader of a national struggle for freedom. In the new tales, then, Bar Kokhba plays the role traditionally assigned to rabbis and other learned or righteous Jews.

A brief comparison of recent Bar Kokhba literature and traditional Jewish tales revolving around the lion motif illuminates the significance of this change. A popular traditional Jewish tale about a lion who provides protection and help focuses on a pious Jew who refuses to travel with a convoy on the Sabbath and is therefore left alone in the wilderness. A lion appears and guards him while he observes the Sabbath, and at the end of the holy day it gives the Jew a ride so that he can rejoin the convoy.<sup>57</sup>

Traditional tales, like the new Bar Kokhba lore, often highlight the lion's protective role during conflicts with foreign rulers. The lion defeats a vicious plan to use it as an agent of destruction, and its cooperation with the Jew ultimately changes the situation in favor of the Jewish community as a whole. This theme appears in the biblical description of Daniel in the lions' den (Daniel 6: 16–21) and still thrives in oral traditions collected in modern Israel. The Israel Folktales Archive holds several examples of Jewish tales that use these motifs. For example, a Moroccan Jewish tale describes how a wicked king put two big lions in an urban Jewish quarter. When the hungry lions got out of their cage, a learned Jew ordered them to lie down, and they followed him to the king. The pious man made the king promise that he would never again cause trouble to the Jews.<sup>58</sup>

Much like Bar Kokhba's lion, these traditional lions are miraculously transformed from ferocious beasts to "pets" who lick pious men's feet and subordinate themselves to their will. The lion recognizes the superior power of a holy Jewish person, which the non-Jews fail to recognize. Yet while the traditional tales follow the "Purim paradigm" of assigning the Jews' deliverance to the foreign ruler's change of heart, the recent Bar Kokhba literature portrays the hero as a self-reliant man who saves himself in a critical moment.<sup>59</sup> That the ancient hero achieves this success by openly defying the Roman emperor clearly conforms to the Zionist emphasis on the ancient Hebrews' activism, resourcefulness, and self-reliance in sharp contrast to the Jews of Exile, who depended on others' help.

Another relatively recent tale about a hero's encounter with a lion supports these observations about the deliberate secularization of traditional

Jewish tales during the Yishuv period. The hero of this story is Michael Heilperin, a Jewish settler of the Second Aliya and an early advocate of Jewish self-defense. Responding to an Arab's challenge, Heilperin entered a lion's cage in a circus in Jaffa. The unarmed Zionist settler proceeded to sing the Jewish national anthem in the lion's cage before he safely got out.<sup>60</sup>

Like the Bar Kokhba lore this tale displays selective borrowing from Jewish tradition. A Jew's survival in the lion's den is a traditional Jewish theme. But this modern Hebrew tale introduces a deliberate inversion of the traditional tales. Whereas they describe Jews who are forced into the lions' den by their persecutors, Heilperin freely chooses to do this. And while the traditional Jew proves his religious devotion by praying to God at a moment of heightened personal risk, the modern Hebrew hero replaces the traditional martyr's prayer with the Zionist national anthem.<sup>61</sup>

In the peculiar ways in which historical memory and folk traditions intertwine, the story of Bar Kokhba's lion received an unexpected boost from later archeological findings. Long after the legend had become part of Israeli folk culture, an archeological dig in the Judean desert uncovered letters signed by Bar-Kokhba, along with an engraved image of a man struggling with a lion, which was used as a seal. In his report about this excavation, Yigael Yadin remarks that this visual image was common in Greek and Roman seals representing Hercules's fight with the lion, and that Bar Kokhba's headquarters may have used this image to represent Judaea's struggle against Rome.<sup>62</sup> Two other Israeli scholars note the similarity between the seal image and the modern Bar Kokhba lore. Shmuel Avramsky remarks that "it is noteworthy that modern literature and art conceived this theme on an interpretive and intuitive basis";<sup>63</sup> and Yehuda Dvir vaguely states that "the late folk legend" about Bar Kokhba riding a lion may have had some actual foundation.<sup>64</sup>

