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Introduction

No Master but God

In southern Israel’s Judean Desert lies the mountain of Masada. Set slightly off from the rest of the Judean Mountains, Masada aligns to an almost perfect north–south orientation. The land drops off abruptly on three sides to the unforgiving brown and barren desert floor, interrupted only by the sparking blue water of the Dead Sea. The top of the mountain is almost uniformly flat, and it was on this site that the Roman Jewish governor of Judea, Herod the Great, built a citadel designed to serve as a safe haven in the event of a revolt. With its isolated desert location, sharp cliffs, and level plateau, it was an ideal choice for a fort.

The ruins of the fortress are still visible today. On the plateau’s summit are the remains of storehouses that were once filled with grain, olives, dates, and other foods—enough to keep a Roman garrison well provisioned. On the side of the mountain are the canals and cisterns the Romans built to channel the rainwater that falls only sporadically in the desert into underground storage to keep the fortress supplied with the most important resource in this parched, sunbaked land. Perhaps most impressive of all is Herod’s palace, a splendid three-story structure built by the Roman Jewish governor of Judea, to house himself in luxury. Herod spared no expense for his palace: it included a bathhouse, and the spectacular frescoes that adorned the walls can still be

seen. From his tiered palace Herod could enjoy the magnificent view of the region that Masada affords. A stone wall surrounds the fort, protecting against any possible invaders. Behind these walls and protected by Roman soldiers, Herod must have felt safe from any rebellious subjects.

In an ironic twist of fate, however, it was not the Romans who were attacked and besieged on Masada. For in 66 CE Judea rose up against the masters of the ancient world in a rebellion known as the Great Revolt. They succeeded at first, driving back the Romans and temporarily gaining their independence. One of the rebels' first victories was the capture of Masada in a surprise attack. More victories followed and Jewish self-rule seemed near, but it was not to be. The mighty war machine that was Rome came back stronger than ever and relentlessly crushed the rebellion, leaving death and destruction in its wake. The legions made their way to the heart of the rebellion and the heart of Judea, the ancient Jewish capital of Jerusalem with the Holy Temple at its center. The Jewish rebels held off the Romans with their last bit of strength, but they could not keep the mighty empire off forever. The legionaries finally broke through the walls. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus described the ensuing carnage as the Roman soldiers entered the city:

They poured into the streets sword in hand, cut down without mercy all that came within reach, and burnt the houses of any who took refuge indoors, occupants and all. Many they raided, and as they entered in search of plunder they found whole families dead and the rooms full of the victims of starvation: horrified by the sight, they emerged empty-handed. Pity for those who had died in this way was matched by no such feeling for the living—they ran every man through whom they met and blocked the narrow streets with corpses, deluging the whole City with gore so that many of the fires were quenched by the blood of the slain.¹

As the streets ran red with Jewish blood, the Romans burned down the Holy Temple—the very symbol of the Jewish people. The emperor had had enough of the troublesome Jews. He decreed

the Jews would no longer run their own affairs. There would be no more Jewish governors of the province.

Yet one Jewish stronghold held out against the might of Rome: the fortress of Masada, home to 963 men, women, and children. An entire legion was dispatched to crush the zealots stationed there in open defiance of the Roman Empire. Using Jewish slaves, they piled rocks onto a natural ridge leading to the mountain. When the ramp was ready, the Romans rolled a giant siege tower and began to batter the walls with a mighty ram. Inside the redoubt, the defenders knew they were about to be overrun. Their leader, Eleazar Ben-Yair, spoke to them on the eve of the final assault. His words, as recorded by Josephus, would become a legendary statement of Jewish independence:

Since we, long ago, my generous friends, resolved never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than God himself, the time is now come that obliges us to make that resolution true in practice. We were the very first that revolted against them, and we are the last that fight against them; and I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God hath granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom. It is very plain that we shall be taken within a day's time; but it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom. Let our wives die before they are abused, and our children before they have tasted slavery; and after we have slain them, let us bestow that glorious benefit upon one another mutually, and preserve our freedom, as an excellent funeral monument to us. For, according to our original resolution, we have preferred death over slavery.²

And so it was. Each man retired to his house to slay his family. According to Josephus, the remaining rebels “chose ten men by lot out of them to slay all the rest. And when those had, without fear, slain them all, they made the same rule for casting lots themselves, that he whose lot it was to first kill the other nine, and after all, should kill himself.” Upon entering the fortress, the Romans did not find resistance, but the evidence of a mass suicide: “Here encountering the mass of the slain, instead of exult-

ing as over enemies, they admired the nobility of their resolve and the contempt of death displayed by so many in carrying it, unwavering, into execution.”³

For two thousand years Masada remained the last time the Jews had controlled their own affairs. The Jews had wandered since then, scattering among the nations, unwelcome strangers in strange lands who were viewed as dangerous outsiders.

