

The image shows the Tel Rumeida archaeological site in Hebron, featuring a large stone wall with two minarets and a set of stone steps in the foreground. A dark semi-transparent box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the title text.

Tel Rumeida  
Hebron's Archaeological Park

emek shaveh  
למק טורה عمق شببي

2014

# Tel Rumeida

## Hebron's Archaeological Park

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2014

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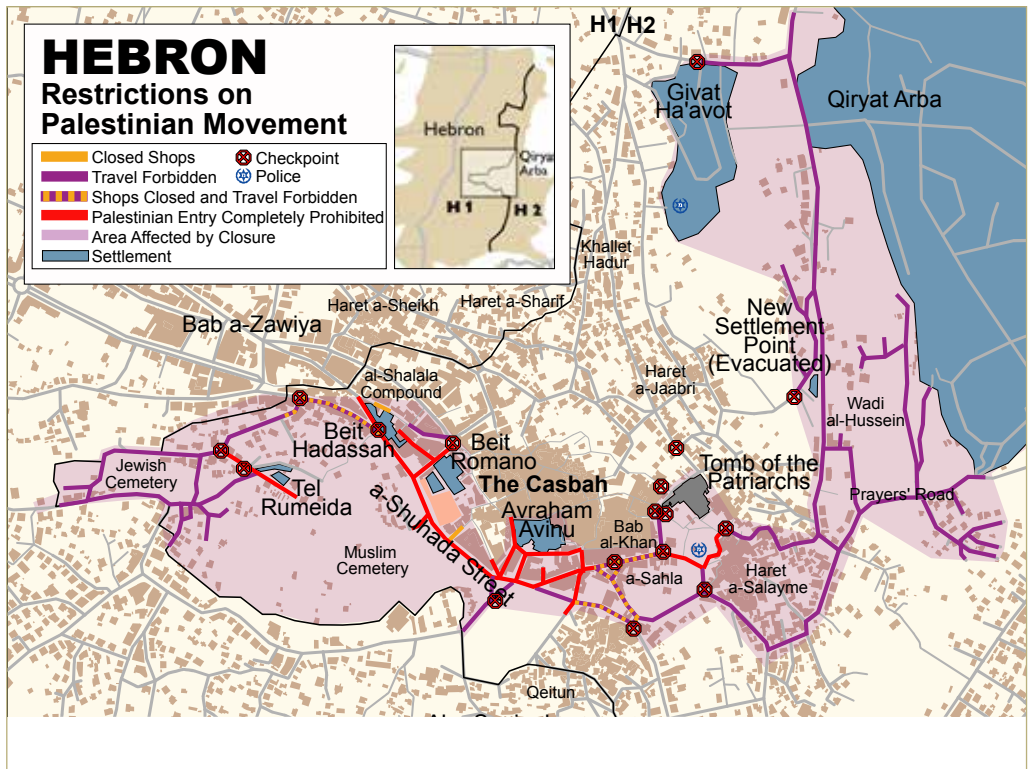
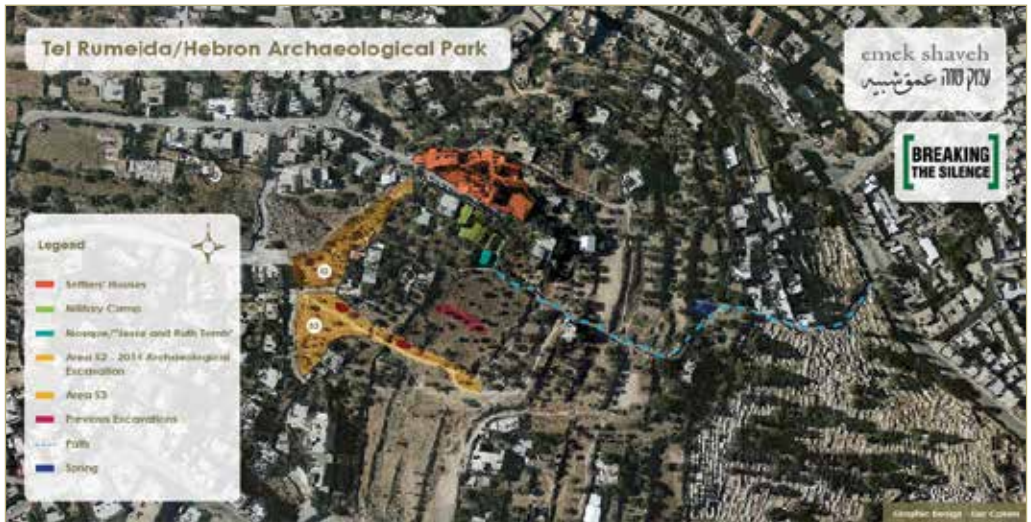
Emek Shaveh is an organization of archaeologists and heritage professionals focusing on the role of tangible cultural heritage in Israeli society and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We view archaeology as a resource for strengthening understanding between different peoples and cultures.

