

Abe, Izzy & Bibi by Uri Avnery

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THE WHOLE thing could have been a huge practical joke, if it had not been real.

All of Israel was taken in. Left, right and center. All the newspapers and TV networks, without exception.

There it was: UNESCO has declared that the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron is a Palestinian heritage site.

I ADMIT that I was taken in, too. The news was so clear and so simple, its acceptance so uniform, that I too accepted it unthinkingly. True, it was a bit strange, but stranger things happen.

The "Cave of Machpelah" is no cave at all. It is a large building, which the Arabs call al-Haram al-Ibrahim, the Mosque of Ibrahim, in the center of Hebron, the town the Arabs call al-Khalil, the Friend of God (meaning Abraham).

According to the Bible, Abraham, the forefather of the Jews, bought the place from its local owner as a burial plot for his wife, Sarah. When his time came, he was also buried there, as were his son Isaac with his wife Rivka and his grandson, Jacob, with his wife Leah. (His other wife, Rachel, is supposed to be buried on the way to Bethlehem.)

And here comes UNESCO, the anti-Semitic cultural branch of the anti-Semitic UN, and declares that this is a Palestinian holy site!

Is there no limit to Jew-baiting?

A tsunami of emotions surged over Israel. Jews were united in protest. Everybody vented their anger as loudly as possible. Rarely was such unanimity seen here.

IF I had stopped to think for a moment, I would have realized that the whole thing was nonsense. UNESCO does not assign places to nations. World Heritage sites are — well — the heritage of the entire world. As a detail, these declarations mention in which country each World Heritage site is located.

The holy church in Nazareth is located in Israel, but it does not "belong" to Israel. The graves of holy Jewish rabbis in Russia or Egypt do not belong to Israel. UNESCO did not say that the Machpelah-al-Haram al-Ibrahim site belongs to the Palestinians. It said that it is located in Palestine.

Why Palestine? Because, according to international law, the town of Hebron is part of Palestine, which was recognized by the UN as a state under occupation. Under Israeli law, too, Hebron is not a part of Israel proper but under military occupation.

I am grateful to an ex-Israeli called Idan Landau who lives in the US. He took the trouble to read the original text and sent us emails to correct our impression. The moment I read it, I hit myself on the brow. How could I have been so stupid!

The UNESCO resolution is fair and correct. It remarks that the site is holy to the three monotheistic religions, as indeed it is. Because of this, a Jewish fanatic – a settler from America – once murdered dozens of praying Muslims there. Jewish fanatics have settled nearby.

IS THE place really holy? That is a silly question. A place is as holy as people believe it to be.

Are Abraham and his progeny really buried there?

Even that is irrelevant. Many people – myself included – believe that the entire first part of the Bible, up to the Assyrian era, is fictitious. That does not make the Bible less wonderful. It is the most beautiful work of literature on earth. At least the (original) Hebrew version.

If one believes that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were real persons, it would still be doubtful that they are buried there. An entire school of archaeologists believes that the burial place is somewhere else in Hebron, not the building now known as the Cave of Machpelah. The graves there are those of Muslim sheikhs.

Be that as it may, millions believe that the Biblical forefathers are buried in the Cave. For them, the place is holy, and it is located in occupied Palestine.

But if you take the Bible so literally, you should also read verse 9 of chapter 25 of Genesis: "And Abraham gave up the ghost and died in a good old age… And his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, buried him in the cave of Machpelah."

When I pointed this out to people who had attended Israeli schools, they were deeply shocked. Because this verse is never mentioned in any Israeli school. It does not exist.

Why? Because Ishmael is the forefather of the Arabs, as Isaac is the forefather of the Jews. We learned that Sarah, our foremother, who is described in the Bible as a real bitch, induced her obedient spouse, Abraham, to send his concubine Hagar and their son, Ishmael, into the desert, there to die of thirst. But an angel saved them, and they disappeared, though the Bible gives a long list of his progeny.

The revelation that the Bible in fact says the opposite is shocking. So Ishmael did not disappear, but somewhere along the line made his peace with Isaac. The two sons buried their father together.

This changes the story completely. It means that the Bible makes the Arabs, too, rightful heirs of the Cave of Machpelah, side by side with the Jews and the Christians.

I DO not believe that Binyamin Netanyahu ever read this verse. He knows only what every Israeli pupil knows. The strict Orthodox line.

This week, at the height of the UNESCO hysteria, Netanyahu did something bizarre: in the middle of a formal cabinet meeting he pulled a kippah from his pocket, put it on and started to read from the Bible (not the aforementioned verse, of course). He looked positively happy. He was showing the bloody Goyim up for what they are: anti-Semites all.

Does Netanyahu really believe (as I think he does) that this part of Biblical legend is history? If so, he has the mind of a 10 year old. If he does not, he is a cheat. In any case, he is a very able demagogue.

But he is not alone. Far from it. The President of Israel, a very nice gentleman, reiterated Netanyahu's accusations against UNESCO. So did the speaker of the Knesset, an immigrant from the Soviet Union.

It took about four days for some Israeli commentators to cite the true text of the UNESCO resolution. They did not apologize, of course, but at least they started to quote the actual text. Shyly and quietly some other commentators joined them. Most of their colleagues did not.

Special mention is due to Carmel Shama Hacoheh, Israel's ambassador to UNESCO. He is not known as a pillar of wisdom. Indeed, he was only sent to UNESCO in order to allow a protégé of the foreign minister to take over his place in the Knesset.

During the UNESCO meeting, Shama-Hacoheh - (his real name was just Shama, but that sounds too Arab, so he added the very Jewish Hacoheh) - got very excited. He started a shouting match with the Palestinian ambassador, rushed to the dais and shouted at the chairman, too.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE might have called all this "much ado about nothing", except for two points.

One is that it shows how easy it is to send all of (Jewish) Israel – all without exception! – into a holy rage. Politicians and commentators from left and right, east and west, religious and secular, unite into one raging mass, even when the pretext is false.

Such an eruption can have very serious consequences. It disables all inner brakes.

The other aspect is even more dangerous.

At the height of the tsunami, it suddenly hit me that everybody seemed to be enjoying themselves hugely. And then I realized why.

For hundreds of years, Jews in Europe were persecuted, deported, tortured and killed. It was a part of reality. They were used to it. Anti-Semitism of all kinds, including the murderous one, was a part of reality. The sadism of the goyim was

met with the masochism of the Jews.

(As I have suggested in the past, this is a part of Western Christian culture, emanating from the crucifixion story in the New Testament.

It does not exist as such in Islam, since the prophet admonished his believers to protect the two other "peoples of the book" — Jews and Christians.)

Since World War II and the Holocaust, the old vicious European anti-Semitism has disappeared, or gone underground. But Jews have not got used to that. They are sure that it is lurking somewhere, that it can return any minute. When it does, or when it seems to, Jews are apt to feel "I told you so!"

In Israel, this is even more complex. Zionism hoped to rid Jews of their "exilic" complexes. To turn us into a normal people, "a people like other peoples".

It seems that this has not been quite successful. Or that the success is receding under the stewardship of Netanyahu and his ilk.

This episode has made many Jews happy. They say to themselves: "We were right! All the Goyim are anti-Semites!"