National identity theft at UNESCO

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One has to hand it to the Palestinian Authority. When it adopts a policy of delegitimizing Israel, it goes all the way. Once again it is attempting to co-opt UNESCO, this time to expropriate the tombs of the very founders of the Jewish People – and to turn their resting place into a Palestinian World Heritage Site.

To achieve that feat, the upcoming UNESCO meeting in Krakow, Poland, will have to deliberately erase history instead of protecting it.

In the ancient city of Hebron, there stands a colossal, 2,000-year-old burial monument – a kind of Taj Mahal of the Middle East. Josephus, the antiquities historian, records that this monument was built by the Jewish king Herod the Great as an adornment atop the 3,800-year-old tombs of Abraham, his wife Sarah, and most of the founding family of the Jewish People. The last person to be buried there was the Jewish forefather Jacob, also known as Israel.

It is this structure, known as the Tomb of the Patriarchs or the Cave of Machpela in Hebron, that the PA is audaciously trying to claim as its own.

But the depth of Hebron’s Jewish history will present a serious challenge to that effort. The Book of Genesis records Abraham’s negotiation and purchase of the Machpela cave in Hebron for a family burial plot. Archaeological remains attest to Jewish life in Hebron during the Iron Age (First Temple) and the Roman (Second Temple) period. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jewish and Christian travelers noted the presence of a Jewish community living in Hebron and worshiping at the Tomb of the Patriarchs.

In the 16th century, after the eviction of Jews from Spain, sephardi Jews buttressed the Hebron community and helped it flourish. The Hebron Jewish community was the oldest and longest unbroken presence of Jewish People in the land of Israel.

No doubt there is also Muslim history in Hebron as well. In 637 CE, during the early Muslim conquest, Muslims and Jews coexisted in Hebron. But in 1267 CE, the Mamluks, a Muslim military caste from Egypt, captured Hebron and the Tomb of the Patriarchs and rebranded it the Mosque of Ibrahim. They altered the building by adding two minarets to the top and imposed a jihadist policy of banning Jews, Christians and all non-Muslims from entering the building or visiting the underground burial caves.

Suddenly, in an act of national identity theft, this originally Jewish building housing the founders of the Jewish People, had a Muslim look and feel, with no Jews allowed in. This is exactly the outcome UNESCO is working toward today.

Yet even back then, under Mamluk rule, Jews would not abandon the site, stubbornly holding prayer services at the outside wall of the building. They kept up that practice for the next 700 years. And so things went until 1929 when a horrific jihadist pogrom ended in the murder of 67 Jews. The community’s survivors were then evicted by the occupying British.

But yet again, Jewish magnetism to the site prevailed: in the Six Day War, Israel regained control of Hebron and the tombs. Jews flocked to site and within weeks, the first Jewish wedding was held there. Since then, secure passage, freedom of access, and freedom of worship for all faiths has been ensured at the Tombs of the Patriarchs while 700,000 pilgrims and tourists visit the site yearly.

Juxtapose the freedoms that Israeli control ensures with the PA-controlled areas, which are notoriously off-limits to Jews. A similar site to the Tomb of the Patriarchs, the Tomb of Joseph in Shechem/Nablus, was burned down by a jihadist mob, with tourism to that hallowed spot decimated. Daily mind-numbing incitement and monthly stipends to terrorists continue unabated in PA-controlled areas.

Yet the PA’s success at UNESCO continues. Only six months ago did the PA succeed in getting UNESCO to officially deny Jewish history and rights at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem – no wonder Jewish prayer is strictly forbidden there. After this decision Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated: “UNESCO just denied the 4,000-year connection between the Jewish People and its holiest site, the Temple Mount. That’s just as absurd as denying the connection between the Great Wall of China and China.”

Indeed, behind the facade of the protection of endangered sites, UNESCO has become a tool in a nefarious campaign to eradicate the evidence of Jewish indigeneity in the land of Israel and conversely malign the Jews as occupying colonialists. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee has actually become the legitimate arm of the war against Israel, pushing a jihadist agenda while dressed in a sensible European suit and tie.

In Krakow the Palestinians are fast-tracking the UNESCO process by claiming that Hebron is a site in danger. However, Israel is pushing back on this point and during a meeting at the Foreign Ministry, deputy minister Tzipi Hotovely spoke with foreign ambassadors and explained that the Tomb of the Patriarchs is not in danger, and displayed maps and photographs proving that PA claims of abuses are a farce.

Yet other people in Israel are skeptical about tackling the deeply ingrained antisemitism at the UN. However, recently US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley articulated new US opposition to anti-Israelism at the UN, saying “that the United States is determined to stand up to the UN’s anti-Israel bias.”

So now, more than ever, the time has come to confront the UN. The Polish government, which enjoys excellent relations with Israel, should demand that UNESCO table the anti-Israel vote so that a pogrom on Jewish history not be perpetrated on Polish soil. The US, the main funder of the UN, and the host of its headquarters, should continue to make good on its promises to push back on the UN machine. And, of course, Israel should itself fully defund UNESCO and strengthen Jewish presence in Hebron by unfreezing Jewish building there.

We must send a clear signal: if the UN and UNESCO cannot uphold the values and principles necessary to protect world cultures and heritage sites, let its validity be brought to question – not that of the Jewish People.