Until the return to Israel. Two millennia after the destruction of the Temple—on the very same summit where Ben-Yair and his followers had chosen not to be slaves—the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) hold a solemn ceremony at dawn, as their armored corps cadets’ pledge: “Masada shall not fall again! Masada shall not fall again! Masada shall not fall again!” It has not been an easy promise to keep. Several times in the new age, Masada’s fall seemed imminent. Even when the threat was not immediate, it was always present, never far from any Israeli’s mind. This is the story of how close Masada came to falling again and how it was it was averted. This is the story of the return to Zion. This is the story of Israel.

-1-

A Pillar of Fire on the Road to Zion

Beginning of the Return, 1881–1896

The World of the Shtetl

On the afternoon of March 13, 1881, Czar Alexander II of Russia rode with his entourage through the narrow streets of St. Petersburg. It was a Sunday, and as was his custom for many years, the czar was headed to view a military roll call. He was an impressive-looking man: sixty-three years, tall and immaculately dressed, wearing a red cap, a red-lined overcoat with a beaver collar, and gold epaulets with his family crest. Snow still covered the ground; the long Russian winter was not yet over. The czar was accompanied by six horsemen and two sleighs, carrying the chief of police and the chief of the emperor's guard. Policemen lined the street, guarding the route.

The czar himself rode in a closed coach. The coach was bullet-proof—a gift from Napoleon III of France to cement their relationship. The security measures were more than mere precautions. They were quite necessary. Alexander II had survived three assassination attempts in the two years prior. In one attempt an assassin fired five times at the fleeing czar, but Alexander II fled in a zig-zag pattern to avoid the bullets and escaped unharmed. Another time the “People’s Will” revolutionary group set an explosion on a rail line, but the attack missed the czar’s train. The bloodiest incident occurred the year before: a People’s Will agent set off a

massive charge beneath the dining room of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, killing eleven people and wounding thirty. The czar himself escaped harm only because he was late for dinner.

Alexander II was by no means a reactionary ruler. The twenty-six years of his rule were the greatest period of restructuring since Peter the Great had first attempted to modernize Russia. Like his illustrious forebearer, Alexander II had initiated a series of reforms intended to modernize the vast but backward empire. By far his most important act had been to emancipate the serfs twenty years earlier. Forty million peasants were freed of their legal obligations to their landlords in one sweeping gesture. With this move the czar hoped that Russia might catch up with the West. But the emperor had to be cautious: he could not move too fast. Russians might have envied the wealth and power of their Western neighbors, but they still looked upon their freedoms with suspicion. Democracy would mean the end of the old order and the historic union of the Orthodox Church, the military, and the aristocracy. To the old order, the czar was moving too fast. But to the liberals—and especially the radicals—he was moving too slowly, and they meant to start a social revolution with the czar out of the way.

The entourage followed the same route it always did, via the Catherine Canal and over the Pevchensky Bridge. It would be the czar's undoing. For on that Sunday afternoon no fewer than three People's Will revolutionaries waited as the procession made its usual trip. As Alexander rode in his secure coach, a young man carrying a small white package wrapped in a handkerchief stood on the narrow sidewalk. He went unnoticed by the policemen. As the imperial procession arrived, he threw the package under the czar's horses. The bomb inside exploded, killing one rider and knocking the would-be assassin into a fence. The energetic czar emerged from his coach unharmed, and he began to survey the scene. He approached the assassin, who was already being held down by no fewer than four soldiers. His men begged him to return to the safety of the coach, but the czar insisted on viewing the site of the explosion. As they moved toward it, another bomb

landed at his feet. This time there was no escape: the explosion rocked the street, knocking the czar and his men to the ground as a cloud of white smoke covered the street. The police chief described the ghastly scene:

