BY
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The City of Abraham

Telling the story of Hebron, cradle of monotheism.

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Introduction

My book *The City of Abraham* sets out to tell the 5, 000 year history of Tel Rumeida, the site of ancient Hebron, and the modern city in which it stands, through the experiences of all those with an interest in it, regardless of nationality or religion.

Hebron lies at the heart of the contemporary struggle for control of the land because it is the city of the matriarchs and patriarchs – the family of named individuals from whom all Jews, Christians and Muslims claim lineal or spiritual descent. According to the Book of Genesis, Abraham lived in Hebron when he arrived in the Promised Land, and when he died, he was buried beside his wife, Sarah, in a tomb half a mile to the east of Tel Rumeida. Abraham's son, Isaac, and his grandson, Jacob, and two of their respective wives, are also believed to be interred in the family tomb, which is called the Cave of Machpelah in Hebrew. Since Jacob is believed to be the father of the Jews, Hebron is regarded as the birthplace of the Jewish people, and the immense Herodian structure that stands above the traditional site of the Cave of Machpelah is Judaism's second holiest shrine.

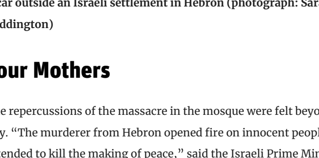
Yet it is not only holy to the Jews, for Abraham had another son called Ishmael, who became the father of the Arabs. When the Muslim armies led by Mohammed's successors emerged from the Arabian peninsula and captured Palestine in 632 CE, they renamed Hebron Al Khalil, "'the friend", in honour of Abraham, whom Muslims venerate as a "friend of God", and turned the building above the Tomb of the Patriarchs into a mosque.

Most Jews had been sent into exile during the period of Roman rule in the first and second centuries AD, but they began returning to Hebron in the medieval era. A small group lived in peace with their Palestinian neighbours until 1929, when 67 of their number were killed in a riot provoked by growing tensions over Jewish immigration to Palestine, and the British authorities evacuated the rest.

For most of the next 40 years there were no Jews in Hebron, but in 1968 an atavistic rabbi called Moshe Levinger led a small group back to the city. The Israeli writer Amos Oz has said that the "settlers" who led the return to the territories that Israel had captured in 1967 were "a stupid and cruel messianic sect, a band of armed gangsters . . . that emerged from some dark corner of Judaism," and Rabbi Levinger and his followers were some of the most extreme of all. Most settlements were established on isolated hilltops or other defensible locations, at one remove from the local population, but the settlers of Hebron chose to live in the middle of the largest Palestinian city in the West Bank.

They believed that the biblical legends on which their claims to the land were based should supersede all other considerations: "The Jewish national renaissance is more important than democracy," Rabbi Levinger said. "No government has the authority or right to say that a Jew cannot live in all of the parts of the land of Israel." Since many of his followers belonged to the outlawed Kach Party that advocated the expulsion or "transfer" of the "Ishmaelites" from the territories they called "Judea and Samaria", their presence in Hebron provoked resentment, resistance, and violence. Several of the settlers were killed, and yet they were not easily intimidated. In the early days of the settlement, Palestinian stallholders in the Old City would identify their new neighbours by their antisocial tendencies – one might be known for turning over market stalls; another for spitting in people's faces – but over the years, the minor antagonisms escalated into violent confrontations, and on the morning of 25 February 1994 a doctor from Brooklyn called Baruch Goldstein walked into the Tomb of the Patriarchs during dawn prayers and shot and killed 29 Muslims.

The following extract from the book describes the aftermath of the massacre in the mosque through the experiences of an Israeli woman called Yona Rochlin, who is descended from two of the Jewish families that had lived in Hebron until 1929. Yona ran a campaign maintaining that the settlers did not represent the pre-1929 Jewish community of Hebron, and had no right to claim the property it used to own in the city, including a former clinic called Beit Hadassah. Haim Hanegbi, who is the grandson of the last Sephardic rabbi of Hebron, also became involved in the campaign.



