

THE JERUSALEM POST

MAY 3, 2024

MAGAZINE

ISRAEL'S CONTENTIOUS SACRED SPACES

The challenges of gaining access to biblical sites: Shanna Fuld explores Joseph's Tomb and the Cave of Machpelah

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COVER: Wisam Hashlamoun/Flash90
Photos (from top): Shlomo Waldmann/INPA;
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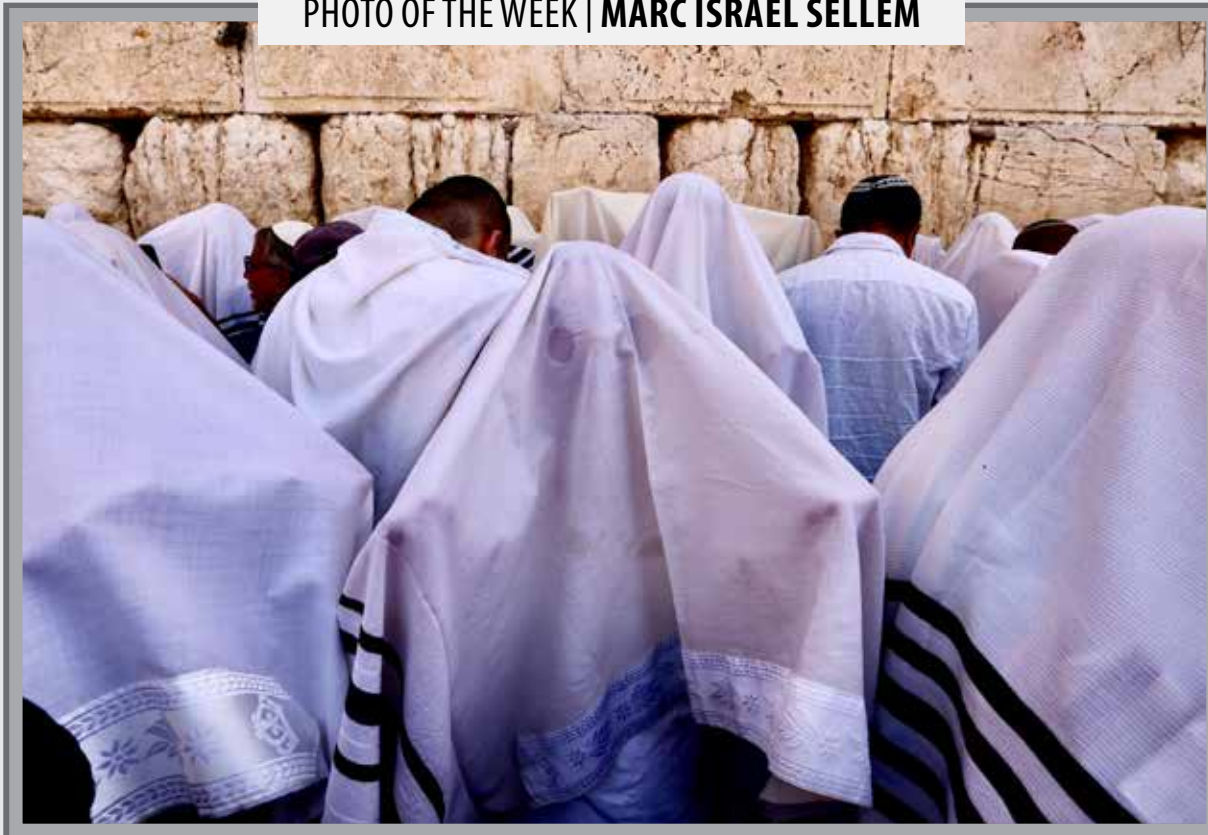


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PHOTO OF THE WEEK | MARC ISRAEL SELLEM



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THE JERUSALEM POST
MAGAZINE

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THE LARGEST WOMEN'S FASHION COMPLEX IN ISRAEL: T&E

Israel's largest women's fashion complex, T&E in Shfaram, has become in recent months an island of unity for women from all sectors: Jewish women from all sectors, women from the Arab-Christian and -Muslim sectors, and tourists who come to purchase dresses for events and wedding dresses.

