

Hebron: Tomb of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs (Ma'arat HaMachpelah)



The Cave of Machpelah in [Hebron](#) is the world's most ancient [Jewish](#) site and the second holiest place for the Jewish people, after the [Temple Mount](#) in [Jerusalem](#). The cave and the adjoining field were purchased—at full market price—by [Abraham](#) some 3700 years ago. [Abraham](#), [Isaac](#), [Jacob](#), [Sarah](#), [Rebecca](#), and [Leah](#) are all later buried in the same Cave of Machpelah. These are considered the [patriarchs](#) and [matriarchs](#) of the Jewish people. The only one who is missing is [Rachel](#), who was buried near [Bethlehem](#) where she died in childbirth.

The double cave, a mystery of thousands of years, was uncovered several years ago beneath the massive building, revealing artifacts from the Early Israelite Period (some 30 centuries ago). The structure was built during the [Second Temple Period](#) (about two thousand years ago) by [Herod](#), King of [Judea](#), providing a place for gatherings and Jewish prayers at the graves of the [patriarchs](#).

This uniquely impressive building is the only one that stands intact and still fulfills its original function after thousands of years. Foreign conquerors and invaders used the site for their own purposes, depending on their religious orientation: the [Byzantines](#) and [Crusaders](#) transformed it into a church and the [Muslims](#) rendered it a mosque. About 700 years ago, the Muslim [Mamelukes](#) conquered Hebron, declared the structure a mosque and forbade entry to Jews, who were not allowed past the seventh step on a staircase outside the building.

In the [Ottoman period](#) the town was divided into four courters: The Ancient Quarter (*Harat al-Kadim*) near the Cave of Machpelah; to its south, the Quarter of the Silk Merchant (*Harat al-Kazaz*), inhabited by Jews; the Mamluk-era Sheikh's Quarter (*Harat ash Sheikh*) to the north-west; and further north, the Dense Quarter (*Harat al-Harbah*). From 1874, the Hebron district was part of the Sanjak of Jerusalem was administered directly from [Istanbul](#).

The British occupied Hebron on December 8, 1917, and became part of the [Palestine Mandate](#). During that time, the Cave of the Patriarchs continued to remain officially closed to non-Muslims. In 1929, the [Mufti of Jerusalem](#) instigated riots that spread to Hebron where 67 Jews were [massacred](#) on August 23, 1929.

Some Hebron Arabs, including Ahmad Rashid al-Hirbawi, president of Hebron chamber of commerce, supported the return of Jews after the massacre. Two years later, 35 families moved back into the ruins of the Jewish quarter, but on the eve of the [Arab revolt](#) (April 23, 1936) the British Government decided to move the Jewish community out of Hebron as a precautionary measure to secure its safety. The sole exception was the 8th generation Hebronite Ya'akov ben [Shalom Ezra](#), who processed dairy products in the city, blended in well with its social landscape and resided there under the protection of friends. In November 1947, in anticipation of the [UN partition vote](#), the Ezra family closed its shop and left the city.



Tomb of Abraham

After [Jordan](#) occupied the [West Bank](#) in 1948, no Jews were allowed in the territory and consequently none could visit the tomb. Upon the liberation of Hebron in 1967, the Chief Rabbi of the [Israel Defense Forces](#), the late Major-General Rabbi [Shlomo Goren](#), was the first Jew to enter the Cave of Machpelah. Since then, Jews have been struggling to regain their [prayer rights](#) at the site, still run by the Muslim [Waqf](#) (Religious Trust) which took control during the Arab conquest.

Because Abraham is also revered in [Islam](#) as the father of [Ishmael](#), the tomb is holy to Muslims who refer to it as the Sanctuary of Abraham and converted a Byzantine basilica built on the site into the Ibrahimi Mosque. Muslims believe that [Muhammed](#) visited Hebron on his nocturnal journey from [Mecca](#) to Jerusalem to stop by the tomb and pay his respects. The tomb subsequently became an Islamic pilgrimage site. It was said that Muhammad himself encouraged the activity, saying "He who cannot visit me, let him visit the Tomb of Abraham" and "He who visits the Tomb of Abraham, Allah abolishes his sins."

In 1994, Dr. Baruch Goldstein [entered](#) the Ibrahimi Mosque and opened fire on Muslim worshippers, killing 29 and wounding 90. Goldstein was killed by the enraged worshippers. Security was subsequently enhanced at the site.

Many restrictions are imposed on Jewish prayers and customs at the Tomb of the Patriarchs despite the site's significance, primacy and sanctity in Jewish heritage and history. Nevertheless, more than 300,000 people visit Ma'arat HaMachpelah in a normal year. The structure is divided into three rooms: Ohel Avraham, Ohel Yitzhak, and Ohel Ya'akov. Presently Jews have no access to Ohel Yitzhak, the largest room, with the exception of 10 days a year.

Hebron is a tense city where about 700 Jews live among more than 200,000 [Palestinians](#). The [Hebron Protocol](#) of 1997 divided the city into two sectors: H1, controlled by the [Palestinian Authority](#), and H2, roughly 20% of the city, including 35,000 Palestinians, under Israeli military administration.

Sources:

[Jewish Community of Hebron](#).

"Hebron," [Wikipedia](#).

"Cave of the Patriarchs," [Wikipedia](#)

and other historical sources.

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