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HEBRON: JEWISH-ARAB FLASHPOINT

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Entrance to Paradise / Who Controls the Hall of Isaac? / Search for the Tomb of Abraham / The Jewish Return to Hebron / Hard Questions to Face

The soldier sped past me and raced toward headquarters shouting, "Sound the emergency siren!" Jewish worshippers in Hebron had just entered the Hall of Isaac at the Cave of Machpelah (Tomb of the Patriarchs) and were holding an illegal prayer service. I was among the witnesses to local events during the High Holy Days as a member of the Israel Defense Forces reserve unit guarding the Cave of Machpelah and the Avraham Avinu Synagogue.

Entrance to Paradise

The Cave of Machpelah (translated as "the Double Cave") is the traditional burial place of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Leah (Rachel is buried in Bethlehem) and, some say, Adam and Eve. On this site,

which Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite for 400 shekels of silver in Genesis 23, the Jewish King Herod, builder of Masada, Herodion, and the Temple Wall in Jerusalem, erected a four story rectangle of massive stone blocks.

For thousands of years, Jewish worshippers have been making pilgrimages to this site, held by Jewish folk tradition to be the entrance to Paradise. During much of that time, a Jewish synagogue existed within the Herodian walls. However, for the last few hundred years, until 1967 when Hebron came under Israeli rule, Jews were not allowed to pray inside the Cave of Machpelah. Before 1967, Arab guards of the Wakf (the local Arab religious authority) prevented Jews from going past the seventh step. Jewish

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worshippers would leave notes with their prayers in the outside wall, just as at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

After the 1967 war, the Israeli government signed certain documents which assured Moslem religious rights by preserving the status quo at the two most prominent mutual holy places newly under Jewish control — the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron. The continued Israeli acceptance of the status quo at these holy sites is an issue which demands increasing attention. In recent years, police have arrested a number of Jewish activists associated with circles calling for Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount.

Who Controls the Hall of Isaac?

At the Cave of Machpelah, the issue is the Hall of Isaac, the main hall at the site. It was originally built as a Crusader Church. From the time of the expulsion of the Crusaders until 1967, it was a mosque closed to Jews and Christians.

The Hall of Isaac may be the only place in the world where Jews and Moslems pray in the same room, sometimes even at the same time. There is a complicated schedule allotting the room or parts of it to each of the two groups. Strict rules govern the hours of use, the placement of partitions, and the number of worshippers.

It was a violation of this last point which precipitated the emergency alert. On the morning before the Simchat Torah holiday, just after the news broke about the seven Israeli tourists killed in Sinai, Jewish settlers from Hebron walked into the Hall of Isaac at an hour when Jews are forbidden to pray there in a *minyan* (a group of ten or more men) and began the morning service.

The soldiers at the scene had clear orders to forbid this unauthorized worship. They told the men to move to the Halls of Abraham or Jacob at the other side of the building where such group prayer was permitted. A confrontation ensued between the green-clad soldiers and the armed settlers in prayer shawls. The settlers called the reservist squad leader "Nazi," not knowing that he was an immigrant from Romania who had lost four aunts and uncles in the Holocaust. The soldiers, outnumbered, sent a runner off to headquarters to bring reinforcements. Officers and more soldiers rushed into the Hall of Isaac. An intense round of negotiations followed,

punctuated by pushing and threats. After some time, including consultation with superiors, permission was granted to allow the Jews to finish their service.

The settlers later explained that until recently Jews had been totally prohibited from praying in the Hall of Isaac and had won limited rights to pray there only after a protracted struggle with the Israeli military authorities. They intend to keep up the pressure until they are allowed the freedom to pray anywhere in the Hall of Isaac at any time.

The whole scene was very entertaining for the Moslem guards who lay on prayer rugs on their side of the Hall and watched Jewish soldiers defend Moslem rights against Jewish civilians. Some of these same guards had once prevented Jews from entering any part of the Cave of Machpelah or had been present when Torah scrolls left under their guard were desecrated. Seeing the smiles of the Moslem guards, the Jewish reservists, themselves civilians at heart, felt an urgency to see Jewish policy defined and differences among Jews settled in order to prevent any more such scenes from being played out in front of Moslem audiences.

