

# The Giants of Hevron—Then & Now

- Basil Herring.

There are essentially two views of the significance of the State of Israel. The one sees Israel as a Middle Eastern State which happens to have a majority of Jews, but is essentially no different from other free democratic countries all over the world. But there is another view: Israel is not just a State for Jews, but a Jewish State, not just a place where Jews can live free from oppression, but a place where Jews can live as Jews.

Hevron. I must admit that it was the one place in Israel last January that I and my family experienced fear and apprehension. Honestly, before we went there, I hesitated, and thought long and hard, before deciding that on principle we had to go, in spite of the risk posed to ourselves and our children. For it is one thing to drive around the open spaces of Yehudah and Shomron, visiting small towns and settlements on mountain tops and valleys. There we felt relatively secure. But when our driver brought us into the narrow streets of the city, surrounded by unfriendly faces, I experienced a heightened sense of anxiety. But in retrospect, visiting Maarat Machpelah, passing through the metal detectors, past armed soldiers, to daven minchah directly adjacent to the graves of our people's progenitors, was absolutely the right thing to do, worth every minute, without any doubt. For that is where we belong, and if that spot is not ours, then nothing in Israel is. For that is the significance of that Hevron—the burial place of our patriarchs and matriarchs, a city steeped in Jewish history and Jewish life, long before even Jerusalem, and the city that today is in the veritable eye of the storm in the unexpected aftermath of Israel's election.

For it is the disposition of Hevron, and how the incoming government of Bibi Netanyahu and his coalition will decide to proceed with the delayed withdrawal from that city, that will send a clear signal to their fellow Israelis, to Jews around the world, and to capitals from Washington all the way to Moscow, as to how the new government will relate to the so-called peace process and the Oslo agreements. But beyond the political dimension, and as many times before in Jewish history, it is the fate of Hevron that will fundamentally determine the character and the fate of Israel and its relationship to the Jewish people for generations to come. For Hevron is more than just another city, much more than just another stop for tourists to visit or avoid. In a fundamental sense, and to paraphrase a President of the United States, "we, the Jews of the world, are all Hevronites." It is not just that our patriarchs and matriarchs are buried there. Before Jerusalem was his capital, King David made Hevron his royal city, and throughout the Bible it appears as an important center of Jewish life. Judah the Maccabee fought for it, and for thousands of years thereafter, Jews continued to live in Hevron throughout a variety of Roman, Byzantine, Mamluk, Ottoman, and subsequent Moslem occupations, with the exception of the Crusader period when Jews were banished, but at all other times maintaining synagogues, schools, charities, and various communal institutions with the help of Jews around the world, because of its unparalleled place in the Jewish heart and soul. Given this massive Jewish association with Hevron, sanctified since time immemorial, a policy that would weaken or remove all communal Jewish life from the city and its environs, would say more than any words as to the ultimate character of the modern Zionist dream and its reality.

Why? At the admitted risk of oversimplification, I would start by saying that for Jews today, not just for Israelis, there are essentially two views of the significance of the State of Israel. The one sees Israel as a Middle Eastern State which happens to have a majority of Jews, but is essentially no different from other free democratic countries all over the world, whose highest priorities and values are, or should be, economic success, personal freedom, and harmony with its neighbors. This particular view of Israel is expressed in calls, for instance, from the Deputy Education minister of the current Labor government, to change the national anthem, the Hatikvah, to eliminate its references to a nefesh Yehudi homiya, “the longings of the Jewish soul.” Or in the recent calls to change Israel’s flag to accommodate the country’s non-Jewish citizens. Or in the demands, and in fact the actual policies of recent years, instituted by certain ministers in the Labor government, to eliminate the study of Bible and Jewish history from the curricula of Israeli schools. This view of Israel, as a democratic state, has consistently sought to downplay the Jewish nature of the country, preferring instead to stress its political, cultural, and economic integration into the larger Middle East, and what we might call contemporary American culture with its jeans and hamburgers, rock music and high technology. And in this view, the isolated and relatively remote city of Hevron in the hills of Judea, together with its Jewish enclave of Kiryat Arba, surrounded by masses of hostile Palestinians, are seen as more trouble than they are worth, an unwelcome, and unnecessary burden for the people of Israel, a throwback to some ancient and medieval past, needlessly provoking the enmity of its Arab and Muslim majority.

But there is another view of the meaning, purpose, and *raison d’être* of the State of Israel. And that is one that sees Israel not just as a State for Jews, but as a Jewish State, not just a place where Jews can live free from oppression, but a place where Jews can live as Jews. If the first view entails a vision of Israel first and foremost at peace with its contemporary non-Jewish neighbors, this second view bespeaks a vision of Israel first and foremost at peace with its Jewish identity and Jewish past, increasingly connected with fellow Jews all over the world. It is a vision that seeks to build an Israeli society that will serve as no other to unite Jews as Jews, to renew the specific values of Jewish life and Jewish identity, to reconnect with the unique Jewish spirituality and culture that has characterized the Jewish people over centuries and millennia. Rather than overcome the past and negate the diaspora experience, Jews beholden to this perspective would seek to build on the past while affirming the positive fruits of diaspora Judaism, as an essential foundation of the future, in the process of creating a new Israeli society, at peace with itself as well as its neighbors. In this view, the significance of Hevron is unmistakable and clear: give up Hevron, and you break with Jewish history; hold onto Hevron, and you affirm the continuity of this people’s past, present, and future.

