

TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE STRUGGLE FOR HEBRON A STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY?

“Those who refuse to help build Hebron — they are attacking the very roots of our people.”¹ With these words, Rabbi Rav Kook scolded those who after the 1929 Hebron massacre did not support the return of the Jews to their second holiest city. Hebron could not simply be replaced with a different dwelling place in Mandatory Palestine, for it is essential to Zionist Jewish identity. Come what may, Palestinian Arabs living in Hebron are as unwilling to accept population transfer. Allah is with them, they reckon, and will help them prevail. Indeed, Hebron is a microcosm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a relentless struggle between two mutually exclusive identities whose tangibility depends on territorial control. And even though they are mutually exclusive, the Palestinian and the Israeli identity cannot be analysed in isolation from one another. Both were created and developed under the constant influence of the other and in dialogue with the other. It is this assumption which guides this paper in analysing the example of Hebron as a means to detecting the elements of identity that are being contested in city and, by extension, in the disputed territories of Israel/Palestine.

Before diving into a discussion of the above, however, a much more fundamental clarification seems in order. The Arab-Israeli conflict is conspicuously charged with nationalistic emotions and symbolism. As a result, an intuitive response to the question posed in the title is, why would it be anything but a struggle for identity? Oren Yiftachel, a leading expert on the geography of the conflict writes that territory everywhere in Mandatory Palestine has become the main shaper of Zionist and Palestinian identity, because of the inconclusive nature of the territorial struggle. Theorizing the obvious, the author further asserts that settling the land means denying the other’s right to it. Where territory is the only or most tangible expression of each group’s identity, conquest results in the annihilation of the loser’s identity.² So struggle over territory is always a struggle over identity in Palestine. Although his analysis is undeniable, unequal value is attributed to different parts of that contested territory, and Israel’s settlement strategy is very revealing in this sense. Settlers in Jerusalem, Nablus and Hebron differ strongly from those in other parts of the West Bank. Other settlements tend to be near the Green Line and isolated from the local Arab population. Settlers who chose to move to these locations have been called “economic settlers”, because it is the attractive lifestyle offered at these locations what draws them to the West Bank.³ These Jews do not view it as their duty to settle the Holy Land, nor do they equate its loss with the destruction of Israeli Jewish identity. In the Arab culture, on the other hand, each piece of land is looked upon as the owner’s birth right, not matter where it is located.⁴ Land is inalienable, it belongs to a family whose name and honour are intricately linked to it. There is no better illustration for this than the struggle for the

¹ Speech of Rabbi Rav Kook, Feb 18th 1930, available at http://ravkooktorah.org/HAYA_65.htm

² Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 52-61

³ Jeffrey Goldberg, “Among the Settlers. Will They Destroy Israel?”, *The New Yorker*, May 31st, 2004

⁴ A Russian Zionist in the early 20th century, when Ashkenazim were arriving in Israel, is quoted as warning Jews of a possible Arab backlash. Land, he asserted, was a birth right for locals, and depriving them of it would result in their rebellion. Ran Greenstein, *Genealogies of Conflict. Class, Identity, and State in Palestine/Israel and South Africa* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 39

lands of Bil'in, a town located near the Green Line that has been claimed by the IDF for new economic settlers. Hebron, in contrast, is not just land and family; it is a God-given right, not a birth right. Al-Khalil cannot be swapped for peace; Bil'in may eventually be.

Indeed, in Hebron the fight for territory is but one element in a more encompassing fight for ethno-religious dominance. Urban planning and geographical reordering, with unequal success on both sides, have been aimed at expressing and reproducing identity whilst negating the other. The forceful creation of facts on the ground, especially by Jewish settlers, is supported by the redefinition of space through language, religion and history. Palestinians have mustered a response in each of these aspects, resulting in two competing versions of the same city.⁵ A brief analysis of each of these elements allows us to understand not just how identity formation in Hebron works, but provides us with a tool to analyse similar processes elsewhere. Historically, and religiously, both groups have a legitimate claim to the city of Hebron. It is thought that Abraham, father of the faithful, bought the Cave of Machpelah as a burial place for his wife. Later on, Abraham himself and his son Isaac were buried at the same location. Belying its great religious significance, the city of Hebron has not always been central to any of the three monotheistic religions. It was the seat of the Kingdom of Judah at King David's times, before the throne was moved to conquered Jerusalem. As a result, Hebron lost its position as the kingdom's capital. Neither did it have a central place in the Islamic conquests; its capture in 632 a.C. was not even worth mentioning in the official records.⁶ Only later did Muslims recover the meaning of Abraham in their own worship, and Hebron turned into a place of worship visited by pilgrims from surrounding lands. To cater for these pilgrims, an infrastructure of hostels and restaurants was built around the cave. Jews were also among those visitors, and some of them began settling in the city around the 12th century, shortly before the Mamluks forbade non-Muslim worshippers to pray at the site. Despite this expression of religious discrimination, the inhabitants of the city lived peacefully side by side until 1929. Indeed, there was so much respect for the other that when the US ambassador to Istanbul invited trader and rabbi Levi Knlonski to visit the Haram Ibrahimī – a prerogative of foreign dignitaries – he refused, out of respect for the Muslim inhabitants of the city.⁷