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Courtesy of Shai Efrati/B'tselem

## 1. Tel Rumeida – General Features

Hebron is the only Palestinian city in the West Bank that contains a Jewish settlement within it; tensions between Jews and Palestinians in the city are particularly high. Hebron is a holy city for members of both peoples, the second after Jerusalem in its importance to Jews and to Muslims in Palestine and Israel. Hebron is home to the Tomb of the Patriarchs, which according to tradition is the gravesite of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the Matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca and Leah. The great majority of Jews and Muslims in the city practice a religious lifestyle. Most of the Jewish visitors to Hebron – who number in the hundreds of thousands every year – are either traditional or religious and regard the Tomb of the Patriarchs as a holy site and come to pray there.

The archaeological site called Tel Rumeida is located on a slope descending eastward from Jebel Rumeida, west of today's old city center (the area around the Tomb of the Patriarch/Haram al-Ibrahimi). The mound (tel) is located at the western edge of the area under Israeli control (H2) and essentially protrudes into a populated Palestinian area (see bottom map on Page 4). A spring called Ein Jadīde flows out of the foot of the eastern side of the tel.

Most of the area comprising the tel is agricultural land featuring fruit trees, particularly olive trees. Several Palestinian homes are located at the top of the tel. Another cluster of Palestinian houses can be found at the foot of the northern section of the tel. A Jewish settlement is also located here (called by the settlers “Admot Yishai” or “Jesse's Lands”). Several Palestinian homes stand on the eastern side, near the spring, and the land comprising the tel belongs to several Palestinian families (Natshe, Abu Haikal and others). At the northwest section is a Jewish cemetery, also called the “Karaites cemetery.” Three lots, two on the northwest side and one in the south, are considered to be Jewish-owned, bought by residents of the old Hebronite Jewish community in the middle of the 19th century<sup>1</sup> (lots 52 and 53 are the better known among them).

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<sup>1</sup> For the history of the Jews in Hebron see: *Hebron: City of the Patriarchs and its settlement through the ages*, Oded Avishar (editor), Jerusalem: 1970

## 2. The archaeological excavations and the settlement

The first excavations at the site were led by American archaeologist P. Hammond during Jordanian rule, in the years 1964-1966.<sup>2</sup> The first caravans of the Jewish settlement in Tel Rumeida arrived in 1984, towards the end of Yitzhak Shamir's first term as prime minister. The defense minister at the time, Yitzhak Rabin, objected to a settlement at the site. In order to preempt its expansion to other lots he initiated archaeological excavations in lots identified as Jewish-owned but which were not yet settled. With the beginning of the First Intifada in 1987, the excavations were halted.<sup>3</sup> In 1999, following the settlers' demand to build permanent homes in the Jewish settlement of Tel Rumeida, the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) conducted excavations in the area.<sup>4</sup> A group of senior archaeologists opposed these excavations as they constituted a preliminary step towards authorizing construction on an important ancient archaeological tel, something that has always been contrary to archaeological principles. The group petitioned the High Court of Justice to prevent construction (HCJ 264/99), but the High Court rejected the petition, approving excavation and construction on the site.<sup>5</sup> Today the neighborhood of Admot Yishai (Jesse's Lands) is located there, and includes two residential clusters for settlers. An apartment block was built over the excavation area, in such a way that allows the public's access to the archaeological layer. Another cluster of homes, in the form of caravans, is situated at the edge of the excavation area.

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2 "[The AEH Hammond Excavations in Hebron](#)," website of the Jewish settlement in Hebron.