Although one can only speculate about a link between the newly discovered ancient seal and the recent literary tales, it is possible that an old oral tradition about Bar Kokhba and the lion had escaped the written records for centuries but was preserved by folk memory and found its way into the more receptive nationalist orientation of modern Hebrew literature. Or one may argue that the universal appeal of this folk theme may have independently attracted both Bar Kokhba's followers in Antiquity and early modern Hebrew writers who wished to construct new legendary tales to support the emergent national Hebrew culture. By now, however, Bar Kokhba's lion is safely established in Israeli literary and folk traditions, representing the glorified image of the ancient hero who rebelled against Rome.

34. According to the director of the Tel Hai historical museum, the number of visitors is estimated at 81,000 per year. I am grateful to Tamar Katriel for this information.

35. See also Tamar Katriel, "Remaking a Place: Cultural Productions in an Israeli Pioneering Museum," *History and Memory* 5 (Fall/Winter 1993): 104-35.

36. *Ha-Aretz*, March 21, 1921, 2. See also *Do'ar ha-Yom*, March 8, 1920; Nordau, "Ha-Kapitan Trumpeldor"; Snir, "Trumpeldor," *Kuntres*, no. 208 (March 6, 1925): 6.

37. Similar statements were made by other Hebrew youth in the Yishuv period. See, for example, Yosef Nedava, *Sefer Olei ha-Gardom* (The book of the executed) (Tel Aviv: Shelah, 1952), 265. That patriotic statements by youth affiliated with the Revisionist movement were not accepted as national slogans clearly reflects Labor's hegemony during those years.

38. Anita Shapira suggests that Tel Hai's rise as a national myth is linked to the centrality of "defense" as the guiding principle of the settlers' policy in the Arab-Jewish conflict during those early decades. This defensive conception was later replaced by a more offensive ethos; *Halikha al Kav ha-Ofek*, 42-44.

#### Chapter 4: The Bar Kokhba Revolt

1. References to the Bar Kokhba revolt are made in Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary (London: Heinemann, [1925], 1955), 69.12-14, pp. 447-51; Spartianus, *De Vita Hadriani*, quoted in Shmu'el Yeivin, *Milhemet Bar Kokhba* (The Bar Kokhba war) (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1957), 59-61; and Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lako (London: Heinemann, [1926], 1975), 4.6, pp. 311-13. For a review of the study of these and other sources, see Benjamin Isaac and Aharon Oppenheimer, "The Revolt of Bar Kokhba: Ideology and Modern Scholarship," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 36, no. 1 (1985): 33-60.

2. These two reasons are given, respectively, by two Roman historians, Dio Cassius and Spartianus. See also Yadin, *Bar Kokhba*, 19-23; Aharon Oppenheimer, ed., *Mered Bar-Kokhva* (The Bar Kokhba revolt) (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1980), 11; Isaac and Oppenheimer, "The Revolt of Bar Kokhba," 45-48.

3. Yadin, *Bar Kokhba*, 15, 24-27; Isaac and Oppenheimer, "The Revolt of Bar Kokhba," 53-57.

4. Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 69:12-14; see also Yeivin, *Milhemet Bar Kokhva*, 115-21; Shmu'el Avramsky, *Bar Kokhva Nesi Yisrael* (Bar Kokhba, the leader of Israel) (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1961), 120.

5. Babylonian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 29:1, 30:2.

6. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4:6.

7. Palestinian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 4:8; Midrash *Ekha Rabba* (Lamentation **Rabba**) 2:5.

8. Isaac and Oppenheimer, "The Revolt of Bar Kokhba," 57.

9. *Ekha Rabba* 2:5; a slightly different version of this paragraph appears in the Palestinian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 4:8.