This stands in stark contrast to the events that unfolded in the very same mosque in 1994, when Baruch Goldstein killed 29 Muslims during their prayer at Haram Al-Khalil. Goldstein was a member of the radical Kach movement which considers settling all of Judea and Samaria a divine duty, even at the cost of one's life and family. To Hebron's radical settlers – and in Hebron all of them are radical, for only ideology could keep one living in such an environment – 1967 allowed

⁵ Jaques Lévy described this interaction as one that “make possible two readings of space, simultaneously and in the same place” [own translation from French], cited in Chloé Yvroux, “L'Impact du Contexte Géopolitique sur <<L'Habiter>> des Populations D'Hebron-Al Khalil (Cisjordanie)”, *L'Espace Géographique*, 2009/3 Vol. 38, 226

⁶ Nazmi Al-Jubeih, “Hebron (al-Halil): Kontinuität und Integrationskraft einer islamisch-arabischen Stadt”, (PhD diss., Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen, 1991), 114

⁷ Andreas Wagner, *Die Juden Hebrons von der Lokalgesellschaft zur “Nationalen Heimstätte” (1904-1939): Die Desintegration einer Peripheren Jüdischen Gemeinde* (Berling: K. Schwarz, 2002), 20

Jews to re-establish historical justice, to erase this humiliation from Jewish history.⁸ Following the controversial return of a few dozen Jews just days after the Six Days War, the Israeli government grudgingly allowed them to settle in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of the Old City. On this site, the settlement of Kiryat Arba would later be established. The choice of this name – the ancient Jewish name of the city⁹ – is highly symbolic and serves as a good example for the place naming mechanism that has become so important in the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. Early in the history of the Jewish state, in 1949, the prime minister charged a group of prominent researchers with creating the connections between the modern state and history. The goal was to provide the documentation which supported the continuity of a historical thread that remain unbroken from the times of Joshua to the newly established state of Israel.¹⁰ Place naming was an essential mechanism to create this sense of continuity. Whilst this drive to assert historical and religious rights happened in all of Israel, in Judea and Samaria (the Hebrew version of the Arabic “West Bank”) it gained even greater importance: 47% of the settlements in the West Bank have Biblical or Talmudic names, compared with 20% in 1948 Israel.¹¹ This reflected the strong emphasis on the idea of a return of the Jewish community to its ancient homeland.

Resisting this Jewish reinterpretation of what they view as their own space, Palestinians have recovered the name Al-Khalil, “The Friend”, in reference to the way God described Abraham. Even though the name Hebron itself is an Arabic version of the traditional Jewish name “Habaruk” – which has also designated the city in past times – Palestinians insist on Al-Khalil. After all, it distinguishes their version much more clearly from that of the Jews. The Cave of Machpelah, the shrine that is at the heart of the struggle over Hebron/Al-Khalil, is Ibrahim’s Mosque in Muslim discourse. To them, Hebron is “occupied by settlers”, not “inhabited by the Jews of Hebron”.¹² By extension, the West Bank is “occupied” and not “administered”, as the Israeli discourse goes. Where the Star of David is drawn by settlers to express their omnipresence in Hebron, graffiti of Handalah (a mythical figure in Palestinian national discourse) will not be far away. Language and other symbols are visible and ubiquitous expressions of Hebron’s clash of identities. Because these identities negate one another, their expressions paradoxically strengthen one another, and are a constant provocation to the other.

When Miriam Levinger led a group of settler women to take over Beit Hadassa in 1979, she did not view it as a provocation for the Palestinian population. In her view, she was reclaiming pre-1929 Jewish property.¹³ This was the beginning of an attempt to Judaize the Old City of Hebron, directly around the Cave of the Patriarchs/Ibrahim’s Mosque. What had been a bustling commercial

⁸ Ibid., 4

⁹ Joshua 21:11: “They gave them Kiriatharba, that is Hebron, in the mountainous region of Judah, and its surrounding pastures”. NWT.

¹⁰ Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape. The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001), 12

¹¹ Saul B. Cohen and Nurit Kliot, “Place-Names in Israel’s Ideological Struggle over the Administered Territories”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 82, No. 4(Dec. 1992), 662

¹² Chloé Yvroux, “L’Impact du Contexte Géopolitique sur <<L’Habiter>> des Populations D’Hebron-Al Khalil (Cisjordanie)”, *L’Espace Géographique*, 2009/3 Vol. 38, 224

¹³ Interview with Miriam Levinger in Calvin Goldscheider, *Cultures in Conflict: the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002)

city centre has become a ghost town. Downtown Jewish settlers have harassed Palestinians living and working in the city so much that they have forced their transfer to other areas. Only the poorest remained, and the Old City became an urban slum.¹⁴ After the Oslo Accords, the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee was established with international aid and local expertise with the goal of reverting this judaization process. Of course, settlers and the IDF cooperated to impede this negation of their own identity policies. Workers on the properties were routinely attacked, authorizations were slow and hard to come by and house demolitions worked against the committee's goals. In addition, the settler community – whose influence on Israel's West Bank policy is considerable – was able to obtain permits to build multiple settler roads in the city. Since Palestinians are not allowed to access these roads, they effectively cut the city into fragments, mirroring the situation in the entire West Bank. Nonetheless, the Old City has slowly regained some of its Arab character, and Palestinians are committed to staying. However, with settler harassment continuing and the IDF standing idly by – or even protecting perpetrators – the identity of Hebron is far from settled.