3 A. Ofer, *The Judean Mountains in the Biblical Period, Volume 1: Tel Rumeida* (PhD dissertation, 1995), pp.52-60 (in Hebrew).

4 "[Netanyahu approved the construction of permanent homes in Tel Rumeida; security measures will be upgraded](#)," *Globes*, 24 August, 1998 (in Hebrew).

5 M. Reinfeld, "The High Court rejected the petition against construction for the settlers in Tel Rumeida, Hebron," *Walla!* news website, 14 August, 2001.



A modern building in the Jewish settlement neighborhood Admot Yishai (Jesse's Lands), built over the remains of a wall from the early Bronze period III (excavations from 1999).



### 3. The excavations of 2014: Hebron's planned archaeological park in Tel Rumeida

A new archaeological excavation in Tel Rumeida commenced in early January 2014.<sup>6</sup> The excavation was undertaken at the top of the tel, in an area above the Jewish settlement (the neighborhood of “Admot Yishai”) and in-between Palestinian homes (southwest of the settlement). The excavation is led by the IAA and the University of Ariel, as part of the development of an archaeological park in Tel Rumeida, at an initial cost of NIS 7 million from the budget of the Ministry of Culture and Sport.

In the first month, the excavation was carried out in an area known as lot 52 (See Page 4, top map). To the excavators' disappointment, they discovered that in most of that area the bedrock is very high, and almost no ancient remains were found. Several graves were found and removed during the excavation, which the excavators date to the late Roman Period. An excavation in the spring of 2014 on lot 53 (see map) revealed remains of structures and facilities from the early Roman period (1st century BCE–1st century CE), the Byzantine period (4th-7th century CE), and agricultural terraces from recent centuries.<sup>7</sup> Two structures identified as ritual baths were discovered during the summer.

An ancient city wall from the Middle Bronze Age (18th-16th centuries BCE) had already been discovered in the 1980s at the edge of lot 53. This wall was excavated once again by the IAA in May-June 2014. Scholars associate this period with the patriarchs of the Bible. Evidence of structures from the Iron Age (12th-10th century BCE) associated with the end of the Canaanite period and remains from the Iron Age II (8th-7th century BCE) associated with the Kings of Judah and Israel, were previously discovered at the site.

The planned archaeological park will, in our estimation, include both the areas excavated by Tel Aviv University in the 1980s, as well as those excavated by Hammond in the 1960s on the southeastern section of the tel. The remains unearthed during these excavations remained visible but over the years have been filled with waste and soil.

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6 Nir Hasson, Israeli government funding dig in Palestinian Hebron, near Jewish enclave, *Haaretz*, 9 January, 2014.

7 E. Eisenberg, “Excavations resume in Tel Hebron” Youtube video, Hebron Conference, 2014 (in Hebrew).



Beginning of excavations of lot 52, early 2014

## 4. The archaeological find

The excavations conducted over the years at the site indicate that human settlement in the area had begun in the fourth millennium BCE, during the Chalcolithic period and the early Bronze Age I. The first expanded settlement at the site is dated to the early Bronze Age III (2800-2500 BCE).<sup>8</sup> A fortified settlement was discovered with an area spanning approximately 30 dunams (30,000 m<sup>2</sup>). The city was abandoned and then rebuilt in the Middle Bronze Ages I-II (2000-1600 BCE). At the time, the city was surrounded by a massive wall of hewn stone and an external glacis which supported the wall. These impressive fortifications underline the importance of the city during this time. Further evidence to this effect is a cuneiform tablet with a cuneiform script discovered at the site, which attests to an independent system of governance that had maintained commercial relationships with the surrounding kingdoms.<sup>9</sup> This city was also abandoned at the end of the period.