10. Yeivin, *Milhemet Bar Kokhva*, 61-62; Avramsky, *Bar Kokhva Nesi Yisrael*, 53-54; Yadin, *Bar Kokhba*, 18, 28-29, 124. Richard G. Marks argues that later generations may have believed Bar Koziba to be his real name and therefore its use does not necessarily reflect a negative view of the leader; *The Image of Bar Kokhba in Traditional Jewish Literature: False Messiah and National Hero* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 1993), 15. Nonetheless, the name clearly evokes negative associations.

11. According to Marks, the first association of the name Bar Koziba (used in the Jewish literature) with the names Barchochebas or Chochebas (used by non-Jewish sources) was made in the sixteenth century by the Jewish historians Azarya dei Rossi (*Me'or Einayim* [Light to the eyes], 1573) and David Ganz (*Tsemah David* [The sprout of David], 1592). See Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba*, 162-64, 174.

12. Marks's research, first made available as a doctoral dissertation (University of California at Los Angeles, 1980) has made a most important contribution to the study of the traditional Jewish perception of Bar Kokhba.

13. *Ta'anit* 4:8; *Ekha Rabba* 2:5. See also Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba*, 13-57.

14. See Yehoshua Efron, "Milhemet Bar Kokhva le-Or ha-Masoret ha-Talmudit ha-Eretz Yisra'elit ke-Neged ha-Bavlit" (Bar Kokhba in the light of the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmudic traditions), in Aharon Oppenheimer and Uriel Rappoport, eds., *Mered Bar-Kokhva: Mehkarim Hadashim* (The Bar Kokhba revolt: A new approach) (Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak Ben-Zvi, 1984), 63-64.

15. Rabbi Elazar's importance for the rebels' cause is clearly articulated in a story about a Samaritan's advice to Hadrian to kill the rabbi in order to guarantee the Romans' success: "So long as that old cock wallows in ashes, you will not conquer it [Betar]"; *Ekha Rabba* 2:5.

16. The exception here is Avraham Ibn Daud's reference to a three-generation dynasty of Bar Kokhba in *Sefer ha-Kabala* (The book of tradition), ed. Gerson Cohen (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967), 3:28-36.

17. Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon), *Mishne Torah: Hilkhot Melakhim* [Maimonides' Code: Laws concerning kings] 11.3, quoted in Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba*, 81-82.

18. For a detailed analysis of the twelfth-century references to Bar Kokhba by Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac), Ibn Daud, and Maimonides, see Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba*, 57-134.

19. *Ibid.*, 135-83.

20. Lewis, *History*, 29-30.

21. Jewish historical novels written first in European languages and only later in Hebrew became a popular genre in the second half of the nineteenth century. The rise of interest in Rabbi Akiba and Bar Kokhba therefore extends beyond works written in Hebrew. Among historical novels and plays on that period are the novel *Rabbi Akiva* by Meir (Marcus) Lehmann which was translated into Hebrew in Kra-

kow, 1896; Judah Leo Landau's *Bar Kokhva: Shir Hezyon Tuga ba-Hamesh Ma'arakhot* (Bar Kokhva: A play in five scenes) was published in Lvov in 1884, and Kalman Shulman's *Harisot Betar* (The Ruins of Betar) published in Vilna in 1900.

