

## Hebron: Then and Now

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When the federal government spending and deficits are discussed, we often hear about “entitlements.” Social Security and Medicare, for example, are entitlements, not welfare programs. Retired older Americans are **entitled** to the benefits they receive after having paid into those programs throughout their working years.

One might think that Abraham is similarly **entitled** to the Land of Israel. After all, God has promised the land to him. He and Sarah have given up their ancestral home and everything they knew there to travel to a distant and unknown land at God’s behest. We may not notice, from Genesis 12 through 22, that Abraham and Sarah don’t yet **own** the land. In chapter, 23, though, we learn.

Sarah has died, and Abraham needs to bury her. Sarah died in Hebron, a major city in ancient Judea. Abraham goes to the Hittites, the people who own the land in and around Hebron. Calling himself “a resident alien among you,” Abraham humbly asks them to sell him a burial site. The Hittites are gracious, calling Abraham “the elect of God among us” and offering him graves at no charge. Still, Abraham insists on paying full price for the plot, which is arranged and recounted in detail, concluding: “So...the field with its cave ... passed to Abraham as his possession, in the presence of the Hittites.... And then Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan. Thus, the field with its cave passed from the Hittites to Abraham, as a burial site.”<sup>i</sup>

Today’s Jewish settlers of Hebron do not follow Abraham’s example of relating to longstanding residents with humility. To the contrary, a few hundred Jewish settlers cast themselves as **entitled** to live in this city, deep inside the Occupied West Bank, in a way that significantly attenuates the rights of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who have lived there for generations.

Hebron was a center of legitimate Jewish settlement before the State of Israel was established in 1948. Jewish Virtual Library explains: “Jews lived in Hebron almost continuously throughout the Byzantine, Arab, Mameluke and Ottoman periods. It was only in 1929—as a result of a ... pogrom in which 67 Jews were murdered and the remainder were forced to flee—that the city became temporarily ‘free’ of Jews.”<sup>ii</sup> Hebron, along with the rest of the West Bank of the Jordan River, was annexed by Jordan in 1949 after the Israeli War of

Independence. “During the Jordanian occupation, which lasted until 1967, Jews were not permitted to live in the city, nor—despite [provisions in] the [1949] Armistice Agreement—to visit or pray at the Jewish holy sites in the city. Additionally, the Jordanian authorities and local residents undertook a systematic campaign to eliminate any evidence of Jewish presence in the city. They razed the Jewish Quarter, desecrated the Jewish cemetery and built an animal pen on the ruins of the ... synagogue.”<sup>iii</sup> Horrible! The very idea that, after the Holocaust, any place in the world should be *judenrein*, officially “free of Jews” by law, is appalling.

Since its victory in the Six-Day War of 1967, a defensive war waged preemptively to save Israel from annihilation, Israel has occupied the West Bank, including Hebron. Understandably, the children and grandchildren of Jews who had been massacred or forced to flee from their homes in the West Bank were eager to return, often to the very places where they or their ancestors had lived in the pre-state period. However, the West Bank is not part of Israel—not under international law, and not even according to Israel’s own laws. International law prohibits occupying forces from permanently settling civilian populations in occupied territory. The Fourth Geneva Convention states: “The Occupying Power shall not...transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.”<sup>iv</sup> It was adopted in 1949 and signed by Israel, among hundreds of other nations of the world.

Never mind, say the settlers, joined by Israeli governments of all stripes that have established, grown, and supported West Bank settlement since 1967. In the 1990s, with the Oslo Accords and now-dashed hopes for a two-state permanent resolution to the conflict, Israel turned over local governance of major Palestinian cities in the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority. Hebron was the only exception. By agreement between Israel and the P.A., Hebron is divided into two sections. Most Palestinians live in the section governed by the P.A. However, several hundred Jewish settlers live among tens of thousands of Palestinians in a section where Israel retains full security control. *B’tzelem*, The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories explains: “Palestinians living in the area are subjected to extreme restrictions on their movement by car or on foot—including the closure of main streets—while settlers are free to go where they wish. In addition, the military has issued shutdown orders to hundreds of stores and commercial establishments in the area. The [Israeli] military has established 21 permanent staffed checkpoints in Hebron. Palestinians who need to go through any of these checkpoints must endure lengthy, humiliating inspections.”<sup>v</sup>

Since October 7, the situation has worsened. In February, *NPR* reported that, as Israel went to war to defeat Hamas in Gaza, it also “mobilized thousands of reservists as part of newly formed ‘regional defense’ battalions [in the West Bank]. It also strengthened what the government calls ‘emergency response units’ made up of heavily armed civilians. In many cases, according to [Israeli] activists and Palestinians, those ranks have been filled by the very far-right Jewish settlers who have been at the center of much of the violence. Israeli peace activists and Palestinian locals both say that the result has been a huge uptick in violence and harassment by ‘settlers in a green army uniform’...Often it’s unclear whether the settlers are reservists, members of emergency units or freelancers operating on their own.”<sup>vi</sup>

What can we do? Like loyal Americans who often oppose actions and leaders of our own government, we have the right and responsibility to be loyal Zionists and lovers of Israel. We must not abandon the majority of Israeli Reform Jews who join the tens of thousands, often hundreds of thousands, taking to the streets to protest their government.

Zionists outside Israel do have a say. In the spring, every adult Jewish person among us will have the opportunity to vote in the World Zionist Congress elections. I have been invited to stand for election to the Congress on the slate of ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America. If ARZA and like-minded groups prevail, we will work to direct funds sent to Israel from abroad in a way that strengthens Israel within its internationally recognized borders and supports coexistence efforts within Israel and in the Occupied West Bank.

In August, our Adult Learning program encountered Israeli and Palestinian bereaved parents, including Bassam Aramin, whose elementary school aged daughter Abir was killed by a rubber bullet fired by an Israeli border guard nearly twenty years ago. A local Palestinian advocate—my friend, Dr. Ali Khan—joined us. He asked Aramin how best to seek the welfare of Palestinians under siege. Aramin responded: “Stop chanting, ‘Palestine shall be free from the river to the sea.’ Instead, demand, ‘From the river to the sea, let **everyone** be free.’”

Let us, like Abraham, answer the call to go to the land of promise, in person when possible and with our votes for the World Zionist Congress in the meantime. Let us, like Abraham before us, approach others who live in that land with humility. Then, like Abraham and his Hittite interlocutors, may we find blessing, together.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 23:1-20.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/vie-hebron>.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-49>.

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.btselem.org/hebron>.

vi