Zaid Zaid, owner of T&E, has become the guru of women's fashion, and famous women also come to the place among them: Corrin Gideon, Sara Netanyahu, Rina Matzliah, Danit Greenberg, the Canadian ambassador in Israel, and more.

Also in the Miss Universe

competition held in Eilat about two years ago, the contestants wore a collection of dresses that are marketed at the T&E complex.

During the visit to Israel by VP of Facebook Global Sheryl Sandberg, who asked to meet with five prominent businesspeople in Israel - one of the five she asked to meet with was Zaid Zaid.

The T&E fashion complex covers an area of 2,000 sq.m., and about NIS 12 million were invested in its establishment.

The complex is designed like the luxury stores in Beverly Hills and Milan and includes a collection of over 10,000 evening dresses and wedding dresses from about

50 fashion designers all over the world.

The T&E complex also includes personal fitting rooms, a complex of designers and seamstresses, and an espresso bar for men who accompany the women who, instead of pressuring their partners to finish shopping, can drink espresso or other drinks and watch sports games, the news, or thriller series on television screens.

In recent months, Zaid has been examining several possibilities to expand the fashion complex's activities abroad as well and is examining commercial collaborations with entrepreneurs and investors from the US, Canada, Western Europe, and Dubai.

Zaid Zaid points out: "The world of fashion is a universal world. Women are exposed to fashion trends all over the world online and the challenge is to reach fashion houses and designers from all over

the world to present a large variety of fashion trends that are suitable for every woman of every age and every type of event.

"Every day I watch fashion shows that are held all over the world I am exposed to information about trends, and almost every day I add something new and refresh the display in the T&E complex. I adapt the marketing messages to the clientele, and to my delight, the T&E complex is a place that connects all Israeli women of all ages from all ethnic groups from all sectors whose common denominator is fashion, fashion, fashion."

One of the famous women pointed out to Zaid: "You are not a scion of a fashion family, you are not a fashion designer, but you understand women - the best in pairing them with the right clothes for the right occasions, and their exact personal taste."



Israel's sacred sites

Reflections on two contentious national sites – Joseph's Tomb and the Cave of Machpelah – and the difficulties Jewish people face in visiting

• SHANNA FULD

The modern State of Israel is built upon stones that our forefathers and foremothers walked on, beginning some 3,700 years ago. Evidence of this exists in every corner of the land. Holidays such as Passover and Sukkot often require special permits and security arrangements so that Jews can safely travel to and pray at the tombs of our revered ancestors.

These acts become more complicated when one visits sites in Judea and Samaria (otherwise known as the West Bank).

The *Magazine* spent the festival days of Sukkot 2023 and Passover 2024 visiting Joseph's Tomb and the Cave of Machpelah (Tomb of the Patriarchs) and delving into their beleaguered history.



BRESLAV HASSIDIM dance around Joseph's tombstone during one of their infiltrations to Nablus, 2002. (Photos: From book 'Joseph's Tomb – This is how the road was broken' by Nachman 'Nachi' Weiss)

JOSEPH'S TOMB as seen from Mitzpe Yosef, 2014. (Wikimedia Commons)



Joseph's Tomb

As I take my seat on the bus headed to *Kever Yosef*, Joseph's Tomb, I notice that the window is shattered. Upon further inspection, I realize that a bullet or rock has cracked the outer layer of the glass. I sit down and breathe deeply. I wonder who has taken aim and why. It is midnight and the bus tour, organized by The Kever Project (founded in 2023; *thekeverproject.com*), is filling up with people from the center of Israel.

The date is October 5, 2023, an intermediate day in the holiday of Sukkot, the night on which Joseph is the honored

“guest,” ceremoniously welcomed into the sukkah. I have been invited to join the first-ever Tel Aviv bus trip to Joseph's Tomb.

A trip to this tomb is particularly complicated because of its location in Area A, governed by the Palestinian Authority and off-limits to Jews – except for special IDF-organized trips. As a Jew, I recognize that this might be the last chance to visit this particular heritage site, at least for a while. I am indecisive – should I go or shouldn't I?

I feel strongly that this is the moment to go. Tel Aviv,

though diverse in its religious communities, does not have a large demand for such excursions. And those of us who would like the chance to go don't have the connections to know where and how to get there safely. I prepare for the all-nighter and get on the bus.