22. For examples of poems relating to Bar Kokhba, see Bialik, "Ein Zot Ki Rabat Tsrartunu: Mi-Shirei Bar Kokhva" (You have oppressed us unbearably: From Bar Kokhba's poems), 1898; reprinted in *Shirim*, 96; Shaul Tchernichovsky's poems "le-Nokhah ha-Yam" (Facing the Sea), 1910-1920, reprinted in his *Shirim* (Poems) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1959), 119-224; "Betara" (To Betar), 1903; reprinted in *Shirim*, 273-74; and a play "Bar Kokhba" in *Kitvei Tchernichovsky* (Tchernichovsky: Collected works) (Tel Aviv: Hotsa'at Va'ad ha-Yovel, 1932); Ya'akov Cahan, "Bar Kokhva" (1933), reprinted in *Kitvei Ya'akov Cahan*, 3: 127-28; Shmu'el Halkin, *Bar Kokhba: Dramatischer Poeme* (Bar Kokhba: A dramatic poem) (Moscow: Emes, 1939) in Yiddish. For examples of prose, see Israel Benjamin Levner's work on Bar Kokhba, first published in *Ha-Hayim veba-Teva*, 1905; reprinted posthumously as *Bar Kokhva: Sipur Histori mi-Yemei Harisot Betar* (Bar Kokhba: A historical novel on the destruction of Betar) (Warsaw: Barkai, 1923); Avraham Goldfaden's musical play in Yiddish, *Bar Kokhba: Der Zubn Fun dem Shtern: A Musikalishe Melodrama in Raymen* (Bar Kokhba, the son of star: An enlightened melodrama in rhymes) (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1908); David Pinsky, *Mesihim: Dramen* (Messiahs: Dramas) (1928), translated into Hebrew *Mesihim: Dramot* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1952). Bar Kokhba has continued to be the focus of literary works.

23. On the Bar Kokhba Association, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 4:228; on the magazine *Bar Kokhba*, see Leo Baeck Institute, *Library and Archives News*, no. 22 (June 1985); on the Betar youth organization, see Ben-Yeruham, *Sefer Betar*, I: 39-45.

24. Bialik, "Ein Zot Ki Rabat Tsrartunu." Note that this poem was written on Lag ba-Omer.

25. Tchernichovsky, "le-Nokhah ha-Yam."

26. Shapira, *Halikha al Kav ha-Ofek*, 28.

27. Rachel Yana'it Ben-Zvi, *Anu Olim* (We climb up) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1962), 103.

28. David Ben-Gurion, in a speech in a ceremony of pledging allegiance, June 27, 1948, reprinted in *Medinat Yisrael ha-Mehudeshet* (The renewed state of Israel) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1969), 1:207-8.

29. Quoted in Yonathan Shapiro, *Ilit Lelo Mamshikhim* (An elite without successors) (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat ha-Po'alim, 1984), 110.

30. Tamar Bornstein-Lazar, *Lag ba-Omer* (Revivim, n.d.), 62.

31. Elboim-Dror, *Ha-Hinukh ha-Ivri be-Eretz Yisrael*, 2:351-55; see also Shapiro, *Ilit Lelo Mamshikhim*, 110.

32. See, for example, Lag ba-Omer stories by the prominent children's writer and educator, Levin Kipnis, reprinted in *Mo'adei Yisrael: Lag ba-Omer* (Israel's holidays: Lag ba-Omer) (Tel Aviv: Samuel Simson, 1974); Z. Ariel, M. Blich, and N. Persky, eds. *Mikra'ot Yisrael le-Khita Het* (Israel's reader: Textbook for the eighth grade) (Jerusalem: Masada, 1966), 510-18; Bornstein-Lazar, *Lag ba-Omer*;

*Shi'urim be-Historia le-Veit ha-Sefer ha-Mamlakhti* (Lessons in history for the public schools) (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, Center for Curriculum Development, 1987), 2:115.

33. See, for example, Levin Kipnis, "Yigal Asher Yigal" (Yigal who redeems) in *Mo'adei Yisrael*, 17-28; Tamar Bornstein, "Menusato shel Hets ha-Zahav" (The escape of the golden arrow), in *Sipurai ha-Abuvim* (My beloved tales) (Tel Aviv: Zolkovitz, 1960), 7-13. For a similar use of this device in works relating to Trumfeldor, see chapter 6.

34. The lyrics of the song "Bar-Kokhva veba-Arye" (Bar Kokhba and the lion) were written by Levin Kipnis. For further discussion of this song, see the section relating to Bar Kokhba and the lion in chapter 7.

35. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 285, quoted in Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba*, 10.

