

WHOSE HEBRON?

The recent tragedies in Hebron have laid bare Israel's deepest torment.

Hebron is 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem, in the heart of that area which the world usually refers to as "the West Bank," although the names of that territory are recorded on everyone's pre-political maps as Judea and Samaria. But that's another story.

Several weeks ago, a Jewish seminary student was stabbed to death in Hebron's Arab market. In reprisal, the Arab market was set afire. And last week, four masked gunmen killed a number of Arab students on the campus nearby. "It's an Arab city," said the deposed Arab mayor of Hebron. "It's a Jewish city," said a Jewish settler. The bloodbath goes back a long time.

Hebron was founded before the ancient Jewish nation. Abraham bought a burial plot there, the cave of Machpelah, for Sarah. According to Jew and Muslim, Abraham also lies there. The Muslims, for whom Abraham is a sacred figure, erected a mosque at that site.

When Moses, in the wilderness with the people of Israel, was told to send scouts to "spy out the land of Canaan" (Numbers 13:22), those scouts "went up into the South and came unto Hebron ... the children of Anak were there." Then when Joshua later made his way through Canaan to conquer the promised land, he "cut off the Anakims from the mountains, from Hebron (Joshua 11:21) ... Joshua destroyed them utterly with their cities. There was none of the Anakims left in the land ..."

Later, David chose Hebron as his initial royal city and was anointed there. It became subject to the history of the land and to the dispersion which

followed Rome's occupation. However, Hebron had an almost continual component of Jewish residents, up to the modern Jordanian occupation. In the Middle Ages, Jewish scholars came to reside in Hebron, as in Safed and Jerusalem.

But for centuries the Jews have been a minority population in Hebron, as compared to the Arabs. An early 20th century census registered about 5 hundred Jews among 20 thousand residents. So, it was in 1929, when Arab rioters in Hebron killed 59 Jews, wounded and tortured others.

Currently there are about 70 thousand Arabs in Hebron; and Jews have re-settled in the hundreds. Hebron is a sacred place for the Muslims, as it is for the Jews. The Muslims in Hebron are considered to be particularly pious and fundamentalist; and so are the Jews in Hebron. Nationalist fervor is high in both populations. Local peace is not around the corner. In such a situation, a military presence cannot guarantee peace short of dealing with the Palestinian Arabs as Joshua dealt with the Anakims -- an inconceivable option for modern Israel. Meanwhile, the tragedies will recur, for Jews, for Arabs, for Israeli soldiers.

The answer does not lie in resolving conflicting religious or historical claims which are by nature unresolvable. And Hebron's problem is unresolvable by itself. For the majority of the Israelis, the central problem is not religious or historical, but strategic. How can the peaceful security of Israel and Israelis be, at long last, attained? How can the rejectionism of surrounding Arab nations be overcome? Only in that context can the Israeli nightmare involving Hebron, and all of Judea/Samaria, be negotiated to an end.