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Storm Over Hebron

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There seems to be no limit to the troubles caused by the town of Hebron.

This time, the reason is as innocent as can be: the organized visits of schoolchildren to the Cave of Machpelah, where our patriarchs are supposed to be buried.

By rights, Hebron should be a symbol of brotherhood and conciliation. It is the town associated with the legendary figure of Abraham, the common ancestor of both Hebrews and Arabs. Indeed, the name itself connotes friendship: the Hebrew name Hebron stems from the same root as "haver", friend, comrade, while the town's Arab name – al-Halil – means "friend". Both names refer to Abraham being the friend of God.

Abraham's firstborn, Ishmael, was the son of the concubine Hagar, who was driven out into the desert to die there, when the legitimate son, Isaac, was born to Sarah. Ishmael, the patriarch of the Arabs, and Isaac, the patriarch of the Jews, were enemies, but when their father died, they came together to bury him: "Then Abraham gave up the ghost and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years (175), and was gathered to his people. And his two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, buried him in the cave of Machpelah..." (Genesis, 25)

In recent times, Hebron has acquired a very different reputation.

For centuries, a small Jewish community lived there in peace, in perfect harmony with the Muslim inhabitants. But in 1929, something awful happened. A group of Jewish fanatics staged an incident in Jerusalem, when they tried to change the delicate *status quo* at the Western Wall. Religious riots broke out throughout the country. In Hebron, Muslims massacred 59 Jews, men, women and children, an event that left an indelible mark on Jewish memory. (Less well known is the fact that 263 Jews were saved by their Arab neighbors.)

Shortly after the occupation of the West Bank in the Six-day War, a group of fanatical messianic Jews infiltrated Hebron by stealth and founded the first Jewish settlement. This grew into a veritable nest of extremism, including some out and out fascists. One of them was the mass-murderer Baruch Goldstein, who slaughtered 29 Muslims at prayer in the Cave of Machpelah – actually no cave at all, but a fortress-like building, perhaps built by King Herod.

Since then, there has been endless trouble between the 500 or so Jewish settlers in the city, who enjoy the protection of the army, and the 165,000 Arab inhabitants, who are completely at their mercy, devoid of any human or civil rights.

If the schoolchildren had been sent there to listen to both sides and learn something about the complexity of the conflict, that would be fine. But this was not the intention of the Minister of Education, Gideon Sa'ar.

Personally, Sa'ar (the name means "storm") is a nice person. In fact, he started his career in my magazine, Haolam Hazeh. However, he is a fanatical right-winger, who believes that his job is to cleanse Israeli children of the rotten

cosmopolitan liberalism that he imagines their teachers are steeped in, and to turn them into uniform, loyal patriots, ready to die for the fatherland. He is sending army officers to preach in the classrooms, demands that teachers instill “Jewish values” (i.e. nationalist religiosity) even in secular schools, and now wants to send them to Hebron and other “Jewish” places, so their “Jewish roots” grow more robust.

The children sent there see the “Jewish” Cave of Machpelah (which was for 13 centuries a mosque), the settlers, the streets that have become empty of Arabs, and listen to the indoctrination of patriotic guides. No contact with Arabs, no other side, no others at all.

When a rebellious school invited members of the peace-oriented ex-soldiers’ group “Breaking the Silence” to accompany them and show them the other side, police intervened and prevented them from visiting the town. Now some 200 teachers and principals have signed an official protest against the Education Minister’s project and demanded its cancellation.

Sa’ar is upset. With flaming eyes behind his glasses, he fervently denounced the teachers. How could such traitors be allowed to educate our precious children?

All this reminded me of my late wife, Rachel. I may have told the story before. If so, I must ask for indulgence. I just can’t help recounting it again.

Rachel was for many years a teacher of the first and second grade. She believed that after that, nothing further could be done to mould the character of a human being.

Like me, Rachel loved the Bible – not as a religious text or a book of history (which it most decidedly is not) but as a superb literary work, unequalled in its beauty.

The Bible tells how the mythological Abraham bought the Cave of Machpelah to bury his wife, Sarah. It is a wonderful story, and, as was her wont, Rachel had the children play it in class. This not only brought the story to life, but also allowed her to push forward timid boys and girls who lacked self-confidence. When they were chosen for an important role in one of these improvised plays, they would gain self-respect and suddenly bloom. Some had their whole life changed (as they confided to me decades later).

The Bible (Genesis 23) has it that Abraham asked the people of Hebron for a plot to bury his wife, when she died at the ripe old age of 127. All the Hebronites offered their fields for free. But Abraham wanted to buy the field of Ephron, the son of Zohar, “for as much money as it is worth”.

Ephron, however, refused to accept any money and insisted on giving the honored guest the field as a gift. After much exchange of pleasantries, Ephron finally came to the point: “My lord, hearken unto me: the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that betwixt you and me?”

The scene was duly enacted, with one 7-year old boy with a long beard playing Abraham and another playing Ephron, with the rest of the class as the people of Hebron, who were the witnesses to the transaction, as Abraham had requested.

Rachel explained to the children that this was an ancient way of conducting business, not coming straight to the crass matter of money, but first exchanging polite words and protestations, and then gradually working towards a compromise. She added that this civilized procedure is still followed in the Arab world, and especially among the

Bedouins, even in Israel. For the children, who had probably never heard a good word about Arabs before, this was a revelation.

Afterwards, Rachel asked the teacher of the parallel class how she had told the same story. "What do you mean," the woman replied, "I told them the truth, that Arabs always lie and cheat. If Ephron wanted 400 shekels, why didn't he say so straight away, instead of pretending to be ready to give it as a gift?"

If teachers like Rachel could take their children to Hebron and show them around, letting them visit the Arab spice market and the workshops which for centuries have been producing the unique blue Hebron glass, it would be wonderful. If children could speak with Arabs and Jews, including even the fanatics of both sides, it could be highly educational. Visiting the tombs of the patriarchs (which, most serious archaeologists believe, are actually the graves of Muslim Sheiks) which are sacred to both Muslims and Jews, could convey a message. Jewish Israelis are quite unaware that Abraham also figures as a prophet in the Koran.

Before conquering Jerusalem and declaring it his capital, the mythological King David (also revered as a prophet in Islam) had his capital in Hebron. Indeed, the town, which is located 930 meters above sea level, enjoys wonderful air and agreeable temperatures in both summer and winter.

This whole episode brings me back to an old hobbyhorse of mine: the need for all Israeli schoolchildren, Jews and Arabs, to learn the history of the country.

This seems self-evident, but is not. Far from it. Arab children in Israel learn Arab history, starting with the birth of Islam in far-away Mecca. Jewish children learn Jewish history, which played no significant role in this country for almost 2000 years. Big chunks of the country's history are unknown to one side or to both. Jewish pupils know nothing about the Mamluks and next to nothing about the Crusaders (except that they butchered the Jews in Germany on their way here), Arab pupils know very little about the Canaanites and the Maccabees.

Learning the history of the country in its entirety, including its Jewish and Muslim phases, would create a unified common view which would bring the two peoples much closer to each other, and make peace and reconciliation easier. But this prospect is as distant today as it was 40 years ago, when I raised it for the first time in the Knesset, earning the nickname "the Mamluk" from the then Education Minister, Zalman Aran of the Labor Party.

In a different atmosphere, Hebron would be seen as it should be: a fascinating town, sacred to both peoples, the second most holy city of Judaism (after Jerusalem) and one of the four sacred cities of Islam (with Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem). With mutual tolerance and without the fanatics of both sides, what a wonderful place that could be for children to visit!

Post-scriptum :

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