A car outside an Israeli settlement in Hebron (photograph: Sarah Beddington)

Four Mothers

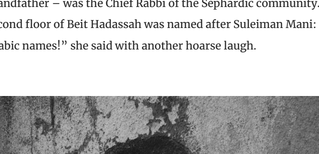
The repercussions of the massacre in the mosque were felt beyond the city. "The murderer from Hebron opened fire on innocent people, but intended to kill the making of peace," said the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin. Less than six months earlier, Rabin and Yasser Arafat had signed a document that established a framework for limited Palestinian self-government and sketched out a path to statehood: the two sides had agreed in principle to partition the country, but before the next phase of the Oslo Accords were signed in May 1994 Hamas carried out its first suicide bombing inside Israel. One observer said that Goldstein's crime had persuaded Hamas to abandon the Islamic prohibition against causing indiscriminate harm against Israeli citizens, and another claimed that it "directly and indirectly created the chain of suicide bombings and the appalling upward spiral composed of Israeli responses and Palestinian counter-responses". The truth is more complex: the fact that the number of settlers nearly doubled between 1992 and 1995 suggests that Israel had never intended to relinquish the West Bank, and yet even so there were those who regarded Rabin's willingness to discuss the possibility of Palestinian statehood as treachery. "It began after Goldstein," Yigal Amir said after he shot Rabin at a rally in Tel Aviv on 4 November 1995. "It's then that it dawned on me that one must put down [Rabin]."

Shimon Peres, Rabin's Foreign Minister, briefly succeeded him as Prime Minister, but Benyamin Netanyahu won the general election held in May 1996. Netanyahu had always been opposed to the idea of partitioning "*Eretz Israel*" and there were fears that he would fail to meet Israel's obligation under the Oslo Accords initiated by Yitzhak Rabin: the IDF had left the West Bank cities of Jenin, Nablus, Tulkarem, Qalqiliya, Ramallah and Bethlehem in November 1995, and it was due to withdraw from 80 per cent of Hebron in January 1997.

The city found itself the focus of media attention again, and one day an Israeli woman called Yona Rochlin saw a newspaper story saying that the settlers had a map of the properties that used to belong to the Jews of Hebron. Since she was descended from two of Hebron's most significant Jewish families, she rang the journalist and asked if she could have a copy: "It was a private call, really a private call," she said when I met her at a cafe in a shopping mall near her home in Ranaana, a suburb of Tel Aviv. Yet the journalist was more interested in what she could tell him, for Hebron had become the most important city in the world: "It was full of journalists, but nothing was happening, and all of a sudden, I open my mouth . . ." Yona Rochlin's laugh was a hoarse, throaty sound. The journalist rang her back, and asked her if she was prepared to be interviewed, and the next day her statement appeared in the paper beneath a bold headline: "I don't want my son to die on my grandfather's grave."

Fourteen years later, she described it as a peace statement: "My son was about 15 then, but whenever a child is born here you think about the army." Yona was 58 years old, and she had frizzy blonde hair and black glasses. Her English was far from fluent but very expressive, and she talked with engaging humour and directness. She was to get through at least half a dozen cigarettes in the course of the next two hours. We were sitting at an outside table within the glow of neon cast by the shop displays of the Kenon Arim mall. There were people drifting around the edges of the mall, like fish prospecting at the face of a reef, but there was no one sitting on the stone seats that ringed the empty plaza.

Yona had not meant to become involved in the debate over Hebron's future, but once she was she addressed the subject with what seemed like characteristic zeal. She does not like Hebron, and has no desire to live there, but she is proud of her connection with the Hasson and Mani families, for they occupy an important role in both the history of Jewish Hebron and the wider community of the Yishuv. Elijah Mani had come to Hebron from Iraq in 1856, and his son – Yona's great- or great-great-grandfather – was the Chief Rabbi of the Sephardic community. The second floor of Beit Hadassah was named after Suleiman Mani: "Very Arabic names!" she said with another hoarse laugh.



The Old City, Hebron (Photograph: Sarah Beddington)

They did not have aristocrats in Israel – still don't – but if they did, the Mani family would have been amongst them. Even the Arabs regarded him as a "*haham*", or wise man. When he died in 1899, hundreds of Jews and Arabs attended his funeral, and the family had to post guards at his grave to stop the Arabs taking his body and re-burying him "as one of their own". Her grandmother's family, the Hassons, were no less integrated into Hebron's Arab life, and her grandparents lived in an Arab district of the city, rather than the Jewish quarter.