During the Festival of Succoth, hundreds of Jews came by the busload to the Cave of Machpelah. Women came up to the Tomb of Rebecca and began to weep. Proud men stood before the Tomb of Isaac and blew the *shofar* — the ram's horn. A group of old weathered farmers sat down in the hall and began to pray. Technically, they too were forbidden to pray at that time, in that hall, and in that number, but out of a sense of respect for our elders we let these men pray without interference. We reasoned that they were only a visiting group and not the resident congregation, and therefore, they would not really threaten the status quo.

In the span of a few weeks thousands of Jews came to visit. I will always remember these warm, beautiful people — immigrants from Yemen and North Africa who blessed me because I was wearing the uniform of an Israeli soldier and who prayed for my safe return home; the Lubavitcher *hassid* whose smile made me glad to be a Jew; the young Bratslaver *hassid* with his big black hat who explained to me that the Messiah just might come tomorrow. We were all impressed by the great love, awe, excitement and reverence displayed by these Jews for the Cave of Machpelah.

The Cave of Machpelah also retains great importance to Moslems. In addition to its historic

role as a major holy site, it serves as the central mosque for Hebron's 80,000 Arabs. Every Friday morning, hundreds of Moslem worshippers crowd the Halls of Isaac, Abraham and Jacob, overflowing into adjacent courtyards and corridors. Moslems use the Hall of Isaac throughout the week for daily prayer and funeral services. The Jordanian religious authorities are even underwriting the cost of major structural renovations at the site.

Search for the Tomb of Abraham

In addition to control over the Hall of Isaac, another ongoing point of contention at the Cave of Machpelah concerns the search for the actual tombs of the patriarchs. The tombs seen by visitors are only representations allegedly built over the true sites of the tombs three floors below. While Moslem religious law does not forbid archeological exploration, they do have a tradition which holds that Moslems who descend below to seek out the actual graves will die the same day.

It is said there are three entrances to the tombs below. The main entrance was blocked hundreds of years ago by a tomb which the Moslems say is that of Joseph. The Jews believe Joseph is buried in Shechem (now the Arab town of Nablus) in Samaria. A second entrance is under the stones near the east wall in an area under tight Moslem control. A Moslem guard sleeps on the spot at night. A third entrance is a narrow hole in the floor of the Hall of Isaac, covered by an ornate grating. Every day the Moslem guards unlock the grating and refill oil lamps suspended on chains one floor below. It is too dark to see anything except the flame of the lamps, yet it piques the curiosity of many who wonder what is there.

Soon after the Cave of Machpelah came into Israeli hands, Moshe Dayan opened the grating and lowered down a slender, young girl, the daughter of a friend. She reported seeing a passageway and stairs leading down even further, which were blocked by stones after a few steps. The day after Dayan reported his findings, Arab newspapers headlined the story "Jews Break Into Cave of Machpelah." No further exploration has been undertaken.

The Jewish Return to Hebron

Hebron is intense. Jewish politics — the Jewish resettlement of Hebron, capital of Judea — is being

played out here in this ancient arena. Three thousand years ago, King David ruled from Hebron as king of Judah for seven years before assuming the rule of a united Jewish kingdom from Jerusalem. Jews lived continuously in Hebron from biblical times until the Arab revolt of 1936, even after a horrible massacre at the hands of the Arabs in 1929.

Jewish settlers returned to Hebron after the Six Day War in 1967. Today the Jewish suburbs of Kiryat Arba and Harsina are flourishing. A community of four thousand enjoys new housing, shopping, banking, medical services, frequent bus service to Jerusalem, an industrial zone and *yeshivot*.

In the older central downtown section of Hebron, Jewish property registered before 1936 is being resettled and is a point of daily contention. Tel Rumedah, Beit Romano, Beit Hadassah, and the Avraham Avinu Synagogue are four Jewish properties in the heart of Arab Hebron which today house fifty Jewish families. Their establishment and growth has been a long story of continuous attempts by Jewish settlers to expand in the face of official opposition. In the latest episode of this ongoing struggle, Jewish settlers purchased apartments in the covered Arab market known as the Casbah, but were refused permission by the military government to move in. In human terms, Jewish settlement in the midst of Arab Hebron means watching a group of five to ten year-old Jewish girls walking freely without adult escort through an Arab crowd at the wholesale vegetable market outside the Casbah. In contrast, armed soldiers tensely walk the same route, scanning the rooftops.