As we enter the Palestinian city of Nablus, the site of biblical Shechem, we drive toward Joseph's resting place, massive fires roaring into the sky. No one knows what is going on, but the bus continues to inch forward. First-timers are confused. I think perhaps the Palestinians are incinerating their garbage.

It is just two days before the horrific Hamas massacre of Oct. 7. It isn't until Passover 2024 that I find my way back to Kever Project co-founder Fayga Marks, who is able to explain what those raging blazes were about.

“This is what the Arabs do,” she says. “They start dragging tires into fire; they will take an old car and set it on fire. They try doing everything they can to stop the Jews from going to pray at Joseph's Tomb,” Marks explains over the phone.

“They try to make it as scary as possible so that people will say, ‘I will never do this again.’ It is so unpleasant and scary.”

THE ANCIENT Jewish city of Shechem is remembered partially with scorn, as the place where Jacob's daughter Dinah was taken by a man named Shechem, prince of the region. He raped her and tried to take her as a wife. This city is also very close to Shiloh, the first capital of the Hebrews after they emerged from the desert to the Promised Land. They resided in Shiloh with the Tabernacle for just under 400 years.

Today, the area of the tomb is located in what is known as the Balata (refugee) Camp. You may recognize the name from the news. It is a city where, according to Marks, Palestinians become celebrities for killing Jews. It is a Hamas stronghold, with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) terror group also operating there.

With the 1993 Oslo Accords, Jews were granted the right to visit their national sites – the Tomb of Joseph included – but the law has not been upheld. Due to pressure from American partners, the international community, and legitimate security concerns, Israel's government has limited Jewish access to these sites.

“It's a very dangerous area of Nablus. Almost every time there is an entrance, there are terrorists who fire at the forces. They also throw explosive devices and Molotov cocktails at the forces and civilians,” the IDF Spokesperson's Unit told the *Magazine*. “It is our aspiration that Jews should be able to visit safely and frequently.”



BRESLAV FOLLOWERS sneak into Nablus to visit Joseph's Tomb.

Today Palestinian police guard the tomb until the IDF steps in on some 15 days per year. This is all coordinated between the Palestinian Authority and the State of Israel. Typically, *shabab* – or rebel Arab teenagers – are said to be waiting for a moment where neither security force is present to deface the tomb.

Worshippers can reach Joseph's tomb once per month and on the sixth night of Hanukkah, as well as the sixth day of Sukkot.

Buses of Jewish pilgrims (including high-level Israeli government representatives) enter Nablus with a full entourage of IDF soldiers on foot, and a tank leading the procession of buses that has accumulated on the road. The soldiers are putting out fires, responding to rock-throwing from locals, and some might even have requisitioned Palestinian homes as lookouts for IDF snipers, if necessary, to take down any Palestinians who might be trying to harm the Jewish worshippers.

Marks notes that on each trip, despite the fact that Jews purposely arrive in the middle of the night in order to reduce friction with local Arabs, word gets out on Arab social media, and everyone knows that Jews are coming to pray.



MOSHE BARBER (L), known as a ‘true fighter,’ spent decades in a vegetative state before dying. He was shot by Palestinians after praying at Joseph's Tomb.

NACHMAN WEISS on the tombstone of Joseph's Tomb, Dec. 2002.



WOMEN LINE up to enter the tight confines of Joseph's Tomb, then pray at and kiss the site, Oct. 5, 2023. (Photos: Shanna Fuld)



JOSEPH'S TOMB has not always been open. In 2002, dedicated and unarmed civilians began making night pilgrimages to the site. They did not arrive in bulletproof vehicles but instead traveled on foot under cover of darkness. Mostly Breslov Hassidim, these individuals believed it their duty to protect and honor Joseph's Tomb. During their dangerous night journeys, some were discovered and killed by Arabs. Many Jews had walked for several hours through the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) to get there from their villages and settlements. For years, these individuals cared for the tomb despite the government deeming their actions illegal and refusing to send in the army for their protection.

At the turn of the century, a number of individuals were killed or wounded during night journeys to visit Kever Yosef. One of those dedicated individuals was Moshe Barber, who in 2003 was shot by Palestinians; he had been praying at the cave. After more than 20 years of paralysis, he died in 2022.