She used to joke that her father, who was born in 1912, was half Arab, for he spoke fluent Arabic and Ladino, and when she was growing up he always used to tell them that he wanted to go back to Hebron. Yona did not entirely believe he meant it – "it was sort of a joke" – but she could see that it "was a dream for him": Hebron seemed to exert the same hold on his imagination as it did on Haim Hanegbi's. Her father took her to the city for the first time in 1968, and she remembered the Arabs welcoming him "like a brother": there were people stopping him in the street, and hugging him, and people crying. Yet on the same visit, her father went to see Rabbi Levinger in the Park Hotel, and told him he could have his family's properties in the Jewish quarter. "He helped them," she said. "He belonged to the hard core of people who started the whole problem. He gave them the permission to stay – not that he had the official right, but who has?"

She believed that he would not have been so willing to help the settlers if he had known how vengeful and destructive they would prove to be, and as the debate over the city's future resumed, she did what she could to redress the balance. In October 1996, she took a group of twenty-five descendants to meet the Mayor of Hebron. A couple of weeks later they published another statement in the press, saying that the settlers did not "speak in the name of the old Jewish community" of the city, for their way of life was alien to that of "the Hebron Jews, who created over the generations a culture of peace and understanding between peoples and faiths in the city". Thirty-two descendants of some 13 or 14 families signed the statement, including Haim Hanegbi. Yona told a journalist at the time that it must have been a "nightmare" for the settlers: "they had been holding the history book of Hebron" for 30 years, and "all of a sudden, we came out of the pages". They had taken "two days and ignored 500 years".

The settlers' spokesman, Noam Arnon, struggled to articulate a coherent response: he accused the petition's signatories of being agents of "fanatical movements who want to destroy the Jewish existence in Hebron" and at the same time he dismissed them as a "small group of leftist activists" who "do not represent anything". He accused the petitioners of "bizarre activity to justify those who killed the Jewish community in 1929", and yet the only descendant of the old Jewish families of Hebron who supported the settlers' cause was a seventy-year-old man who had been less than a year old in 1929. Shlomo Slonim's father, Eliezer Dan Slonim, had been the director of the Anglo-Palestine Bank and a representative of the Jewish community in the Hebron municipality. The Arab mob had killed him and his wife and 22 people in their house with knives and machetes.

Yona's father's family had been more fortunate – "by mistake, or by luck" they had left Hebron in 1929, because business was bad. Not all their relatives escaped. One of her father's uncles – a Hasson, and a rabbi – was killed. Her father's family moved to Jerusalem. Her grandfather had traded in fabric, which he went to Lebanon to buy; he opened a shop in the Mahane Yehuda district of West Jerusalem, where many of the Jewish refugees from Hebron made their homes. Yona believed that they had attended the same synagogue as Haim Hanegbi's grandfather, though she was rather dismissive of Haim Bajaio's status: "Really," she said, drawing on the proud heritage of the Hasson and Mani families, "they weren't that important then."

Her mother's heritage was very different. She was not a product of the Sephardic elite that dominated the old Yishuv, but an Ashkenazic Jew from Riga, in the Baltic state of Latvia, who had emigrated to Israel with her brother in 1934. Yona did not know when her parents got married – there were many things about her mother's life that she did not know. At first, she said they belonged to a generation that did not talk much, and she and her brother "were too young and stupid to ask questions", but on reflection, she said they did not ask for a reason: "The past in my parents' house was taboo because of the Holocaust. My mother left her parents and her two sisters, and her aunts, and her other relatives, and she survived alone with one brother – of course we couldn't ask anything. And because we couldn't ask her, we didn't ask my father." It was a common trait amongst the generation that had survived the Holocaust – some of them became more prepared to talk as they got older, but her mother always blamed herself for leaving her family: "So there was nothing to say."

One thing she did know was that her father's family did not want him to marry an Ashkenazic girl, which made Yona laugh again: "If you know the situation now in Israel, when the Ashkenazim are the elite, then it's a joke. But it didn't suit their class." Her parents had other things in common: neither was religious – Yona remembered being ashamed that she was the only child at school whose fathee never went to the synagogue – and both were right-wing. Her mother was a member of Betar, the right-wing youth movement established in her hometown by the prominent Israeli politician Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who believed that the Jews of Palestine could only negotiate with their Arab neighbours from behind an impregnable "iron wall", and her father was one of the commanders of the Irgun, the militant faction led by Menachem Begin that fought against British rule in the last days of the Mandate. "He was fighting your father," she said. It was said without reproach and yet with such directness that I wondered if she knew something about my family that I had forgotten.