From the Late Bronze Age (1660-1200 BCE) there is evidence of a few graves and a few pieces of earthenware, but no layer of settlement. The settlement was revived during the Iron Age (1200-1000 BCE). Remains attest to a large village. After an absence in the 10th-9th century BCE, a new settlement emerged in the 8th century BCE. Findings from this period include private dwellings, granaries and stamps “for the King” on jar handles. Hebron at the time was part of the biblical Kingdom of Judah. The settlement was destroyed and abandoned in 586 BCE and revived again in the Hellenist and early Roman periods (350 BCE - 1st century CE). Private dwellings from that period were found at the site. That settlement came to an end in the latter part of the 1st century CE. During this time, Hebron was part of Idumaea and was called “Idoma”.<sup>10</sup> Following a hiatus of a few hundred years the settlement was renewed in the late Roman period (3-4th century CE) and continued into the Byzantine period. During the Byzantine and early Muslim periods, and then through the Crusader, Ayyubid, Mamluk and Ottoman periods, the center of the city had shifted to the place where the old city of Hebron stands today. A compound called “Dir el-Arba’in” was built at the site, and most probably functioned as a fortress and a government building. Later on it was converted into a mosque.

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8 E. Eisenberg, “Hebron’s fortifications during the Bronze period,” *The Land of Israel, Studies in the Land and its Antiquities* – The Book of Amnon Ben-Tor, The Israel Exploration Society, Jerusalem 2011, pp. 14-32 (in Hebrew).

9 A. Ofer, *The Judean Mountains in the Biblical Period, Volume 1: Tel Rumeida* (PhD dissertation, 1995), pp. 52-60 (in Hebrew).

10 Aryeh Kasher, *Jews, Idumaeans, and ancient Arabs: relations of the Jews in Eretz-Israel with the nations of the frontier and the desert during the Hellenistic and Roman era (332 BCE-70 CE)*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1988.



Graves, remnants of a structure and a granary revealed in the northwestern lot 52 in Tel Rumeida



Remnants of structures from the Roman-Byzantine period, in the southeastern lot 53 in Tel Rumeida

## 5. Dir el-Arba'in/ “the Tombs of Ruth and Yishai (Jesse)”

At the summit of the tel on its western side is an ancient structure called Dir el-Arba'in, which is a compound featuring a wall and an entrance gate leading to an open courtyard. Until the mid-1990s the compound served as a mosque. Following Baruch Goldstein's massacre of Muslims praying at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in 1994, the army declared the site a military zone. Under the army's auspices the space was then converted into a synagogue and Muslims were barred entry for security reasons. The Jews of Hebron call the place the “Tomb of Ruth and Yishai (Jesse)”.



Courtyard of Dir el-Arba'in mosque, considered today as the Tomb of Jesse and Ruth compound



Dir el-Arba'in compound – Army lookout post



Dir el-Arba'in–interior. This section of the mosque was converted into a synagogue under the auspices of the army

## 6. Presenting the site to the public

In the past few years, the Jewish community in Hebron has worked to create tourist routes, signposting the area and generally developing facilities for tourism. Tel Rumeida, called “Tel Hebron” by the settlers, is one of the recommended routes for tourists visiting Hebron.<sup>11</sup> When presenting the site to the public, the settlers focus on the layers identified with the age of the biblical patriarchs and other biblical events that reinforce the settlers’ political message. So, for example, Hebron from the Middle Bronze Age (“Patriarchal Age”) is described as the city that the biblical spies had visited prior the conquest of the Promised Land.<sup>12</sup> In this context, reference is made to the Oral Torah, which emphasizes the biblical text about Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who prayed at the tombs of the patriarchs, was imbued with courage, and was rewarded with the opportunity to conquer Hebron from the Giants who ruled it.<sup>13</sup>

The tourist route recommended to the visitor is called “the path of biblical Hebron.”<sup>14</sup> The first stop is Ein Jadide (New Spring), called by the settlers “the Spring of Abraham,” whence the groups are taken to visit the archaeological excavations, including the walls from the Middle Bronze Age, described as “the walls of the Giants” that the spies had encountered in the biblical story. From that point the groups walk alongside “Nahalat Shlomo,” an area bought by Jews in the 19th century that is also known as lots 52 and 53. This was the site of the excavations in 2014. Afterwards they arrive at the ancient Jewish (Karaite) cemetery, a central site in the narrative of the Hebron Jewish community, which contains the graves of the city’s 19th century rabbis, Jews who had been killed in the 1929 massacre, and settlers who were killed since the settlement was first founded in 1968. The next stop is the neighborhood of “Admot Yishai” (Jesse’s Lands), the site of archaeological excavations in the 1980s and 1990s. Admot Yishai borders the area designated as a future archaeological park (a “biblical park”), which will offer visitors the chance to “work in archaeology and authentic agriculture at the original biblical capital of Judea.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, visitors arrive at the area of the “Tomb of Ruth and Yishai (Jesse)” which now houses a synagogue that is open to the public.

