

## UNESCO's Latest Injustice

I want to share a news flash with you, a late breaking development, something you might not have heard. Jacob, about whom we read in this week's torah portion, as well as last week's and next week's is one of the patriarchs of the Jewish people. That's right, the same Jacob we mention in the Amidah, along with his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham are referred to and are commonly recognized as the founding fathers of our people.

I suspect most of you already knew this.

How about this, let's see if you know this one: Rachel, the woman he falls in love with, as we read this week, the woman for whom he worked for 14 years in Haran so he could marry her, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, is also considered one of the matriarchs of the Jewish people.

By a show of hands, how many of you knew that as well?

Well, I guess it is a safe bet to say no one here today sits on the governing body of UNESCO, the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization. I say that because on October 21, 2010 the Executive Board of UNESCO by a vote of 44 -1 with 12 abstentions passed proposals initiated by Arab nations calling the site of the Tomb of Rachel as well as the cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, "an integral part of the occupied Palestinian territories" and demanding that Israel remove these sites from its list of national heritage sites.

I can also safely assume that none of those who sit on UNESCO's governing body was in shul last week either when we read in the cycle of Torah readings about Abraham's purchase of the Cave of the Machpelah as a burial site for his wife Sarah, himself and their offspring. The Tomb of the Patriarchs, the most ancient Jewish shrine, whose purchase is told in explicit detail in the Torah has been venerated for almost 4,000 years as the burial site of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah. Considered second only to Jerusalem as a holy site for Jews, it is the cradle of Jewish history and a focal point of Jewish identity. Rashi and other commentators a thousand years ago said that the negotiation for the purchase of the land was explicitly delineated so there would never be any doubt or in the world or questions raised over the true proprietor of the territory. The details are meant to alleviate any potential future dispute over the rights of the Jewish people to properly claim possession of the site.

The Tomb of Rachel, outside of Bethlehem, and not far from the outskirts of Jerusalem has been a place where Jewish people have made pilgrimages and have come to pour out their hearts in prayer for the past 3,000 years. It has special significance for Jewish women, since Rachel died in childbirth and was buried at that spot on the road to Hebron. When the people of Israel were taken into exile after the destruction of the Temple, we are told that they passed the tomb of Rachel, who lamented and shed tears for her people. The Bible records that the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed, "Thus says the Lord, 'Refrain

your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded...and they shall return from the enemy's land and there is hope for the future'... 'Your children shall return to their own country.'"

Despite centuries of association by Jews with the site, UNESCO seeks to re-label the tomb of Rachel as an Islamic mosque and has demanded that Israel remove it from its national Heritage list. It would be like telling the United States that the grave of President John F. Kennedy is not part of America's national heritage.

To be fair and accurate, it is true that there is a mosque at the Cave of the Machpelah. This is consistent with the centuries old practice of intentionally building mosques upon Jewish and Christian holy sites, synagogues and churches in order to both obscure the original purpose of the place and as a display of Islamic triumphalism, something Christians also did in the Middle Ages as well.

But there is no mosque at Rachel's tomb. So what do the "unbiased" international interlocutors do in this instance? Going against all empirical evidence to the contrary UNESCO has accepted the Palestinian *bubemeisa* that the Tomb of Rachel is really the burial place of the first Muslim muezzin, a slave named Bilal ibn Rabah. As detailed in an article by Nadav Shragai for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and published in the Jerusalem Post this claim defies even Muslim tradition which for centuries has accepted the Tomb of Rachel outside of Bethlehem as the burial place of Rachel. In fact, Muslim tradition recognizes that ibn Rabah died and was buried in Damascus in the 600's, a burial site visited for centuries by Muslims. Suddenly in 1996, for political purposes, as part of Palestinian propaganda and efforts during the first and second intifada to arouse emotions and to attempt to retake the site violently, going against all their previous history, they began to claim that this was not the burial site of Rachel, but of Bilal ibn Rabah.

One may ask, why would the Palestinians make such an absurd ungrounded claim. Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu had it right when he said that the connection of the Jewish people to these sites presents a challenge, "an inconvenient truth for the pro-Palestine movement and its supporters, who want to claim that the Jews have no historic ties to this land." In denouncing the decision his office said, "The attempt to detach the Nation of Israel from its heritage is absurd. If the nearly 4,000-year-old burial sites of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the Jewish Nation – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah are not part of its culture and tradition, then what is a national cultural site?"

Ironically the UNESCO mission states: "Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration." Yet when it comes to preserving Jewish heritage and Jewish culture, UNESCO takes an entirely different approach and has an abysmal record. The international body is complicitous with those who would seek to deny the right of the Jewish people to preserve and safeguard its cultural heritage. In so doing it undermines its very own purpose and principles. In

cooperating with efforts to erase Jewish historical ties to the land of Israel, UNESCO is aiding and abetting those who seek to obfuscate Israel's Jewish past, to weaken our ties to the land and to thereby undermine Israel's Jewish future in the land of Israel.

The truth is that most of us are not surprised by this most recent effort to rob the Jewish people of its claim to protect those sites sacred to us. It is not an isolated act, but part of the ongoing effort to deny the Jewish people's connection to the land of Israel, which in turn is part of the ongoing campaign against Israel known as BDS: boycott, divestment and sanctions.

The root cause of the inability of the Palestinians and Israelis to come to a lasting agreement and to reach a peace accord is not disputes over tertiary issues, such as borders or building of settlements, all of which can be negotiated and settled. **Rather as their introducing and pushing this issue, consistent with how they act in all international bodies reveals, it is the inability and refusal of the Arab nations to accept the right of the Jewish people to live as a sovereign state in its historic homeland that prevents them from being willing to come to terms with the presence of a Jewish state in the land of Israel.** Unfortunately, UNESCO, along with other international bodies and nations are enablers of this position, thereby preventing the parties from reaching a settlement to the conflict.

A beautiful midrash tells us that when the people of Israel went into exile Rachel shed tears and sadly pleaded before God on behalf of her people asking that He would have mercy upon them, accompany them on their journey outside the land of Israel and return them to their homeland. We can only imagine the tears that she shed upon hearing of this most recent travesty and mockery of justice perpetrated by the international body that is supposed to be the protector of heritage and history.

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