

CHEVRON: INDISPUTABLY OURS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The city of Chevron is very prominent in our world and in the daily news reports. The news from Chevron is not always encouraging. It is a tough place, this Chevron of ours. A tough place to live and a tough place to leave. In the Torah we read of the purchase of the Cave of Machpela by our father Avraham. This purchase was supposed to eternally establish that holy place as being the property of the people of Israel. But it has not worked out that way. Over the long centuries, Yishmael and his descendants and Eisav and his descendants have successfully contested Israel for these premises innumerable times. For over a millennium Jews were not allowed to enter the building which supposedly rests on the top of that burial cave. The right of Jews to live in Chevron is and has always been contested far more bitterly than even the right of Jews to live in Jerusalem. Why? What is the secret of Chevron that makes it so dangerous and contested a place for Jewish settlement and security?

The Talmud mentions that there are three locations in the Land of Israel which are indisputably the legal property of the Jewish people. They are the Cave of Machpela in Chevron, the field outside Shechem/Nablus in Samaria, and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. All three locations were purchased by the leaders of Israel - Avraham, Yakov, David - for good and valuable consideration and for full, if not more than full, market value. The purchases and the details of those purchases are all recorded in the Bible. Yet, over our long history, even till this very moment, our title to all three locations is in dispute. The insight into this paradoxical situation may be that the very reason that these properties are contested is because our claim to them is based on man-made law and contracts and deeds and not on Divine promise. All contracts, even all purchases in this world of ours, are always subject to review, revision and cancellation. Governments rise and fall, circumstances and situations change, the definition of "rights" is altered by fiat or common consent. In short, nothing ever remains the same. Nothing in man's own created world is permanent. Therefore, the general world, and certainly the Arab world, contests our claim of ownership to these parcels of land in Israel. Our deed is outdated and no longer valid, they say. We abandoned our claim long ago by not being present on those properties for long centuries. The Indian tribes in America also had signed and legal government deeds to large sections of the United States, but when the circumstances "changed," the deeds were abrogated and the Indian tribes' claim to the land was disallowed. Claims to land are not very secure if they are based only upon legalities, purchases and contracts.

The entire thrust of the book of Bereshith is that the world and its lands and properties belongs not

to man but to the Creator. The claim of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel is not based on contracts and deeds. Indeed, it is not based even on Balfour Declarations and United Nations resolutions. It is based upon the Godly promise to our ancestors that the Land of Israel belongs, by right of Godly fiat, to their descendants. Those Jews who, for various personal and faith reasons, deny this Godly promise, are very hard pressed to justify the existence of the state of Israel and the Jewish claim to Jerusalem. Without this justification of belief and Jewish tradition, the claim of the nations of the world that "you are thieves" sounds plausible and correct. The faith of Israel is based upon the revelation and will of our eternal Creator. We certainly have to do our part, for God certainly helps those who help themselves. But, in the final analysis, it is obvious that we derive our rights and claims not merely from current behavior, but rather from rights based upon ancient faith and religious tenets and beliefs. Rabbi Saadya Gaon stated that "our nationhood is based solely on the Torah." Chevron and the Cave of machpela prove how right he is.

Shabat Shalom.

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