

Taking a **New Name** at **Masada**

by Lori Palatnik

One of the highlights of our subsidized women's trips to Israel with The Jewish Women's Renaissance Project (www.jwrp.org) is the day we go to Masada. Now, I have to tell you, Masada is not my favorite place. Not only can it get over 100 degrees in the summer (let's hear it for fall trips!), but personally, I do not find the message of what occurred there very inspiring.

Just to review: According to Josephus, a 1st-century BCE Jewish-Roman historian, Masada was fortified by Herod the Great as a refuge for himself in the event of a revolt. At the beginning of the First Jewish War against the Roman Empire, a group of Jewish extremists called the Sicarii overtook Masada from the Roman garrison and occupied it themselves. After the destruction of the Second Temple, additional members of the Sicarii and their families fled Jerusalem and settled on the mountaintop, using it as a base to fight off the Romans.

They held out for quite a while but the Romans finally breached the wall of the fortress with a battering ram. According to Josephus, when the Romans entered the fortress, they discovered that its 960 inhabitants had set all the buildings ablaze (aside from the food storerooms) and committed mass suicide.

Though modern archaeologists have found no evidence of mass suicide and remains of only

thirty or so have been recovered on the site, modern day Israeli lore still claims the mass suicide happened. So what is the message of Masada? When the going gets tough, kill yourself? Not so inspiring.

So why is Masada one of my favorite days? Because on the JWRP trips, which we call TAG Tours ("Transform and Grow"), we realized that a lot of Jewish women do not have Jewish names. For whatever reason, they were never given one as a child, or, if they did, it has been forgotten.

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So on Masada we bring the whole group into the 2,000-year-old synagogue on top, and there the women who do not have Jewish names formally receive one. They come forward together and stand, holding hands in the middle while all of the other women sit around them on the ancient stones. Rabbi Ken Spiro, author, historian and one of our most popular guides, leads the ceremony.

Now, Sheryl becomes Shira and Cindy becomes Chaya Sarah. At the conclusion, everyone breaks into song – "siman tov u'mazel tov..." – and dances in circles around the women. There is not a dry eye in the shul. Many immediately



change the name on their nametags to reflect this momentous occasion and, on Friday night, some share with the group why they chose that particular name. Perhaps it was a grandmother's name or a quality they hope to live up to.

We are taught that your Jewish name reflects your essence, and that God gives parents Divine inspiration when they choose their baby's name. Apparently, we take on the good qualities of the person we are named after. And we are taught, "change your name, change your destiny." Somehow, your name connects you to a new opportunity and to new potential. That is why some of the women chose names like Simcha, which means joy, or Shira, which means song.

At the most important moments in our life, we invoke our Jewish name: when we are born, when we are called to the Torah, when we marry, when others pray for us when there is a great need and when we leave this world. For significant times, we need to use our Jewish name, for that is the essence of who we truly are. When God looks down, He does not see Lori, He sees Leba Rachel.

On Masada, we learned that when the going gets tough out there Jewishly, you never have to give up. Our group learned that each of us can take control of her destiny by taking on a new name. If you do not have a Jewish name, give yourself one and strive to live up to it. And, with God's help, you will.