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11 “[Tel Hebron \(Tel Rumeida\)](#),” website of the center for tourism and events, Hebron, accessed 26 August 2014.

12 Numbers, Chapter 13

13 Numbers, Chapter 13, 30; Chapter 14, 6-10, 24

14 [A tour to Tel Hebron along the route of biblical Hebron](#), website for center of tourism and events, Hebron, accessed 26 August 2014.

15 “[portfolio of planned projects for construction and development](#),” the website of the Jewish settlement in Hebron, accessed 26 August 2014



The Middle Bronze Age wall (the so-called “wall of the Giants”) and the destruction of the terraces belonging to Abu Haikal family in the southeastern plot

The route is saturated with traditional-religious content (ritual immersion in the spring, biblical events, stories of those deceased or murdered, a holy tomb featuring a synagogue and more), and appeals particularly to a traditional or religious public that is familiar with this content and identifies with it. On the other hand, the planned archaeological park, which highlights biblical agriculture, is designed to draw a whole new public to visit or work at the site.<sup>16</sup> In this effort, archaeology is recruited to play a central role.

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<sup>16</sup> “Tel Hebron: expecting to discover important archaeological finds” (Hebrew), Arutz 7, 23 January 2014.



## 7. The political significance of the excavations

The best way to preserve an antiquities site is to refrain from excavating it altogether. The accepted approach among professionals worldwide, Israel included, is that excavations cause destruction or damage to antiquities whether by exposing them, or as a result of removing layers and antiquities in the attempt to uncover antiquities embedded in deeper layers. In the current situation, reburying the finds at the excavation site would best serve the interests of archaeology. For this reason, the decision to carry on excavating at Tel Rumeida is clearly motivated by political considerations.

The excavation in Tel Rumeida coincides with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's declaration in 2014 that Hebron will remain in Israel's hands in any peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.<sup>17</sup> Yet it seems that planning for the archaeological park, a direct offshoot of the settlement project in Hebron in general and Tel Rumeida specifically, commenced at least four years ago. In 2010 the Minister of Culture and Sport, Limor Livnat, together with the director general of the IAA<sup>18</sup> visited Hebron. Already then, it had been decided that the IAA will grant scientific patronage to the excavation, despite the fact that almost all excavations in the West Bank are managed by the Civil Administration's special staff officer for archaeology.

Today, most of the tourism in Hebron centers on the Tomb of the Patriarchs. As explained, most of the tourists are settlers or their supporters, who are drawn to the place for ideological-religious reasons. During the previous government, former Minister of Education Gideon Sa'ar initiated a program to bring Israeli students for visits to Hebron.<sup>19</sup> The program has been discontinued by the current Minister of Education Shay Piron. However, the archaeological park will become a new excuse to bring thousands of visitors to the site under the guise of an ostensibly apolitical educational-historic tour. Changing the public image of Hebron from a bastion of religious fervor to an important national Jewish heritage site firmly anchored within Israeli consensus, is a key goal for the settlers of Hebron, who wish to influence public opinion and turn the empty streets of the settlement into a lively and well-frequented tourist destination.

The use of antiquities sites to draw visitors and strengthen the legitimacy of the settlements is a familiar strategy from many sites in East Jerusalem and the West Bank,

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17 "Netanyahu: Israel will not evacuate Hebron, Beit El as part of peace deal", *Haaretz*, 6th January 2014.

18 The Tomb of the Patriarchs website, archive of events: "Livnat in Hebron: We will continue to build at the end of the freeze" (Hebrew).

19 Channel 2 News, "Minister of Education Gideon Sa'ar: We will continue the heritage tours to Hebron," (Hebrew) Mako, 27th August 2012.

such as Silwan (“The City of David”), Sussiya, Tel Shiloh and others. The case of Hebron and Tel Rumeida is unique in that the planned archaeological park will be located in one of the most sensitive areas of the city, where Palestinian and Israelis live in close proximity and tensions between the two are rife and erupt on a routine basis.