Yet the Irgun did not confine themselves to fighting the British, and Yona's father had a part in the *Altalena* affair, which she called "the most painful story in Israel's history". The *Altalena* was a ship purchased in Europe by Irgun fighters, and loaded with weapons donated by the French government, which arrived on Israel's shores on 20 June 1948, at the beginning of the Arab–Israeli War. The Irgun had been absorbed into the IDF, but the fate of the *Altalena,* and the destination of its cargo, provoked a confrontation between Begin and David Ben-Gurion, Israel's new Prime Minister. Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary on 16 June 1948 that it contained "5,000 rifles, 250 Bren guns, 5 million bullets, 50 bazookas, 10 Bren carriers", and he ordered Begin, who had boarded the ship at a beach north of Tel Aviv, to hand over the weapons and "cease his separate activities". When Begin refused to acknowledge the ultimatum, the IDF shelled the ship and captured it by force. Sixteen Irgun fighters and three IDF soldiers were killed. Most of the several hundred Irgun fighters who were arrested were released after several weeks, but Yona's father, Moshe Hasson, was one of five men who were kept locked up until the end of August. He never forgave Ben-Gurion: "He hated him," Yona said. "It was very personal."

Unlike many of his colleagues in the Irgun, her father did not join the IDF, partly because he was in jail during the first part of the war, but his experience as a guerrilla helped him establish himself in the diamond business, which was domi- nated in the early years of the state by other Irgun fighters and immigrats from Antwerp. Yona was born in 1951, and she and her brother and sister grew up in Netayana, a coastal city north of Tel Aviv. Politically, the family's loyalties were divided – her mother's brother was a member of the Knesset for the right-wing party, Likud, but her mother's uncle, Abba Ben-Ya'akov, helped establish a kibbutz on the southern shores of the Sea of Galilee which was associated with Ben-Gurion's left-wing alliance, Mapai. Yet despite their contrasting allegiances, her mother's uncle and his family were the only relatives that she and her brother had left, and they were very close: her mother was the only person who was allowed to enter the kibbutz wearing the uniform of the right-wing youth group Betar "because they loved her so much".

Nonetheless, the political arguments were incessant: "We were a very warm and loving family, but the political shouting, you know, was the sound of my childhood." She was not interested in politics: she often visited the kibbutz, and she regarded her mother's uncle as the grandfather she never had, but she unthinkingly endorsed the right-wing views of her mother and father.

Yona was 16 years old at the time of the Six Day War, and she remembered being very happy for her father when she heard they had captured Hebron. She went to the city shortly after the settlers had established themselves in the Park Hotel. She thought she remembered seeing refugees departing for Jordan, but she was too scrupulous to claim the memory as her own: "I didn't even understand what I was seeing – just lines of people. And maybe it's a fantasy." The visit to Hebron was a "very great moment in her life", and yet it did not inspire her to act out her father's dream of returning to the city. Far from it: instead of following the right-wing settlers to Hebron, she moved to her uncle's socialist kibbutz instead. Her motivation was not political – she wanted to live on the kibbutz because it was "a paradise for children" and she did not begin to question the political allegiances she had inherited from her parents until after they were dead.

She could not vote for anyone other than Likud while her father and uncle were alive, and the only time she broke her habit was in the middle of the seventies when she voted for an even more right-wing party, established by the Likud dissident Geula Cohen: "It's so funny, I tell it as a joke, because it makes me laugh today. It was so stupid: let me tell you, I was not twelve, but I was so ignorant."

The Lebanon War was a turning point for her, as it was for many Israelis, but it was not until the signing of the Oslo Accords that she began to vote for left-wing parties. Even then, she felt constrained by filial duty: supporting the party established by the man who sent her father to prison would have been like putting a knife in his back, and instead of taking one step to the left to vote Labour she took ten steps and voted for Meretz, a small socialist-Zionist party with links to Ha'tsomer Hatzair. "Really, I tell you I felt like a religious Jew who eats pig."

The sky didn't fall, as she put it, but her life was changing in other ways: she had been living in Ranaana, a village near Tel Aviv, with her husband and their son and daughter, but in the space of two years she got divorced, went back to university to study political science and international relations and became a political activist. The thought of her son's political service provoked her into action. She became involved with a movement called Four Mothers, which campaigned against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. She was not one of the original four founders: she thought she was the tenth person to join. "They started in the north, and I was one of the founders when it came to the centre."