36. Yadin, *Bar Kokhba*, 15. See also Yeivin, *Milhemet Bar Kokhva*, 131.

37. Yadin's preface to Avramsky, *Bar Kokhva Nesi Yisrael*, 3.

38. On the ambiguity concerning the liberation of Jerusalem, see Isaac and Oppenheimer, "The Revolt of Bar Kokhba," 54-55. However, the liberation is presented as a fact in Yadin, *Bar Kokhba*, 18, and in the public school textbook narratives, such as Ariel, Blich, and Persky, *Mikra'ot Yisrael le-Khita Bet*, 389, and *Mikra'ot Yisrael le-Khita Het*, 511; Natan Persky, ed., *Mikra'ot Yisrael Hadasot le-Khita Bet* (The new Israel's reader: Textbook for the second grade) (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1975), 405.

39. See Almog, *Zionism and History*, 110.

40. Yadin, *Bar Kokhba*, 21.

41. Yisrael Eldad, *Pulmus ha-Hurban u-Lekahav* (The controversy on the destruction and its lessons) (Jerusalem: Van Leer Foundation, 1982), 9-10, 70.

42. Palestinian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 4:8. For similar versions, see Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 58a and *Ekha Rabba* 2:5. For a comparison of the different versions, see Yeivin, *Milhemet Bar Kokhva*, 153-66.

43. Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba*, 181-83.

44. Yadin, *Bar Kokhba*, 15. Hereafter pages are given in the text.

45. Amos Elon, *The Israelis: Founders and Sons* (New York: Bantam, 1971), 365.

46. In addition to these soldiers' participation, army officers gave useful advice to Yadin. For example, an Israeli general visiting the site suggested using mine detectors to find more coins (86).

47. Eldad, *Pulmus ha-Hurban u-Lekahav*, 4-5.

### Chapter 5: The Fall of Masada

1. Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, book 7.8.3, in *Complete Works*, trans. W. Whiston (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel, 1960), 599. Hereafter pages are given in the text.

45. *Ibid.*; Hebrew verses rhyme.
46. *Haverenu*, Adar 1924, 1.
47. See, for example, Hanoach Bartov, *Shel Mi Ata Yeled?* (Whose child are you?) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1970), 241; Amalya Kahana-Carmon, *Ve-Yare'ah be-Emek Ayalon* (And moon in the valley of Ayalon) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uḥad, 1971), 176.
48. Within Jewish tradition the Hebrew term *agada* was first used in reference to the nonlegalistic texts in the talmudic-midrashic literature, which served primarily for teaching ethical and moral principles. Later, *agada* referred also to historical-biographical texts related to postbiblical rabbis. Although these tales are not historically accurate, they are presented as true accounts; *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 2: 354-55; Yosef Heinemann, *Agadot ve-Toldoteiben* (Agada and its development) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 11-12; Dan Ben-Amos, "Generic Distinctions in the Aggadah," in F. Talmage, ed., *Studies in Jewish Folklore* (Cambridge, Mass.: Association for Jewish Studies, 1980), 52; Emanuel Bin-Gorion, *Shevilei ha-Agada* (The paths of the legend) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1970), 33-35, 40-44.
49. Yosef Dan, *Ha-Sipur ha-Ivri bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim* (The Hebrew story in the Middle Ages) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 25.
50. See Liebman and Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel*.