Until two weeks ago, it was not quite clear which of these two visions of Israel, and indeed of Jewish life, would predominate in our time. But in the aftermath of the elections, there is reason to believe that a historic corner has been turned in the modern history of the Jewish people. It is not just that Netanyahu won the Jewish vote by a remarkable 11% plurality, in spite of the enormous advantages enjoyed by his opponent (including the consequences of the Rabin assassination, the virtual Clinton endorsement, and massive media support.) Even more important, and beyond slick personalities and media manipulation, were the results of the Knesset party voting, which in unprecedented manner strengthened the hand of the traditionalists in the country. For it is now clear that the religious parties in the new Knesset effectively constitute a third, triangulating, bloc of political power. Both the repudiation of the Labor

government, and the shrinking of the Likud opposition, with the concomitant expansion of those traditionalist forces, are unmistakable signs that increasingly, Israelis want to see the revitalization of the Jewish character of the country, not just to be Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel, but affirmatively connected to the historical nature of Eretz Yisrael. And beyond that, it was a vote to strengthen the connection and identification of Israelis with Jews and Jewish life all over the world, as Jews.

Now it is this emergent reality, and its very real symbolism in the fate of Hevron as it will be decided in the days to come, as one of the first and key challenges facing the new government of Israel, which brings me to this morning's parshah. We are all of course very familiar with the narrative of the 12 spies, one from each tribe, which Moshe sent out to scout the land of Israel. We are equally aware of the catastrophic consequences of their majority report. But what concerns me this morning, is the minority report. The Torah says as follows:

They went up in the Negev, and he came unto Hevron, and there were Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the sons of Anak; Hevron was built seven years prior to Tzoan Mitzrayim.

Nu. 13:22

The commentators are puzzled by this verse. Why first “they went up,” and then “he came, plural then singular?” Who is “he?” Why tell us about these three sons of Anak, and why connect it to the building of an Egyptian city? A number of answers are provided. Rashi, and others, quoting the gemara Sotah 34b, tell us that while all the spies went into the land, it was Calev ben Yefuneh of the tribe of Yehudah who separated himself from the group, with the specific purpose of visiting the cave of Machpelah, there to prostrate himself on the graves of the patriarchs, praying to God to find the strength to disassociate himself from the conspiracy of his fellow spies. For this reason Hevron was in fact apportioned to Calev by his fellow spy Joshua after crossing the Jordan. As to the reference to Tzoan in Egypt, the Rashbam explains that that city was well known to the Israelites and throughout antiquity as an ancient, revered city of kings and princes, with a long and distinguished history. By noting that Hevron was even older than Tzoan, the Torah is saying that as a city it possessed even greater importance, deserving even greater respect, than the greatest cities of Egyptian antiquity. As a specific locale, Hevron, it would appear, is history personified.

But it is more than that. There is a wonderful observation by the late Rabbi Menachem Benzion Sacks that explains the reference to the three sons of Anak in this verse. The gemara in Sotah explains their names as attesting to their extraordinary physical size and strength, born as they were to Anak, literally, a physically imposing giant among men. What Calev encountered in Hevron were two forces, two powers: on the one side were 3 men, Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, who were physical giants, possessed of martial power and awesome physique, who dominated and ruled their contemporaries by virtue of their tangible invincibility. On the other side, however, long buried and invisible to the eye, were three other giants, titans and colossi not in the physical—but in the spiritual and moral domain, and these of course were Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. For most people, and the majority of spies, it was the current physical realities that counted most, that determined their response to the contemporary challenge. But for those rare people able to see past the physical reality, beyond the material horizon that bespeaks conventional limitations and mundane calculations, it was the spiritual greatness and force of past generations, as they inspired the present, that determined the material outcome of each

historical period. And what Calev uniquely saw, was that those giants long buried in the underground cave of Machpela, were more than enough to inspire his generation of Israelites to overcome the Canaanite giants with all of their imposing physical force and numerical superiority. As he stood at the graves of his forefathers, Calev recognized that by remaining true to the covenant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, his contemporaries would be able to conquer the promised land, establish a truly Jewish society, and find both material and spiritual blessing, even as they would retain all of the ethical and spiritual sensibilities of those giants long dead and buried. But such an outcome would require that the patriarchs be seen not as some inconsequential antique or dinosaur fossil, but rather as a living model; preserved not in amber but in the collective memory of this people Israel. Not as oppressive symbols of a long dead civilization, but as truly tolerating and liberating paradigms of what it means to thrive as a small family called the Jewish people, a beacon of light unintimidated and unbowed by the impositions of larger, more physically powerful nations, be they enemies nearby or allies across the ocean. And to be able to not merely to survive, but to flourish, as individuals and as a people, only by, and to the extent that, these Jews remain faithful to the model and the example of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel/Leah. That is why this verse reads as it does, and why Calev was inspired to stand against the contrary consensus of his peers: because through Hebron and its prevailing symbolism he had come to a profound appreciation of the true strengths of the people of Israel, in relation to the land of Israel.

Today in and around Hebron there are many fellow Jews, who bear the brave mantle of Calev ben Yefuneh, and who seek to maintain our people's historic connection not just to that city, but to all of Jewish history, as it has emerged from the covenantal experience with God. May it be God's will that the incoming government of Israel will endorse their uncommon resolve, protect their lives and their legitimate concerns, strengthen their presence, and reinforce the Jewish commitment to that ancient corner of the ancestral territory of Judah, the Lion of Israel, even as it allows their Arab neighbors to strive peacefully toward their own accommodations with the Jews in their midst. And may it be God's will that as we ourselves renew our ties to Hebron and all that it represents, supporting it, visiting it, praying for it, and understanding its indispensable place in the life of the Jewish people, so too will we, like Calev of old, in turn be inspired by Hebron, and those buried within its precincts, to see in our own lifetime the long-awaited moment of the messianic redemption of Israel and mankind, and we ourselves take our rightful places as faithful sons and daughters, citizens and residents, of the land and State of Israel.