The campaign attempted to enlist the parents of serving Israeli soldiers to bring about the withdrawal from Lebanon, and I did not doubt that Yona was right to say that the Israeli politicians were scared of Four Mothers: I could see that she would make a formidable opponent. Once, she was invited on a TV show, where she was accused of being a supporter of Hezbollah, and as she was leaving the studio she heard the next guest, Ehud Barak, say that if he became Prime Minister he would withdraw the IDF from Lebanon. He would not be in a position to act on the pledge for several more years, but Yona believed that he was sincere, and with the movement's aim secured her attention was drawn to Hebron.

She was one of the many people who believed that Netanyahu would refuse to withdraw from the city, though she knew that she would not have the same power to influence events as she had with Four Mothers. "Hebron is much more complicated." Haim Hanegbi hoped to kick the settlers out, but she knew it would not be possible. He had warned her that he would be a nuisance, and she soon realized why: she could present herself as a daughter of the Irgun chiefs, but Hanegbi's reputation as one of the most "extremist leftists" in Israel attracted a great deal of criticism. Nonetheless, he came with them when they went back to Hebron in 1997, and met Jabril Rajoub, head of the Palestinian Security Services in the West Bank, and a senior figure in the PA, who had been criticising the settlers and expressing doubts about Israel's commitment to peace. Arafat himself wanted to meet them, but Yona was suspicious of his motives: he wanted them to say that they ought to be entitled to live in Hebron, so that he could say Palestinians should be allowed to live in Tel Aviv. She had a property deed to Beit Hadassah, but she wanted to see the building converted into a museum documenting the history of Arab–Jewish coexistence in Hebron. "I always say, I give away my property for peace, because peace is more important than a house."

She felt they had achieved all they could, but Hanegbi was "mad at her" because he wanted the campaign to go on: 'He saw us as the most colourful or original peace movement, and he wanted us to continue. I didn't want to because I had established something ad hoc and not a movement.' Besides, nothing had changed – more people knew that the settlers were living in houses that did not belong to them, but it made no difference, for they were still there. Besides, her orientation as an activist was as a mother and not just as a citizen, and she said it was not 'in her blood' once she no longer had a son.

After all she had said about him I was shocked to hear that her son was dead. She had disclosed it in a very matter-of-fact way, but her manner had changed: she suddenly looked very brittle and frail, and she started tugging on her cigarette, with short, distracted gasps. I didn't feel I could ask her how he died, but when she started talking about his military service I assumed I had my answer. He was posted to Ramallah in 2000, which in itself was "a punishment" for her: unlike Haim Hanegbi, who wants to see a single unified state for Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, she believes in the two-state solution, and she drew a clear distinction between defending Israel and serving in the Territories. "I went crazy – really. I live in Israel, I was born in Israel, we have wars here, unfortunately, but my son never went behind the Green Line before he went to service in Ramallah. It's immoral that we waste his life, not for his country, but for the foolishness of settlers and politicians, because the settlements are foolishness and mistakes – really, from the bottom of my heart, I say it's immoral to take my son to service across my borders. I told my cousin that the worst thing had happened to me – my son is serving across the Green Line. And he told me: it's not the worst thing. And after his funeral, I said to him, 'So you were so right: it wasn't the worst thing.'"

The only consolation was that he was not chosen to be a combat soldier: minor physical defects, such as a problem with his shoulder, meant that he was confined to his base. "I was so happy about that, and he was very, very happy, so I shut my mouth." Friends of hers joked that she would force Israel to leave the West Bank, but she did not get involved, and her son's years in the army were the happiest of his life. "He liked the company, and he got all the compliments, because he was an excellent guy, and the moment he got there they saw it." He served in the West Bank for two years between 2000 and 2002, at the height of the Second Intifada, but he had left the army, and he was studying at the Open

University when he died in a car accident. “Look, I was lucky that he wasn’t killed in Ramallah. He was alone in his car, it was his mistake. I have nobody to blame. You see? If it happened to him in the army, I would have joined the Hezbollah. So emotionally, there is a difference. I have nobody to blame. I have only the pain, not the hatred.”

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