



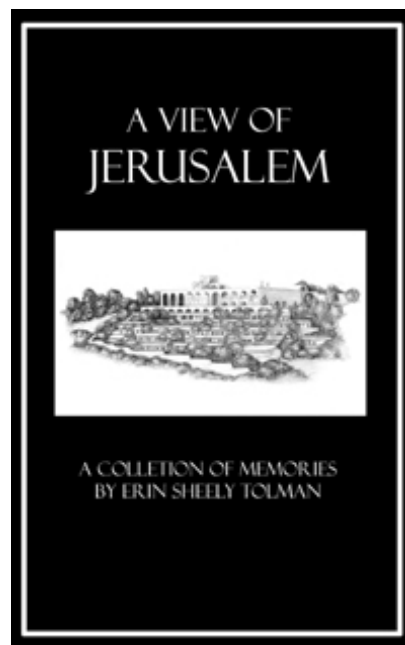
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A Collection of Memories***

by
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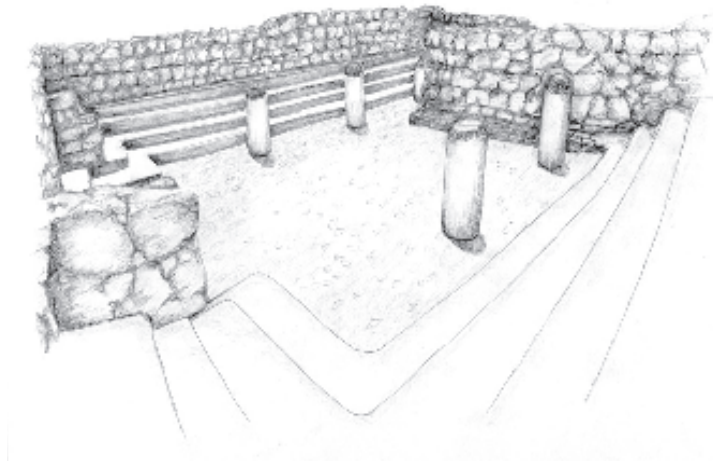
~ MASADA ~

All I can see is the brown desert stretching for miles in all directions while our bus moves down the seemingly endless road. There are no trees rushing past to gauge speed and no signs of any kind to mark distance so it is hard to judge the passage of time. I scan the horizon, watching for a break in the monotonous landscape. Suddenly I see it – Masada, an archeological site steeped in history and rumor. The busses pull up to a parking lot and our group leader hands out cable car tickets which we gratefully take after seeing the height of the mountain. The ride to the top is incredibly steep and the air inside the car is stiflingly hot. I climb a few stairs after exiting the cable car and step back almost two thousand years.

Herod the Great built palaces in the middle of the Judean Desert on an enormous plateau, now known as the Masada fortress, around 37 BC as a place of protection for himself and his family should he be overthrown and need refuge. In 70 AD, Jerusalem revolted against Rome and a group of Jewish zealots and their families fled to Masada to escape the destruction of the city and likely crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. They were followed to Masada and held off the Roman legions for two years. During those two years, the Romans used Jewish slave labor to build a ramp up the side of Masada to lay siege to the zealots. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, all of Masada's inhabitants but two women and five children committed suicide before the walls were breached rather than die at the hands of their Roman oppressors. Many modern day

scholars reject this heroic scenario, but the legend is a powerful part of the history of the Jews and of Masada.¹⁹

Archeologists have extensively excavated Masada. I walk through crumbling sections of Herod's palaces and pose for goofy pictures with some of the other girls. I climb down the narrow steps of an enormous cistern and stare upward, the shaft of sunlight from the opening catching dust so the light itself seems to swirl. The west side of the complex overlooks the siege ramp and the area where the Roman encampments would have been – where Jewish slaves hauled wood and dirt, building the ramp that would end the lives of yet more Jews. A barren, monochromatic desert surrounds the fortress. No bushes or trees, no water, just reddish gray sand and caked dirt. This sort of desolation has its own stark beauty. I find the Byzantine church, built centuries after the fall of Jerusalem, and marvel at the exquisitely preserved mosaic on its floor.



Prior to coming to Jerusalem, I had watched a video about Masada and learned about the synagogue there, remnants of walls lined with bleacher-style benches. I step on the cracked dry earth of the synagogue, climb a few of the steps and sit, thinking about what was taught here, about men discussing God and the Torah. An image comes to my mind – bearded men in robes, their heads covered, as they read or listen to the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

When it is time to leave Masada, I depart by the Snake Path. From the top of Masada I look down on a dusty, winding trail broken occasionally by steps and railings, but mostly a steep path of countless switchbacks. I can't tell how long it will take to get down, but I hoist my backpack onto my back and start the descent. The air is thick with dust kicked up by other students already making their way down the mountainside. My feet slip in the rocks and dirt and the awkward thumping motion of walking downhill bounces my bag against my sweating back. For forty-five minutes I walk down the Snake Path. I feel the temperature rise and not just from my own exertions. With weary legs I finally reach the bottom of the path where a man is selling orange juice from a small wooden kiosk. Next to the juice stand, a thermometer reads 108 degrees Fahrenheit.

I squint back up at Masada, its sheer cliffs rising towards the sky. It is part of my past now, a place of legend that I walked on and by doing so became a part of its history, along with the thousands of others whose footprints scuff its sun baked surface.