I was deafened by the new explosion, burned, wounded and thrown to the ground. Suddenly, amid the smoke and snowy fog, I heard His Majesty's weak voice cry, "Help!" Gathering what strength I had, I jumped up and rushed to the emperor. His Majesty was half-lying, half-sitting, leaning on his right arm. Thinking he was merely wounded heavily, I tried to lift him but the Czar's legs were shattered, and the blood poured from them. Twenty people, with wounds of varying degree, lay on the sidewalk and on the street. Some managed to stand, others to crawl, still others tried to get out beneath bodies that had fallen on them. Through the snow, debris, and blood you could see fragments of clothing, sabers, and bloody chunks of human flesh.¹

The czar's attendants took him back to the palace, where he died a few hours later. Had the reform movement died with him? It was the question that consumed all of Russia. It was not clear how his son, Alexander III, would rule. Perhaps no group within the vast, multiethnic realm was more affected by this question than the Jews. Roughly five million Jews—the vast majority of world Jewry—lived hemmed into the "Pale of Settlement," the area where they were legally allowed to reside, which ran from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea in western Russia. Theirs was a world vastly different from modern America. Their language was Yiddish, a combination of Hebrew and German. Their home was the shtetl (the Yiddish word for "town"), where almost all of them lived, having been barred from owning land or living in the cities. A contemporary vividly described the shtetl as

a jumble of wooden houses clustered higgledy-piggledy about a market-place . . . as crowded as a slum. . . . The streets are . . . as tortuous as a Talmudic argument. They are bent into question marks and folded into parentheses. They run into culs-de-sac

like a theory arrested by a fact; they ooze off into lanes, alleys, back yards. . . . [At the center] is the market-place, with its shops, booths, tables, stands, butchers' blocks. Hither come daily, except during the winter, the peasants and peasant women from many miles around, bringing their livestock and vegetables, their fish and hides, their wagonloads of grain, melons, parsley, radishes, and garlic. They buy, in exchange, the city produce which the Jews import, dry goods, hats, shoes, boots, lamps, oil, spades, mattocks, and shirts.²

From this clever depiction we also gain an insight into the Jews' economic role. With farming and the professions barred to them, they became merchants or artisans, peddlers, blacksmiths, tailors, butchers, shoemakers, bakers, and the like. According to historian Dan Kurzman, "In his tiny shop or factory, or in a candle-lit nook of his dismal house, a bearded figure with side curls might weave fiber into rope, hammer tin into utensils, tan a cowhide that would be transformed into shoes and gloves, stitch by hand the traditional caftan that was worn by most Jews, or distill brandy or brew beer."³

Plonsk, another typical shtetl town, is described by Kurzman:

Branching out from the huge market square in the heart of town was a web of alleys paved with pink, red, and blue cobblestones that were often blackened with the slime of open, overflowing sewers. Along the alleys were lines of rickety two-story wooden houses that seemed almost to hold each other up. Inside, wobbly, creaking staircases led to dark rooms with smoky stoves, iron beds, and shelves laden with patched clothing—reeking dungeons, totally cut off from sunlight by the houses on the other side of the narrow street. The poorest Jews lived here: the market women and their pale Talmud-studying husbands, the seamstresses, the food peddlers who sold hot beans to schoolboys.⁴

Other poor Jews were known as luftmenschen (Yiddish for "flying men"), who moved from town to town, looking for regular work and gathering in the market or other public places in search of even the lowliest job.

The Jews of the shtetl practiced a highly ritualized way of life. They followed the 613 commandments of piety that dictated the everyday rites of life, from eating to working to clothing. This is the “tradition” that Tevye the Milkman so lovingly sings of in *Fiddler on the Roof*. And while Tevye admitted that he did not know how or why the traditions came into being, they were in fact adaptations for a group living on the fringes of society, a way of instilling law into a region pervaded by lawlessness, chaos, and fear. If the Jews of the shtetl could not have security in their external life, they would impose order on their internal life, for it was in religion that the Jews of the shtetl found their only solace. Life revolved around religion and around God. Luftmenschen would crowd into their wooden synagogues, where they could come closest to God through the chanting of the Torah and Talmud. One memoir of this time read: “Carried away by the mellow, melting chant of Talmud-reading, one’s mind soared high in the pure realm of thought, away from this world of facts and worries, away from the boundaries of here and now, to a region where the Divine Presence listens to what Jews create in the study of His word.”⁵

In a society where religion was so highly valued, the schools that taught the word of God were very important. Boys began religious study at an early age and continued for many years. The day when a son began his religious lessons was one of immense significance to his parents. A nineteenth-century Jewish writer vividly captured one such scene:

Soon a poorly clad couple entered, the man carrying in his arms a young boy of about six, wrapped in a *talit* [prayer shawl]. Both father and mother were weeping with joy, grateful to God who had preserved them that they might witness this beautiful moment. Having extended a cordial welcome to the newcomers, the *melamed* [teacher] took the hero of the celebration into his arms and stood him upon a table. Afterwards the boy was seated on a bench and was the first to receive cake, nuts, raisins and dainties of which the happy mother had brought along an apron-full. The leader then sat down near the youngster, placed a card with the printed

alphabet before him and, taking a long pointer, began the first lesson by blessing his newly-initiated pupil that he may be raised for the study of Torah, marriage, and good deeds.⁶

The boys' parents' zeal notwithstanding, the conditions of these schools were quite shabby. A turn-of-the-century report called them "filthy rooms, crowded from nine in the morning until nine in the evening, with pale, starved children. These remain in this contaminated atmosphere for twelve hours at a time and see only their bent, exhausted teachers. . . . Their faces are pale and sickly, and their bodies evidently not strong."⁷

Events in the outside world rarely gave the denizens of the shtetl cause for hope. The nadir of their fortunes came during the thirty-year reign of Alexander II's father, Nicholas I. Calling the Jews "regular leeches,"⁸ Nicholas attempted to cleanse Judaism from the land. According to one of his secret edicts, "The purpose in educating Jews is to bring about their gradual merging with the Christian nationalities and to uproot those superstitious and harmful prejudices which are instilled by the teachings of the Talmud."⁹ Consequently Nicholas issued over six hundred anti-Jewish decrees designed to disrupt Jewish life. These included censoring Yiddish and Hebrew books, stifling religious education, mass expulsions, and the conscription of young boys into the army for periods of up to twenty-five years. Jews remained barred from the professions, barred from holding land, barred from living outside the Pale of Settlement. His son, the reformer Alexander I, reduced compulsory military service to five years, allowed Jews into some universities, and allowed Jewish businessmen to travel to parts of Russia that had been off-limits. They were still not allowed to own land, enter the professions, or live outside the Pale. Nonetheless, the winds of change were blowing, even into the deepest recesses of the backward empire.

This was the situation the Jews faced when Alexander II was assassinated. Would his son continue the reforms, including possible emancipation, as had been bestowed on their Jewish brethren in Western Europe? The answer came within weeks—it was

a resounding “No.” Alexander III ended all reforms, including leniency for the Jews. The Jews had no place in the new czar’s plans. He would restore the old order. As a wave of pogroms (violent riots) spread from rumors that the Jews had killed the beloved czar, the regime did little to quell the unrest. All across the country, drunken peasant mobs formed and attacked Jewish settlements, killing, maiming, and raping in an orgy of unbridled violence. A Jewish man in Odessa recorded a chilling description of the pogrom as he and his family hid in a cellar: “The situation is terrible and frightening! We are virtually under siege. The courtyards are barred up, and we keep peering through the grillwork to see if the mob is coming down on us. . . . We all sleep in our clothes and without bedding . . . so that if we are attacked we immediately will be able to take the small children . . . and flee. But will they let us flee? . . . Will they have mercy on the youngsters? . . . How long, O God of Israel?” Two days later: “The rioters approached the house I am staying in. The women shrieked and wailed, hugging the children to their breasts, and didn’t know where to turn. The men are dumbfounded. We all imagined that in a few moments it would be all over with us.”¹⁰ The police held back the mobs in Odessa, but Jews elsewhere were not so fortunate. Hundreds were attacked and maimed.

The attacks continued on and off for the next year. A Jewish man in Vilna recorded:

If someone gets into an argument with a Christian the latter immediately says: “Just wait, soon we’ll settle all the scores,” or something similar or even worse. What kind of life is this? If I had the courage I would kill all those close to me and then myself, and the farce would be over. If I do not, some drunken riffraff will come along, ravish my wife and daughter and throw my infant Sonia from the third-floor window. Would it not be better for me to kill everyone? What a miserable creature is the Jew! Even when the advantage is clear to him he cannot summon the courage to do a good thing. Death awaits us in any case, so why should we wait?¹¹

The following spring the czar passed the May Laws, further

restricting where Jews could live and sending them even deeper into poverty. But that was what the government wanted. The czar's top adviser declared, "One-third will die out, one-third will leave the country, and one-third will be completely dissolved in the surrounding population."¹²

It was a cold, hard slap in the face to the Jews, who had been so hopeful that emancipation was on the way. Now it seemed like a distant dream, shattered in the blood and fire of the pogroms. One Jewish writer described the situation starkly: "The Russian peasant, poor as he may be, is the proprietor of a small piece of land. And his condition is not hopeless—one feels that sooner or later it will improve. But Jewish poverty is utterly without a cure; the Jew has no available means for improving his condition, which will remain abject as long as he lives among alien peoples."¹³ With crisis gripping the Jewish community, a conference convened in St. Petersburg to debate emigration from Russia. Many spoke out against it. Emigration would appear unpatriotic and might undermine the struggle for emancipation.

