Hebron ties and lies

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Long before the United Nations or organizations such as UNESCO were ever conceived – indeed long before there were nation-states as we know them – the people known today as Jews lived in the Land of Israel, shared a common language and heritage and were united by a set of canonical texts that became the Hebrew Bible. They viewed Hebron as a holy city resonant with history and religious meaning.

No matter what was decided Friday by UNESCO, an organization regularly hijacked to advance the narrow interests of peoples purportedly suffering western dominance, there is no denying the Jews’ ties to Hebron.

Those ties are deeper and arguably date back earlier than the Jews’ ties to Jerusalem, another city deemed by UNESCO to be devoid of Jewish history.

The Hebrew Bible tells how Abraham bought land in Hebron to bury Sarah. All three patriarchs are said to have been buried there with their wives. In Exodus, much emphasis is placed on Jacob’s demand to be buried there, which can be seen as a tangible expression of his hope that the Jewish people would return after the Egyptian exile ended.

The spies passed through Hebron to reconnoiter the land ahead of the Jewish people’s imminent entrance.

King David consolidated his rule in Hebron after Saul’s death. King Herod built the wall that still surrounds the Cave of the Patriarchs. And after the defeat of Simon Bar-Kokhba in 135 CE, which precipitated the exile of the Jews from the Land of Israel, Jews were sold into captivity at Hebron’s Terebinth slave-market.

Jews were not permitted to live in Hebron during Byzantine rule. However, according to documents from the Cairo Geniza, under Muslim rule Jews returned and maintained an organized Jewish community.

Over the centuries, Jewish presence in the city ebbed and flowed depending on the tolerance of the ruling power. Christians tended to be less accommodating; Muslims more so. The Italian traveler, Meshulam of Volterra, found in 1481 no more than 20 Jewish families in Hebron. Jewish women disguised themselves as Muslims to enter the Cave of the Patriarchs.

In the late Ottoman period, the Jewish community grew. Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal began to arrive in Hebron in the 1500s. In 1823, the Lubavitch hassidic movement established a presence in Hebron.

The Karlin hassidic court settled there in 1866. In the 1920s, after the Lithuanian government attempted to draft yeshiva students into the army, the Hebron Yeshiva was established in the city, which attracted hundreds of students from Europe and the US.

The 1929 Palestinian pogroms orchestrated against the Jews of Hebron by the rabid Jew- hater and Nazism admirer, Mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini, left over 60 men, women and children dead and dozens more injured. In 1936, the British evacuated the remaining Jews ahead of a Palestinian uprising. Only after Israel’s victory in the Six Day War could Jews return to Hebron to live.

All of this information and more is readily available.

Yet a UNESCO report disingenuously blames Israel for its own failure to recommend an alternative to the Palestinian proposal. Why? Have UNESCO officials not heard of the Bible, Google or Wikipedia? The vote by the UN’s cultural organization to declare Hebron a Palestinian World Heritage site in danger had nothing to do with education, science or culture. It is, instead, a form of propaganda. Rewriting history hinders and further complicates efforts to address the very real problems now preventing a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

And this works both ways. Dwelling on Jews’ undeniable ties to the land of Israel and to places like Hebron and Jerusalem does little to solve the present-day conflict.

Jews’ right to a sovereign state in their historical homeland is inalienable. But that does not help in the pragmatic, here-and-now endeavor to find a way for Jews and Palestinians to live together.

Admittedly, denying Jews’ ties to the Temple Mount or to Hebron is a symptom of a deeper hatred, possibly based on envy. Muslims know that these sites and others would have no holiness for their faithful if they were not first and foremost places with deep spiritual, historical and religious resonance for Jews.

It is a shame that UNESCO became an accomplice to this diplomatic sabotage.