### Chapter 7: Bar Kokhba, the Bonfire, and the Lion

1. Eric Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
2. "When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the priest . . . And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the Sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks" (Leviticus 23:10, 15; see also Deuteronomy 16:9).
3. On the mourning practices and their diversity see Solomon Ganzfried, ed., *Code of Jewish Law* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1961), 3:52-53; "Omer," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 12:1385-86; Levinsky, *Sefer ha-Mo'adim*, 7:333-34; Mordekhai Ha-Cohen, "Lag ba-Omer: Mekorot, Halakhot, Minhagim" (Lag ba-Omer: Sources, laws, customs), *Mahanayim* 56 (1961): 20-28.
4. Babylonian Talmud, *Yebamot* 62b.
5. Rabbi Menahem Ha-Meiri in his commentary to *Yebamot* 62b, *Beit ha-Behira*. See Levinsky, *Sefer ha-Mo'adim*, 6:342-43; *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 12:1387.
6. *Ha-Entsiklopedia ha-Ivrit* (The Hebrew encyclopedia) (Jerusalem: Encyclopaedias Publishing Company, 1971), 21:178.
7. Whether the mourning customs stop at that point or are resumed following Lag ba-Omer vary across the different Jewish communities. See Avraham Ben-Ya'akov, *Yalkut Minhagim: Mi-Minbagei Shivtei Yisrael* (An anthology of Jewish communities' customs) (Jerusalem: Ha-Madpis ha-Memshalti, 1967); Ha-Cohen, "Lag ba-Omer," 20-31; Levinsky, *Sefer ha-Mo'adim*, 6:360-70.

8. Menahem Ha-Cohen, "Hetz va-Keshet be-Lag ba-Omer," (Bow and arrows on Lag ba-Omer) *Mahanayim* 26 (1961): 38-40.
9. Lou H. Silberman, "The Sefira Season: A Study in Folklore," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 22 (1942): 222-25; Theodor H. Gaster, *Festivals of the Jewish Year*, 3d ed., (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1974), 52-53; Julian Moregenstern, "La ba-Omer: Its Origin and Import," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 29 (1968): 81-90.
10. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 10:1357.
11. Note that in Hebrew the word for bow and for rainbow is exactly the same. On the explanations regarding the mystical traditions, see Levinsky, *Sefer ha-Mo'adim*, 6:345-53, 359, 361-66, 408-41; Meir Benayahu, "Hitnahagut Mekubalei Tsefat be-Meron" (The behavior of the Safed Kabbalists in Meron), *Sefunot* 6 (1962): 24-34; Betsalel Landau, ed., *Masa Meron* (The Meron journey) (Jerusalem: Usha, 1966).
12. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 12:1388; Levinsky, *Sefer ha-Mo'adim*, 6:340-42.
13. This interpretation was raised by the scholar Nahman Krokmal in the first half of the nineteenth century. J. Derenbourg, "Le 33e Jour de l'Omer," *Revue des Études Juives* 29 (1894): 149; Ha-Cohen, "Lag ba-Omer," 30.
14. Levinsky, *Sefer ha-Mo'adim*, 6:353-54.
15. *Lag ba-Omer: Hoveret la-Talmid* (Lag ba-Omer: A student's work guide) (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, Curriculum Planning Department, 1987), 22.
16. See, for example, B. Avivi and A. Keren-Tal, eds., *Mo'adim le-Simḥa* (Happy holidays) (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1943), 3-9; Levin Kipnis and Yemima Tchernovitch, eds., *Gan Gani* (My nursery school) (1947; Tel Aviv: Bronfman, 1978), 113-14; Levinsky, *Sefer ha-Mo'adim*, 6:341.
17. This view was supported by a remark made by the prominent medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, that Rabbi Akiba was *nose kelim* (armor-bearer) of the king Bar Koziba, in his commentary on laws concerning kings, *Hilkhot Melakhim*, 11:3.
18. Ariel, Blich, and Persky, *Mikra'ot Yisrael le-Khita Bet*, 339; Persky, *Mikra'ot Yisrael Hadasot le-Khita Bet*, 404. Note that in Kipnis and Tchernovitch, *Gan Gani*, and in Z. Ariel, Z. Vilensky, and N. Persky, eds., *Alfoni: Mikra'a le-Khita Alef* (Reader for the first grade) (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1968) Rabbi Akiba is not mentioned at all. See also L. Kipnis, A. Buchner and Y. Levinton, eds., *Sefer ha-Kita Gimel* (Reader for the third grade) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1962), and Arye Horshi, *Haḡim vi-Yemei Zikaron la-Talmid* (Holidays and memorial days for the student) (Tel Aviv: Bronfman, 1974), 185-89.
19. B. Yoel, "Haḡ ha-Mered" (The holiday of the revolt), *Ha-Aretz* (Lag ba-Omer Eve 1927), reprinted in Z. Y. Yaffe and Y. Spivak, eds., *Medura* (Bonfire) (Jerusalem: Keren Kayemet le-Yisrael, 1929), 6-7.
20. Levinsky, *Sefer ha-Mo'adim*, 6:480; Yaffe and Spivak, *Medura*, 111-26. Note also that later the Israel Defense Forces established a tradition of shooting contests on Lag ba-Omer.