Visits to Joseph's Tomb used to last just five minutes and one night would bring in about 300 people. Today, there are 1,500 pilgrims on any of the nights it is open, and each bus or group

The 1993 Oslo Accords granted Jews the right to visit their national sites – Joseph's Tomb included – but the law has not been upheld

can have 20 to 30 minutes to visit with Joseph. The IDF has the right, and exercises it regularly, to turn buses away at the last minute if it deems the area not safe enough. Sometimes, Palestinians plant homemade explosives in the area or are found to be planning an attack.

THE BUS pulls into Nablus, and it looks like a different country. Stores are horridly rundown. The army prevents Palestinians from entering roads that lead to the holy site on nights it is open to the Jews. The IDF is working hard, and from the bus I witness an Israeli soldier holding a Palestinian man up against a wall. He is the only person I see on the street that night.

The bus pulls up to the cave, and the site looks like a large, dirty mound. There are men's and women's entrances. Inside, a large blue covering over the grave reads "Joseph the Tzadik" embroidered in gold Hebrew letters. Conversely, the coverings at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron are embroidered only in Arabic.

Women wait for their turn to push themselves through the doorway into the area of the tomb. Female soldiers are working the door and making sure no one spends more than five minutes inside with Joseph. Women throw themselves on top of the grave. Some weep, some smile.

The *Magazine* discovers that NIS 500,000, or \$130,000, has gone into the site's restoration. In 2022, Palestinians vandalized it and lit it on fire. Luckily, the tomb was not destroyed. Marks notes that locals defecate on the site in an effort to disrespect it, although Muslims, too, have a connection to the patriarch.

Dr. Melissa Kronfeld, co-founder of the Kever Project, addresses the question of why she and Marks felt a need to open their organization and make sites around the country available to Jews.

"Our holy sites, including the Temple Mount and graves, are critical to our history, culture, our story and are the reason why this land was given to us," she says. "If we sacrifice these holy historical places, we are sacrificing our heritage, history, culture, and faith. And most critically – our claim to this land."

Kronfeld goes on to suggest that Jews must not worry about what Palestinians think of their right to Jewish holy spaces, and should assert Israeli sovereignty over them. In her words, this is not only so they can be visited, honored, respected, cared for, and celebrated by the Jewish people, but so all people around the world can visit and honor them.

"The only way we can provide these spaces to the Jewish people and the world is by reclaiming them, restoring them, and securing them. And that is why we launched the Kever Project," Kronfeld explains.

Suddenly, the show is over at Joseph's Tomb. The army quickly hustles people out and back on the buses. As we pull away, it feels as if we, the Jewish people, are abandoning Joseph.

The following day, I consult Tribe Tel Aviv's Torah teacher Elana Langer. She assures me that after all the years Joseph spent living comfortably among the Egyptians, he can surely handle an eternal rest among "cousins" better than I may have considered.

PALESTINIANS BURN tires and block the Nablus streets leading to Joseph's Tomb, Jan. 17, 2023. (Nasser Ishtayeh/Flash90)



Cave of the Patriarchs

"It is contentious. But it is all contentious," Rabbi Yehuda HaKohen tells the *Magazine* as he leads a group of 30 young adults out of the city of Hebron on a bulletproof bus. Unlike Nablus, this tomb is located in an area of Hebron open to Jews at any time.

HaKohen is the educational director of the Vision Movement, which focuses on enabling young people to see themselves as characters actively working on the next chapter in the story of the Jewish people. The organization ran a special trip to the Cave of the Patriarchs during Hol Hamoed Passover.

Thursday, April 26, was one of the 10 days a year that Jews have full access to their heritage site. On these 10 days, only Jews are permitted into the building, and they are allowed to enter the mosque where Judaism's patriarch Isaac and matriarch Rebecca are buried.

There are another 10 days a year when Muslims have full access to the site and Jews are not allowed in.

During the rest of the year, the complex can be accessed by two separate entrances – one for Muslim worshipers who enter through the mosque, the other for Jews. Apart from

the 10 special days, Jews are only permitted in the perimeter of the complex, outside of the mosque's sanctuary, where they have access to the tombs of Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, and Leah, whose resting places are in the periphery of the space.