But to others, the situation was quite clear: "Either we get civil rights or we emigrate. Our human dignity is being trampled upon, our wives and daughters and being dishonored, we are looted and pillaged; either we get decent human rights or else let us go wherever our eyes may lead us."¹⁴ As for appearing unpatriotic, one writer scoffed at the very idea: "Sympathy for Russia? How ironical it sounds! Am I not despised? Am I not urged to leave? Do I not hear the word *zhid* constantly? Can I even think that someone considers me a human being capable of thinking and feeling like others? Do I not rise daily with the fear lest the hungry mob attack me? . . . It is impossible . . . that a Jew should regret leaving Russia."¹⁵

And leave they did. Over the next thirty-three years, some 2.5 million souls (roughly one-third of the Jews of the Pale) departed in one of the largest voluntary migrations in history. The modern reader, appalled by the horrible circumstances the Jews endured, may wonder why still more did not emigrate. But it is always difficult for people to leave what is familiar, especially for a distant,

unknown land. Those who did leave mostly made their way to the New World, where America welcomed the new immigrants to help fill their factories and settle the large country. Others found homes in Canada, Argentina, and Britain, where they established new communities whose vibrant Jewish traditions continue to flourish today.

“O House of Jacob, Come and Let Us Go!”: The First Aliyah

But there was another choice. The Jews always viewed the Land of Israel as their home, a notion reinforced through their devotion to biblical study and daily prayer. According to one historian:

Multitudes of Jews, wherever they lived, saw their spiritual home as rooted in a remote land which none of them had ever seen and which few ever expected to behold with their eyes. They lived in a permanent nostalgia, sustained by ways of life which, though often poor and sometimes squalid, nevertheless had the dignity of self-knowledge and self-assertion. This talent for corporate existence was especially conspicuous in the shtetl, the Jewish village within the Pale of Settlement of the Russian Empire. The lives of Jews, however miserable, went forward there in an atmosphere of autonomy. Most of the Jews of Russia and Poland lived under oppression, but they did not feel rootless. Their lives were bound up with religious observance, and their minds and hearts were filled with images of Jewish history and faith. Even when they bowed their heads to secular subservience to gentile empires, they secretly saw themselves as the descendants of prophets and kings temporarily cut off from their own inheritance.¹⁶

A memoir from the time explained, “Half of the time, the shtetl just wasn’t there; it was in the Holy Land, and it was in the remote past or the remote future, in the company of the Patriarchs and Prophets or of the Messiah. Its festivals were geared to the Palestinian climate and calendar; it celebrated regularly the harvests its forefathers had gathered in a hundred generations ago; it prayed for the subtropical rains, indifferent to the needs of its neighbors, whose prayers had a practical, local schedule in view.”¹⁷

Europe was gripped by nationalist movements in the late nineteenth century, and the intellectual ferment inevitably affected the Jews. Soon a number of writers and intellectuals were advocating the re-creation of the Jewish state in the Land of Israel. Two groups formed to bring Jews back to Palestine, one called the “Lovers of Zion” and the other the Bilu, a Hebrew acronym from the biblical verse “O House of Jacob, come and let us go!” With Jews leaving Mother Russia in droves, these movements now had their recruits. They would send young Jews to Palestine, buy land, and have them settle it. They had high hopes, as the Bilu manifesto made clear. This striking document begins by recounting Jewish history: “Nearly two thousand years have passed since, in an evil hour, after a heroic struggle, the glory of our Temple vanished in fire and our kings and chieftains changed their crowns and diadems for the chains of exile. We lost our country where dwelt our beloved sires. Into exile we took with us, of all our glories, only a spark of fire by which our Temple, the abode of our Great One, was engirdled, and this little spark kept us alive.”¹⁸ Moving into the modern era, the manifesto declares, “this spark is again kindling and will shine for us, a true pillar of fire going before us on the road to Zion, while behind us is a pillar of cloud, the pillar of oppression, threatening to destroy us.”

