

## Who Owns the Land of Israel?

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From ancient rabbis to modern-day settlers of the West Bank, Jews have pointed to Abraham's purchase of a burial place for his wife Sarah in Hebron, to demonstrate that the Land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people. The Torah does give them basis for their position: Abraham and Ephron the Hittite enact a legal sale. The property transfer even takes place "in the presence of the children of Heth [– that is, the Hittites --] of all who sat on the council of [Ephron's] town." In modern language, they went to the title company.

Hebron and its sacred cave are located in territory that Israel has occupied since its miraculous victory in the preemptive defensive Six Day War of 1967. Of course, in Abraham's day, no nation-state existed. Nobody argued over who was sovereign in the land. The West Bank of the Jordan River is a geographic designation defined by the Jordan River to the east, which goes without saying. On the west, the border is based only on the 1949 armistice lines from the end of Israel's War of Independence. Israel has never annexed the West Bank, though it is the heart of ancient Israel. Some refer to that territory as Judea and Samaria, the names of the ancient southern and northern kingdoms of the Children of Israel. Officially, Israel holds the West Bank as a bargaining chip for peace negotiations. No nation on Earth, including the United States – and I reemphasize, including even Israel – recognizes the West Bank, including Hebron, as part of Israel.

Nevertheless, the ancient rabbis and today's settlers both point to the legal transfer in tonight's reading as proof: The land that Abraham purchased and everything around it belongs to the Jewish people, and only the Jewish people, in perpetuity.

But there's another way of looking at the children of Abraham who may permanently own that land. The descendants of Abraham, after all, include not only Jews but Arabs, whose patriarch is Abraham's first born son Ishmael, just as ours is his second-born, Isaac. That's just as clear in our Bible as it is in the Koran.

We may also do well to examine Abraham's behavior throughout the process of acquisition. Remember: God has promised this land to Abraham and

his descendants. However, the first time that Abraham actually needs to possess land, personally and permanently, to bury his dead, he doesn't simply take it, announcing that the land is his for all time. He makes no attempt to acquire the land by force. He doesn't even take the Hittites up on their opening offer, namely that the land is his for the asking. Instead, Abraham responds humbly. The Hittites call him a "prince among [them]," but Abraham is the one who bows to them. He asserts no right, but insists on paying full price for the land.

Another interpretation: The ancient rabbis may be correct when they say that the Hittites engage in typical Middle Eastern bargaining, insincerely offering Abraham the land for free. The sages go on to insist that Ephron, the Hittite seller, proposes an exorbitant price. If so, they must confess that Ephron's selling price is an opening offer, which Abraham chooses to pay, another act of humility, if not generosity.

We would be wise to note that the Hittites are already in the land when Abraham arrives. At no point in history have Jews been alone in our holy land – not when God promises the land to Abraham, not when the Israelites enter at Jericho after the Exodus, not during the reigns of David and Solomon, not when those who had been exiled to Babylon return to rebuild the Temple, and certainly not with the early Zionist settlement of what was then called Palestine in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We may conclude that Jews and others – some of them ancestors of modern-day Palestinians, perhaps – have shared that land for millennia. Maybe God never intended our people to be alone on the land.

I wonder, too: Does purchasing land makes the buyer its "real" owner? Almost forty years ago, when I became a Bar Mitzvah, I read a portion called *Behar*, in which God requires landowners to leave their fields fallow every seventh year. God would seem to be asserting that nothing, and certainly not the Earth, or any part of it, really belongs to us. We human beings are merely tenants on God's planet. We are taught: "The Earth belongs to the Eternal, and the fullness thereof."

When the early Zionists began to settle Palestine, they behaved much as Abraham before them. They did not attack, attempting to take land by force, on the premise that God had promised it to them. Instead, they sought out those who owned title to the land. Wealthy European Jews, Zionist supporters who weren't eager to be pioneers themselves, gave the money for the Jewish National Fund to buy up land where their poorer cousins could dwell after escaping the

terrors of Eastern Europe. Even then, the result was that Jews owned land in what was still the Ottoman Empire.

Today, tragically, the reality could not be more different from the Abrahamic ideal.

On the one hand, Palestinians and their supporters often claim that Jews have no legitimate historical tie to the land. They look at our white skin and insist that we do not have Middle Eastern roots, but that we are descendants of people who took on Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple. Some even falsely claim that no Israelite Temple ever stood on that sacred Jerusalem mountain.

Our rebuttal is clear: We have never claimed to be a race, but rather a sacred community in covenant with one another, with our holy land, and with God. Of course, European Jews are descended both from ancient Israelites and from others who joined this Jewish people along the way. Many Jews – the majority of Israel’s Jewish population, in fact – are of North African and Middle Eastern extraction, hardly European colonizers. Whatever land of our diaspora, our people always maintained its historic connection to the Land of Israel, and not only in prayer. Even in our centuries of darkest exile, Israel has always been home to a Jewish community.

On the other hand, many Israelis, their current government and its supporters, including many Americans, assert a divinely-ordained right over what they call the “Greater Land of Israel.” They do not oppose a two-state solution because they fear that Israel could not live in peace and security with a neighboring Palestine. Instead, they assert that the entire historic Land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people, because God promised it to us. They seek to settle all the territory that Israel has occupied since 1967, forcibly creating “facts on the ground,” a land of the Jews. The zealots among them recognize that lives must be sacrificed if their goals are to be achieved. They practice an idolatry that treats the land as a god, immorally placing the holiness of the land above the sanctity of human life, contrary to every teaching of Judaism.

Again, our rebuttal is stern: Judaism teaches that taking one life is tantamount to destroying the entire world, not that giving up one inch of Israel’s soil is a sin. Judaism teaches us, “Seek peace and pursue it.” The rabbis focus on the word “pursue:” We must run after peace, working to achieve it, even at great

cost. Abraham's story teaches us to share the land, in humility, with others who live there.

Let us learn from Torah: No land belongs exclusively to us; the entire Earth belongs to our Creator. Let us learn from this week's portion: We never have been, nor should we expect to be, the only people in the Holy Land. Let us learn from Abraham: Humility goes a long way in facilitating the dream of two peoples, living side by side, each with full ownership of its own land.

Amen.