The military government has good reason to be concerned with the specifics of Jewish settlement in central Hebron, since a repeat of the Arab massacres and riots of the 1920s and 1930s is a realistic possibility. It is the military government which must arrange for twenty-four hour security with a detachment of soldiers at every site of Jewish settlement.

We soldiers debated the cost. Jewish civilian settlements in the heart of a heavily populated Arab town require a far more substantial investment by the Israel Defense Forces in order to maintain security than is the case with the more common pattern of rural settlements which are most often located apart from centers of Arab populations. Yet with all of the history involved, it is not easy to

argue against the Jewish right to settle in Hebron.

Hard Questions to Face

We reservists discussed day and night what we saw. We wanted to understand why we were stationed in Hebron with the irony of left-wing kibbutzniks guarding Rabbi Levinger and Gush Emunim settlers guarding Arab prayer rugs. The issues we debated must be faced soon by the Jewish people as a whole.

In Jerusalem, the question is what are Jewish rights at the site of the Holy Temple? Today, Jews are permitted to pray only outside of the Western Wall and not at the site of the Temple itself within the Wall. There are groups of religious Jews who have moved into the Moslem Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem and are actively studying the laws of the priests who officiated at the ancient temple in anticipation of its imminent restoration. The Orthodox Jewish establishment, however, maintains its opposition to any independent initiatives directed toward the Temple Mount prior to the coming of the Messiah.

In Jerusalem there is a defined, although not universally accepted, border between Jews and Moslems: the top of the Western Wall. In Hebron, the matter is more unsettled because there is no fixed border between the two religious communities but rather a floating or alternating one using partitions. Many Jews are today asking, "Since Israel won the war in 1967 and controls the territory, why doesn't Israel control these two sites which are so important to the Jewish religion? The Israeli government will certainly be more generous to the Moslems than they were to the Jews when they were in control. Why should the Israelis not determine procedures at the sites in terms more convenient to local Jewish worshippers? Why should Jews not be the custodians of the Cave of Machpelah, whose Jewish ownership is registered in the Bible?"

The government's answer is concern over the negative impact on the Arab world of a change in the religious status quo. However, when the status quo was formalized in 1967, there was no strong and growing local Jewish community in Hebron, as exists today, which uses the Cave of Machpelah as its main synagogue.

Another hard question which needs to be confronted urgently is what to do about Jewish settlement in heavily populated Arab urban areas.

Only a minority advocate this policy, even among settlement activists now living in Judea and Samaria. The previous Likud government did not favor this approach and actually permitted expanded settlement in the heart of Hebron only as a response to acts of Arab terror. Under the present government, Defense Minister Rabin has declared his total opposition to any such moves. Yet, there are forces within the Jewish community actively at work on increasing the Jewish presence in Hebron, in the Moslem Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City, and even in the ancient Jewish capital of Shechem, where Jewish settlers in the area have established a *yeshiva* at Joseph's Tomb. A small, dedicated, militant group is challenging Jewish authorities to explain why they are prevented from settling on legally-owned Jewish property within the Land of Israel.

It is a difficult question to answer. Since the preservation of the status quo and the prevention of Jewish settlement adjacent to Arab population centers were never part of Zionist ideology and tradition in the days before Israel's independence, it will not be easy to block this drive indefinitely. The growth of Kiryat Arba and other Jewish settlements in Hebron have established a pattern. The time for discussion of the prevention of Jewish settlement in or near Arab population centers has passed. One needs to think now about how to live with this inevitable phenomenon. What actions must be taken to achieve the degree of security and tolerance which will enable those little girls to continue to walk unafraid on the streets of Hebron?

Both Judaism and Islam are today feeling the renewed strength of their fundamentalist streams. The most radical factions of both groups are especially strong in Hebron. We can expect to hear of more incidents regarding the clash of Jewish and Moslem religious rights at the holy sites in Israel. Soul-searching, careful decision-making, and statesmanship by Israeli political leaders will be required in order to reach mutually acceptable solutions without recourse to violence.

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