21. *Lag ba-Omer: Hoveret la-Talmid*, 24.
22. This information is based on the *Lag ba-Omer* tales I found at the Israel Folktales Archives at Haifa University in 1987.
23. Avraham Goldfaden's *Bar Kokhba: Der zuhn Fun dem Shtern* (Bar Kokhba, the son of star: An enlightened melodrama in rhymes) was published in 1887 in Yiddish (see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 7:716) and in 1908 in New York by the Hebrew Publishing Company. The play was translated into Hebrew by B. Yedidya, and excerpts were reprinted in the *Lag ba-Omer* anthology for children, edited by Yaffe and Spivak, *Medura*, 84-85.
24. Arye Horshi, *Hagim vi-Yemei Zikaron la-Talmid*, 198. See also Levinsky, *Sefer ha-Mo'adim*, 6:478.
25. Persky, *Mikra'ot Israel Hadashot le-Khita Bet*, 404. See also Kipnis, *Mo'adei Yisrael*, 16. Ariel, Blich, and Persky, *Mikra'ot Yisrael ke-Khita Bet*, 339; Kipnis and Tchernovitch, *Gan Gani*, 13. Another, though less common, interpretation of the custom of kindling bonfires suggests that the Romans prohibited the kindling of fires because they knew that the rebels used them for communication; therefore bonfires have become a symbol of resistance; Ha-Cohen, "Lag ba-Omer," 38.
26. These reports are reprinted in Yaffe and Spivak, *Medura*, 112-13.
27. See, for example, Yaffe and Spivak, *Medura*; Dalya Talmi, ed., *Leket Shirei Lag ba-Omer* (An anthology of Lag ba-Omer songs) (Tel Aviv: Kiryat ha-Hinukh, n.d.); Bornstein-Lazar, *Lag ba-Omer*, 18-24, 34-54.
28. See, for example, the two humorous pieces on this phenomenon by Ephra'im Kishon, "Hag ha-Mayim" (The water holiday) in *Ba-Ahad ha-Amashim* (One of yester days) (Tel Aviv: Tversky, 1963), 159; Yonatan Gefen, "Ha-Mekosheshet ha-Ketana" (The little gatherer), *Ma'ariv*, May 2, 1975. On the competitive nature of wood gathering, see also Horshi, *Hagim vi-Yemei Zikaron la-Talmid*, 198.
29. On the custom of burning a Haman effigy on Purim, see Hayyim Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals: History and Observance* (New York: Schocken, 1962), 267. On the custom of burning Hitler's effigy during World War II, see Levinsky, *Sefer ha-Mo'adim*, 6:478. During the *Hilula* celebration on Mount Meron, participants burn clothes immersed in oil, a custom that was disapproved by some religious authorities; see Shmu'el Hagai, "Ha-Hadlaka veba-Halakha" (The bonfire and the religious law) *Mahanayim* 56 (1961): 34-37.
30. Lipovetsky, *Yosef Trumpeldor*; Poznansky, *Me-Hayei Yosef Trumpeldor*; Ben-Ari and Kena'ani, *Yosef Trumpeldor*; Laskov, *Trumpeldor*.
31. Kipnis wrote hundreds of short stories, poems, songs, and plays for young children and was editor of numerous children's books. See Tidhar, *Entsiklopedia le-Halutsei ha-Yishuv u-Vonav*, 5:2103-5; Ofek, *Sifrut ba-Yeladim ha-Ivrit*, 2:342-52.
32. See, for example, Kipnis and Tchernovitch, *Gan Gani*, 114. This song is still among the first ones that Israeli children learn around the celebration of Lag ba-Omer. See Telma Elyagon and Rafi Pesahzon, eds., *Elef Zemer ve-Od Zemer* (The Israeli sing-along) (Ramat Gan: Kinneret, 1985), 4:231.
33. Note that the Hebrew verses rhyme and that the italicized words are repeated twice. The melody for the song was composed by Mordekhai Ze'ira, who,

