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PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF A HEBRON PIONEER

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Among the places liberated by the Israel Defence Forces in June 1967 was the city of Hebron — the first city in the world to house Jews (despite what you have heard from King Feisel and his like-minded friends!). One would have thought that the Israeli Government would immediately have sought to re-establish a Jewish community which had suffered so brutally by the Hebron massacres of 1929, but unfortunately this was not to be the case.

On Erev Pesach of 1968, a group of people (which included my wife-to-be) went to a hotel in Hebron "to celebrate the Seder" except that they did not leave after Pesach. This put the Government of Israel in a quandary. To remove them would have caused a Jewish outcry and to let them remain, an Arab outcry. To "solve the problem", the Government moved them to the confines of the military governor's headquarters.

At this period I was a University Lecturer in Chemistry in Israel, and from the time of the Six Day War, I was devoted to the resettlement of the liberated portions of Eretz Israel. During the course of that summer, I on several occasions travelled up to Hebron to spend the weekend there. That year I was utilising the long university summer vacation to study in a Yeshivah in the Negev and whilst I was there, I realised more and more that my place was in Hebron and not in Tel

Aviv. Therefore, when the end of the university vacation arrived, instead of returning to the University, I went to Hebron to take up residence on Erev Sukkot of 1968. This was to be my home for the next three years.

At this stage, I ought to explain the conditions in which the Hebron settlers (the Mitnachalim) lived. A small wing of the military governor's headquarters was set aside for the use of the Mitnachalim. Families, even those with a number of children lived in one room. The single young men, who numbered about twelve or fourteen, also lived in one room. Since it was our policy to have as many Jews as possible living in Hebron, we were always happy to squash up even more.

The washing facilities were not too plentiful and it worked out about one shower between forty people and a toilet between twenty. One might mention here that the toilets were of the Arab design — a hole in the ground. To add to our trouble there were often water stoppages for several hours at a time.

The military compound was surrounded by coils of barbed wire which in turn was surrounded by forty thousand neighbours, — Hebron Arabs.

By Government order, it was forbidden for any of the Mitnachalim to occupy themselves with any form of work. One could only remain in Hebron if one were associated with the Yeshivah. A special military permit was required to remain in Hebron for more than

48 hours although in practice one could be living in Hebron for several months before the military administration bothered about the permit.

By making all these restrictions, the Israeli Government hoped that the Mitnachalim would get tired and return whence they had come — but the Government miscalculated. In fact, the most ideal conditions for a Yeshivah is away from all distractions and by the various restrictions imposed on the Mitnachalim, the Government had unwittingly provided such conditions.

Due to the publicity given to the "Black Hole of Calcutta", conditions in which the Mitnachalim were living, after several months the Government agreed to build a few small buildings to ease our living conditions. Generally speaking however, we utilised this opportunity not to spread out but to bring in more families to Hebron.

A number of marriages were arranged between the Yeshivah students and the girls who worked in the kitchens or performed the other domestic work of the Yeshivah. One of these marriages was my own and just before Rosh Hashanah 1969, I was married in Hebron. On the previous Shabbat, I had been called up to the Torah in the Cave of Machpelah — we believe this was the first "Uffruf" in this Holy place. For the subsequent two years my family's house consisted of one small room.

Every few weeks, hand grenades were thrown at any Jews who happened to be in Hebron at the time and the injured would be brought up to our first aid station for treatment. It was our policy that, in order to show the Arabs that they could not intimidate us with their grenade attacks, as soon as possible after an attack, we would all walk (including the women and children) through the town. In this connection, I recollect that on the morning following an attack during Chol Hamoed Sukkot, we all marched down to the Cave of Machpelah carrying our lulovim. As is usual in Israel, the lulovim were not in boxes and from the expressions on the faces of the Arabs we passed on the way, it seems that they thought the lulovim were some new kind of secret weapon!

Towards the end of 1969, the Mitnachalim were granted the lease of a building near the Cave of Machpelah and were allowed to open a restaurant and gift shop. On the day we received the keys of this building, we went down with

a box of Mezuzot and affixed them to each of the doors. At intervals afterwards, the Arabs would break the cases of the Mezzuzot of the outer doors and remove the parchment!

At the beginning of 1970 the Israeli Government finally approved of Kiryat Arba — a Jewish suburb of Hebron and towards the end of that year, the foundations of the first buildings were laid. Lists of prospective settlers were drawn up and on Chol Hamoed Sukkot of 1970, a meeting for those people was held in Hebron and they were taken on an escorted tour of the embryo Kirat Arba. Throughout 1971 the building of 250 flats continued together with the beginnings of an industrial zone and at Rosh Hashanah of that year, the Mitnachalim took up residence in Kiryat Arba.

THE CAVE OF MACHPELAH

The City of Hebron has been made famous largely by the Cave of Machpelah — the place which was purchased in full silver and contract by Abraham. Hence, the Midrash tells us, the Cave of Machpelah is one of the places of which the nations of the world will not be able to say the Jews have stolen it. But the Nations of the world thought otherwise and during the Arab occupation of Hebron, any Jew going above the seventh step at the entrance did not live to tell the tale. One would therefore have thought that after the liberation of Hebron in 1967, the Israeli Government would open this Holy Place to Jews without let or hindrance — but this was not to be the case. Rules and regulations were drawn up by the Israeli Government which severely limited the rights of Jews. These included entrance for only six hours each day with entry on Friday being completely forbidden; no furniture, even chairs could be brought in — which meant that elderly and infirm people had to stand for the entire duration of prayer. Needless to say, none of these restrictions applied to the Arabs, and only the Arabs have the keys of the building.

The Israeli Government refused to permit Jews to perform a Brit Milah there yet in the very same place Arabs were allowed to parade the bodies of terrorists.

All this and much more caused great pain and upset to Jews all over Israel and particularly those living on the spot in Hebron. It was for this reason that I started a campaign known as the "Movement for the Restoration of Rights

to the Jews in the Cave of Machpelah". The first stage of this campaign was to publicize the prevailing situation and this was mainly done by writing letters to the various newspapers, meeting with and writing to members of the Knesset and having questions asked in the Knesset.

Immediately after the Liberation of Hebron, the Army had brought an Ark and Sefer Torah into the Cave of Machpelah but that was it — we were not allowed to bring in any more furniture. Our Movement decided to challenge this matter and through our lawyers wrote "legally worded" letters to the Minister of Defence (Moshe Dayan) and then to the Prime Minister. As a result of this, we were allowed to take a specified number of benches into the Cave of Machpelah. We were then able to smuggle in, bit by bit, additional furniture.

With the development of Kiryat Arba, there are now more Jews in the area to pray in the Cave of Machpelah and hence the conditions appertaining to Jews in this Holy Place are generally improving.

In conclusion, Jews are now returning to the ancient and Holy City of Hebron and we look forward to the day when there will be more Jews living here than Arabs. ●