JEWS HAVE continuously lived in the city of Hebron since Abraham purchased the plot of land to bury his wife, for which he paid 400 silver shekels to Ephron the Hittite. During this exchange, Ephron offered the land three times to Abraham for free. Abraham, for his part, refused the gift and made the purchase in front of all the elders of the region in a large display or presentation. Some consider it the first real estate deal ever recorded.

Since then, Jews have lived in this area, minus the years between the 1929 Hebron massacre and the 1967 return of the Jews to that area. They did not start to live in Hebron until 1979.

During the Mamluk empire, it was forbidden for Jews to visit their heritage site, which became a place of pilgrimage and prayer for Muslims only. Jews were only permitted to climb up to the seventh step – and no further. For 700 years,

CAVE OF Machpelah; Hol Hamoed Passover 2024. (Photos: Shanna Fuld)



DOORS OF the sanctuary where Isaac and Rebecca are buried are opened for Jews only 10 days out of the year.

MACHPELAH WAS turned into a mosque where Muslims worship. You can see Rebecca's tomb on the left-hand side.



committed Jews prayed on the seventh step, hoping to one day return to the patriarchs. During the Six Day War in 1967, Maj.-Gen. Rabbi Shlomo Goren became the first Jew to enter the compound.

"I think the entire project – of trying to bring an ancient civilization that was destroyed in antiquity, but preserved its identity in 'gas form' for 2,000 years... to bring that back to life in 'a solid,' in the land it was displaced from, especially if there are other people living in that land and various empires ruling that land; I think it's contentious. I think it's complicated," HaKohen says. "I don't think you can do that without making a mess."

HaKohen goes on to suggest that the ongoing resettlement of the State of Israel is a revolutionary project and that while Jews and Muslims need to respect each other on a day-to-day basis, the path forward should never involve capitulating on our identity.

"Why is it contentious? Maybe we have made a lot of mistakes," HaKohen explains. "In Western thought, only one can be right. Multiple truths can be simultaneous truths."

ENTERING THE city of Hebron, we see soldiers at their small protective posts, with guns at the ready.

The area is heavily secured by the IDF on a regular basis. On pilgrimage days, security is heightened and Palestinians are not allowed to walk on the main roadway leading to the Cave of the Patriarchs. In Arabic, it is called Jihad Street, which translates as "Martyrs Street" because so many Jews were killed on that street by Arabs willing to become martyrs. Jews call the street David HaMelech, in tribute to the great Jewish king. To foreign English speakers, it is known as Apartheid Street.

The main drag and some side streets are lined with memorials indicating where Jews had been stabbed and killed. Many Jews were murdered in Hebron during the Second Intifada. One site we visited had a piece of art on a wall next to a playground. A mother lost her child there when a Palestinian sniper shot the baby in the head.

The rules about entry to the Cave of the Patriarchs were changed after a major incident in which Baruch Goldstein entered the mosque on Purim 1994 and killed 29 people. This event caused a change in the rules of contact between Muslims and Jews at the mosque.

THE GROUP walks up onto the green grass complex outside the Cave of the Patriarchs and continues up to the top. Families picnic outside, music is blaring, and announcements in Hebrew recount visits by important Israeli leaders who have gone there to pray alongside these ancient ancestors. On the way up the hill, those who have firearms are asked to deposit them into police hands at the small station.

People flood through the doors and men and women disperse, finding spots to pray within the cool walls of the cave. Outside, Israel is dealing with an unusual April heat wave reaching 37°C.

Unfortunately for the women, Rebecca's tomb, located right in the center of the men's section (which is a much larger, more open part of the sanctuary) and open only those 10 days a year to Jews, is off-limits to female pilgrims. We are instructed to "view" her tomb and pray in Rebecca's merit from the doorway of the men's section. The women's section is separate – a side wing to the sanctuary.

The tombs of Isaac and the Gan Eden, or "Garden of Eden," tomb (where Adam and Eve rest) are separated by a mehitza, so that both men and women can pray over the tombs.

Some people smile as they pray their hearts out, some women weep, and others look dazed and confused as they sit on plastic chairs scattered throughout the cave. They look around, play on their phones, or just patiently wait for the rest of their group to finish their expressions of devotion.

ABOUT AN hour later, HaKohen leads us out into the hot heavy air, back down the main road, and into a side street with painted walls. Once assembled, HaKohen tells the group that we are standing in an ancient marketplace.