- like Kipnis himself, contributed to the making of many Israeli folk songs. The first publication of this song was in *Gilyonot* (an anthology of stories and songs for the nursery school), ed. Levin Kipnis (Tel Aviv: Association for Nursery School teachers, 1929), 59-62. I would like to thank Meir Noy, who established an archive of Jewish and Israeli folk songs, for this information.
34. We can assume that Kipnis read Levner's work on Bar Kokhba and borrowed the theme of Bar Kokhba and the lion. Levner published Kipnis's first works in his children's magazine *Ha-Perahim* and encouraged Kipnis to pursue his career as a writer; Tidhar, *Entsiklopedia le-Halutsei ha-Yishuv u-Vonav*, 5:2103-5. Levner's work on Bar Kokhba, which was first published in *Ha-Hayim veba-Teva* in 1905, was reissued as a book, *Bar Kokhba: Sipur Histori mi-Yemei Harisot Betar* (Bar Kokhba: A historical novel on the destruction of Betar) (Warsaw: Barkai, 1923) and again in Israel in 1950.
35. Levner, *Bar Kokhva*, 42.
36. *Ibid.*, 47.
37. Israel Benjamin Levner, "Bar Kokhva veba-Arye" (Bar Kokhba and the lion), in Avivi and Keren-Tal, *Mo'adim le-Simha*, 3-6.
38. Levner, *Bar Kokhva*, 54, 82, 105, 116.
39. Kipnis's story is published in two versions (short and long) according to the age of the targeted readers. For the full text of the story, see "Kefirei Arayot" (The lions) in his *Mo'adei Yisrael*, 33-42; for the shorter version see Ariel, Vilensky, and Persky, *Alfoni*, and Ariel, Blich, and Persky, *Mikra'ot Yisrael le-Khita Bet*.
40. Kipnis, "Kefirei Arayot," 38.
41. Kipnis also makes an overt analogy between Bar Kokhba and the lion in the description of their earlier encounters: both like wandering alone at night in the mountains, both shake their hair/mane; and both "roar" to communicate to the other.
42. Shraga Gafni, *Mered Bar Kokhva* (The Bar Kokhba revolt) (Tel Aviv: Amihai, 1976), 12. Hereafter pages are given in the text.
43. The image of Bar Kokhba riding his lion also appears in Sha'ul Tchernichovsky's earlier poem "Betara."
44. Kipnis, "Ari ha-Even," 23-24.
45. Kipnis, *Yigal Asher Yigal*, 17-28. The story title uses the double meaning of *Yigal* as both a first name and the future tense of the verb "to redeem" implying that the child will be the redeemer.
46. Ya'akov Hurgin, "Ha-Lavi shel Bar Kokhva" (Bar Kokhba's lion), in *Shal-shelet ha-Gevura*, 32-41.
47. Bornstein, "Menusato shel Hetz ha-Zahav," 7-13.
48. Hurgin, "Ha-Lavi shel Bar Kokhva," 33.
49. Bar Kokhba's victory over the lion is thus analogous to Lord Raglan's theme of "victory over a king and/or giant, dragon, or wild beast"; *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (1936; New York: Meridian Books, 1979), 174. Similarly, the older legend about the snake who killed Bar Kokhba fits Raglan's theme of a hero who loses favor with God, is defeated in the war, and encounters a mys-