The biblical Hebrews had followed the Lord’s pillar of fire through the Sinai back to the Promised Land. Now the Bilu saw another pillar leading them back to the land of their ancestors, away from oppression: “Sleepest thou, O our nation? What hast thou been doing until 1882? Sleeping, and dreaming the false dream of Assimilation. Now, thank God, thou art awakening from thy slothful slumber. The Pogroms have awakened thee from thy charmed sleep.” The manifesto exhorted the European Jews to return to Zion: “Hopeless is your situation in the West; the star of your future is gleaming in the East.” As for their goals, they were quite explicit: “We want a home in our country. It was given to us by the mercy of God, it is ours as registered in the archives of history.” By the end of 1882 nearly seven thousand

Jews had emigrated from Russia to Palestine, hoping to rekindle the spark of Zion.

To say it didn't turn out to be as easy as the Lovers of Zion and Bilu had imagined would be a gross understatement, particularly in light of the new immigrants' expectations. "It is hard to describe the romance—the hope, light, and joy—that filled their hearts," one of the early pilgrims recounted, "as they set sail for the land of their fathers to be pioneers of Jewish agriculture. Each man painted in the brightest colors a picture of his farm-to-be in the Land of Israel. . . . Each man would have his own wheat field, vegetable garden, and chicken run. . . . In the land flowing with milk and honey, of course, all this would be supplemented by olives, almonds, figs, dates, and other delicacies."¹⁹

This idealized version of what their lives would be like was quickly dashed. The biblical land "flowing with milk and honey" was, in fact, no paradise. Quite to the contrary—the privations they suffered in the new land were innumerable. The plight of the migrants began with the arrival at the port of Jaffa. Without a deep-water harbor, the ships dropped anchor while sturdy Arab oarsmen rowed the passengers to land. In stormy weather, the waves would bob the rowboats up and down, so that the passengers had to be loaded quickly as the waves elevated the boats. Once on land the immigrants would be forced to wait in the rain or under the beating sun while the Turkish officials decided whether or not to admit them. If they were allowed in, the immigrants would climb aboard donkeys and ride off to their new homes—ramshackle mud huts, with shared, crowded rooms. They were eaten alive by all manner of pests, including insects, vermin, rodents, scorpions, and snakes. There was no running water or even furniture, save a few old packing cases and tins. They could count on only one hot meal per day of the barest ingredients, perhaps pita bread with canned fish and olives. Since the Lovers of Zion scarcely had any funds, the land they managed to acquire tended to be rocky, marshy, teeming with flies, and invested with malaria. The new immigrants were from the shtetl, where Jews were not permitted to hold land. Therefore they had little idea how to farm and

were not used to the hours of backbreaking physical labor and daily toil in the fields that agriculture demanded.

One pioneer recorded what it was like for the new immigrants as they tried manual labor for the first time in their lives. In an entry from 1882, the new farmer wrote:

When I first started work, I tended to swing my hoe and to strike sideways, in every direction. But after a short while, my hands would blister. Blood would flow and I would experience horrific pain which would compel me to cast down my hoe. Then I would immediately be stricken by the weakness of my resolve and would admonish myself, saying “Is that how you intend to demonstrate that Jews are capable of physical labor?” An inner voice tauntingly cried out, “You will not stand this decisive test!” Then with all my resolve and despite the pain, I resumed hoeing. I worked frantically for two full hours and when my strength finally gave in, I collapsed and was immobilized for the rest of the day. My back pain was unbearable, my hands full of wounds, those four morning hours seemed like an eternity.²⁰

In addition to the backbreaking labor, bouts of dysentery, typhus, and malaria limited their work and health. Before long, disease, poor sanitation, and the lack of medical facilities took their toll on the lives of the settlers. Roving bands of Bedouins raided the tiny villages. In the twenty years after the death of Alexander II, several thousand Jews made aliyah—that is, “ascended” to the Holy Land—but most returned to Russia, unable to cope with the harsh new life. The movement teetered on the brink of collapse. Only financial assistance from the French baron Edmond de Rothschild saved the Lovers of Zion from an early demise. But dependence on overseas Jews was not the goal of the pioneers—they were supposed to be self-sufficient. By the turn of the century, only about five thousand Jews lived in the rural settlements, surviving on Rothschild’s largesse. The future of Zionism was very much in doubt. But events in Western Europe, where the Jews had been emancipated and supposedly assimilated, would forever change the destiny of the Zionist movement.