"What was sold here?" he asks, answering: "Jewish slaves." We learn that the Judeans were sold to Romans for a price equivalent to the cost of feeding a donkey for one day. Participants have nothing to respond.

Next, the group enters the Avraham Avinu Synagogue. Dating back to 1540, this small synagogue is evidence of the long Jewish presence in this area. The beautiful, round house of worship is intimate, and several arches make the building an impressive piece of architecture. Jordan took control of the Jewish Quarter in 1948, turning it into a market, dumping grounds, and public toilet. The synagogue building had been used as a goat and donkey stable until Jews reclaimed the site and restored it to its original purpose.



RABBI YEHUDA HAKOHEN grips his tallit bag as he readies himself to lead a tour of young adults into the Cave of the Machpelah.

HEBRON HAS more than 216,000 residents and is the largest city in Judea and Samaria (West Bank). A 2017 survey showed that some 700 Jews lived there, within the 3% of land allotted for the Jews to live.

Hebron, unlike other parts of Judea and Samaria, is not divided into areas A, B, or C but is separated into H1 and H2. Throughout the rest of Judea and Samaria, territory A means full Palestinian Authority control; B is Palestinian municipal control but with Israeli security; and C is Israeli municipal control and Israeli security. H1 accounts for 80% of the 74 sq. km (28.6 sq. m) and is under full Palestinian Authority control. The other 20% is Israeli-controlled. Within that 20%, Jews are only allowed to live in 3% of the area.

The bus passes through Kiryat Arba on its way back to Jerusalem. HaKohen counts Kiryat Arba as part of modern Hebron and explains how some people currently living there are simply using it as a transition point while waiting for housing to become available in Jewish Hebron.

As the bus careens on its way back to Jerusalem, Alexa Eden shares her experience with the *Magazine*. She's an *olah* (immigrant) from New York who has committed to living in Israel and is four months into what she calls her "new spiritual journey" in the Holy Land.

"This morning I woke up and caught up on the news in America. A flood of information from college campuses to information about our hostages and the videos released about them... Out of all the chaos and confusion, the one thing that hasn't changed in thousands of years is the Torah," Eden says. "That gave me a lot of peace. It's every person's birthright to discover this history and these roots."

Eden suggests that perhaps the Jewish people do not yet exemplify the responsibility it takes to have these national sites open to them all the time. She thinks perhaps they are not ready to honor and respect the site as deeply as needed for it to be fully ready for the Jewish public year-round.

Eden also mirrors the theme of the day that HaKohen has emphasized during his tour. She says the site of the patriarchs is less of a religious issue and more of an issue of heritage.

"This isn't about our religious beliefs. This is about our history and lineage. We are the only people who are direct descendants of all the forefathers and foremothers. There's enough proof that both sides acknowledge it to be true, so at this point, it's a power thing," says Eden, referring to the issues of authority and control over the cave.

Eden's wish is for the Jewish people to stop seeing their history as ancient and disconnected from current reality. She says the sooner the Jewish people embrace their past and get educated on where they come from, many who are confused will realize that the things they value and want to see in the world are exactly what our forefathers and foremothers stood for. That includes, in her words, "love, peace, harmony, unity, collective empowerment, oneness, humility, and compassion."

Other students on the trip come away from the experience with a message of force and power. Ben Weissman feels that while the Jewish people are always trying to be the more "civilized, non-violent faction" in the region, his takeaway is that being peaceful is not the answer to the problems in the Middle East.

"It was a magical experience for me," Weissman says. "We need to fight for the land, we need to be ready to die for the land. And then we can have peace."

HaKohen compares the Jewish people to the Aztecs in that there is a national component, a spiritual component, a territorial component, and even a legal one. He says that the Jewish people are the "sum of those parts."

"I think the Jews who are connected to these places are Jews who really feel like they are consciously living our national story. And they are willing to fight for that story," HaKohen explains.

Throughout the last 2,000 years, there have been several failed attempts at restoring Jewish independence to the Land of Israel, says HaKohen. "Zionism," he says, is the name of the attempt that succeeded.

If the Land of Israel is the soulmate of the Jewish nation, HaKohen says the people must be willing to fight and sacrifice to maintain that connection and keep it current. ■

Unfortunately for the women, Rebecca's tomb, open only 10 days a year to Jews, is off-limits to female pilgrims