By asserting Jewish identity in the West Bank through the construction of roads that link settlements with pre-1967 Israel and with each other, Israel denies Palestinians the opportunity to build an "imagined community".¹⁵ These are the words that Benedict Anderson used to describe a nation: By knowing of the existence and similarity of others in the country, it is possible to imagine oneself a member of a cohesive community, even though there is no personal connection between the members. When checkpoints, settlements, walls and roads cut through a country – and even through the heart of cities – the passage of generations can easily make this image disappear. As seen in Hebron, in some parts of the West Bank the fight for territory can sometimes turn into a battlefield for ideas and identities. Where religion, history, language and culture are contested, the fight for land takes on a different meaning. For the Jews, it is the second holiest site, the burial place of the patriarchs. As such the settler movement views it as a religious duty to settle the land, and will not yield in its demands. Palestinians have their livelihoods in Hebron. For generations have they settled the city's territories, and land and property are birth rights. Ibrahim, the father of their religion, is buried in the local mosque. They dominated the site for almost a millennium and will hold on to the quarter of the mosque that was left to them after the 1994 attack on Muslim worshippers. They will always call it Ibrahimi Mosque or Haram Ibrahimi; Jews will always call it the Cave of Machpelah. In the Jewish sector of Hebron, H2, the white flag with the blue Star of David will always fly in defiance of local identity politics, whilst the Palestinian flag flying at demonstrations reminds settlers of their precarious position in the West Bank. Hebron or Al-Khalil? This question may never be settled.

¹⁴ Anita Vitullo, "People Tied to Place: Strengthening Cultural Identity in Hebron's Old City", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Fall 2003), 74

¹⁵ Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 78

References

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006)
- Cohen, Shelly, Shmuel David, Eitan Felner, Yuval Ginbar, Noga Kadman, and Yael Stein. 1995. *Impossible coexistence: Human Rights in Hebron since the Massacre at the Cave of the Patriarchs*. B'Tselem - The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, .
- Cohen, Saul B., and Nurit Kliot. 1992. Place-names in Israel's Ideological Struggle over the Administered Territories. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (4) (Dec.): 653-80
- Goldberg, Jeffrey. Among the Settlers. Will They Destroy Israel? *The New Yorker* (May 31st, 2004)
- Goldscheider, Calvin. *Cultures in Conflict* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002)
- Greenstein, Ran. *Genealogies of Conflict: Class, Identity, and State in Palestine/Israel and South Africa* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995)
- Ju'bah, Nazmī. *Hebron (al-ḥalīl) : Kontinuität und integrationskraft einer islamisch-arabischen stadt*.
- Kimmerling, Baruch. *Clash of identities : Explorations in israeli and palestinian societies*.
- Müller, Patrick. Occupation in Hebron. The Alternative Information Center, 2004.
- Paine, Robert. 1995. Behind the Hebron massacre, 1994. *Anthropology Today* 11 (1) (Feb.): 8-15,
- Said, Edward W. 1997. The real meaning of the Hebron agreement. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 26 (3) (Spring): 31-6
- Sellick, Patricia. 1994. The old city of Hebron: Can it be saved? *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23 (4) (Summer): 69-82
- Vitullo, Anita. 2003. People tied to place: Strengthening cultural identity in Hebron's old city. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33 (1) (Fall): 68-83
- Wagner, Andreas. *Die juden Hebrons von der lokalgesellschaft zur "nationalen heimstätte" (1904-1938) : Die desintegration einer peripheren jüdischen Gemeinde*. (Berlin: K. Schwarz, 2002)
- Yiftachel, Oren. 2008. Spaces of ethnic conflict. In *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, eds. Rob Kitchin, Nigel Thrift.
- Yiftachel, Oren, and Roded. 2010. Abraham's urban footsteps: Political geography and religious radicalism in Israel/Palestine. In *The Fundamentalist City? Religiosity and the Remaking of Urban Space.*, eds. Nezar AlSayyad, Mejgan Massoumi. London: Routledge.
- Yiftachel, Oren. *Ethnocracy : Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006)

Zaha Kheir. DPhil Candidate in Politics. To What Extent is the Struggle for Hebron a Struggle for Identity? November 30th, 2014. University of Oxford

Yvroux, Chloé. 2009. L'Impact du Contexte Géopolitique sur <<L'Habiter>> des Populations D'Hebron-al Khalil (Cisjordanie). *L'Espace Géographique* 38 (3): 222-32.