A-Shuhada Street, one of the main streets in Hebron, today closed to Palestinian vehicles

## 8. UNESCO resolutions regarding Hebron

In the beginning of 2010 the government of Israel published a plan for “National Heritage Sites,” which in its original format included Rachel’s Tomb (Bilal Bin Rabah Mosque) and the Tomb of the Patriarchs (El Haram el-Ibrahimi).<sup>20</sup> Later, these sites were removed from the list but Israel’s initial declaration triggered a reaction by Arab countries, who turned to UNESCO with the demand to discuss “Israel’s appropriation of Palestinian heritage sites in occupied Palestinian land.”

The subject came up in a UNESCO’s World Heritage Center conference in Brasilia in the summer of 2010, where it was decided to encourage all sides to prevent and avoid any damage to Palestinian cultural and natural heritage. Also, a recommendation was made to reestablish the Technical Israeli-Palestinian Committee for Archaeology, in consultation with both sides, and to send a delegation from UNESCO and ICOMOS<sup>21</sup> to investigate the state of conservation of Palestinian heritage sites that are of particular importance.<sup>22</sup>

In November 2010, UNESCO’s Executive Board published a decision re-affirming that the two sites are an integral part of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and that any unilateral action by the Israeli authorities is to be considered a violation of international law and the UNESCO conventions.<sup>23</sup> In 2011 UNESCO admitted Palestine as a member state. In 2012, representatives from Palestine complained to UNESCO’s Director General about a new road connecting the settlement of Kiryat Arba to the old city of Hebron, claiming the works caused destruction to a cluster of ancient houses. They also expressed concern that Israel intends to build a wall along the road. The executive board discussed the issue and it is being followed up.<sup>24</sup> Once Palestine was accepted as a member of UNESCO, a list of sites that the Palestinians wish to promote as world heritage sites was drafted (called the “tentative list for proposed sites in Palestine”). In 2012 the Old City of Hebron/al-Khalil was added to the list.<sup>25</sup>

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20 Later on these two sites were removed from the list and replaced by other sites in the West Bank.

21 The ICOMOS Israel branch works for the conservation and protection of cultural heritage sites.

22 WHC-10/34.COM/20, item 11.

23 UNESCO Executive Board Decision 185, Item 15

24 Decision 191 EX/10.

25 <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5705/>

The Palestinian Authority is apparently interested in achieving recognition of Hebron as a World Heritage Site within the next few years. Such a status would make it easier to challenge Israeli activity in the ancient heart of the city. If Tel Rumeida were to be included, it would aid the Palestinians in obtaining a UNESCO decision against the archaeological excavations.



Palestinian restoration work in ancient Hebron (right of image), Area H2

## Conclusion

The fact that Tel Rumeida is located at the western edge of the Jewish settlement in Hebron makes it possible for the settlers to fortify Israeli presence in one of the most sensitive places in the city (which is already rife with tensions between Israelis and Palestinians and which erupt on a regular basis). Establishing an archaeological park on the tel would create a tourist route that could isolate the Palestinians who live there.

Beyond the political struggle on the tel, the history of the site, when presented along with archaeological artifacts (regardless of how accurately they corroborate the story) gives the impression that the Jewish settlement in Hebron exists by historical right. In this respect, the archaeological park in Tel Rumeida has been inspired by the success of the settlers in Silwan and the “City of David” site in East Jerusalem, and by other places in the West Bank, such as Sussiya and Tel Shiloh.

Today the settlers in Hebron number in the several hundreds. In the past two decades, the main market in Hebron has been closed down and the streets controlled by Israel are almost empty of people. Bringing thousands of visitors to Hebron on a tour branded as “apolitical” and “educational” will fill its empty streets with Israelis. For the settlers of Hebron this would amount to a double victory: a larger Israeli presence in the city that would, in turn, reinforce their perceived right to live there. The potential revenue from tourism is, of course, an added benefit.

After decades of attempts to build and live in Tel Rumeida, it appears that the settlers have realized that by using tourism and archaeology, they can conquer the tel without having to admit that it is a settlement. In Hebron, the struggle over heritage cannot be separated from the struggle over land. Archaeology, in this context, has become an effective tool for the settlers in their efforts to entrench their hold over Hebron.



Hebron's Israeli tourist map





Tomb of the Patriarchs in the center of ancient Hebron



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