The historic Beit Hadassah complex in the Old City of Chevron dates back to 1893. The first floor was built with funds donated by the Jewish communities in North Africa. Rabbi Chaim Rachamim Yosef Franco (1833-1901), a noted scholar known as the HaCharif and Chief Rabbi of the community, initiated the building. The building was originally called Chesed L'Avraham, (Kindness of Avraham) and was utilized as an infirmary and aid center for the needy. In 1911, an additional floor was built with funds donated by the Jewish communities of India and Baghdad.

Later, the Hadassah Organization sponsored a medical clinic which granted free medical assistance to both Jewish and Arab residents. The noted pharmacist, Ben-Zion Gershon, worked out of the adjacent building. Rabbinic leaders of the community, such as Rabbi Chanoch Hason and Rabbi Joseph Castel and their families lived in adjacent buildings in the complex.

In 1929, the hospital was the site of some of the worst of the rioting that killed 67 Jewish residents. The clinic was looted and burned. During the Jordanian occupation of 1948-1967, all Jews were barred from the city and the Jordanians converted the building into a school for a while and renamed it the Al-Dabboia building.

The liberation of Chevron in 1967 was accompanied by efforts to return to these homes. Abraham Franco, grandson of Chief Rabbi Chaim Rachamim, turned over the property deed to the new leaders of the fledgling community.

In 1979, a group of women took the initiative and along with their children, entered Beit Hadassah. In early spring, immediately after Pesach, a group of 10 women and 40 children proceeded in secret from Kiryat Arba to Chevron in the middle of the night. Arriving behind Beit Hadassah in the heart of the city, the women and children climbed into the vacant structure through a small window on the rear side of the building.

The morning after the women and children entered, soldiers patrolling the area heard singing coming from the building. Investigating, and to their great surprise, they found the building’s new Jewish occupants. The Israeli Government, led by Prime Minister Menachem Begin, was agitated by the nerve of Kiryat Arba’s Jews and their mentors, Rabbi Moshe Levinger and his wife Miriam. Begin opposed the renewal of the Jewish community in Chevron at the time, but was disturbed by the thought of forcibly removing women and children from the building.

The Israeli Government ordered the army to surround Beit Hadassah, effectively placing the building under siege. No-one was allowed inside, and anyone leaving was not allowed to return. Even food, water, or medical supplies were not allowed through the blockade. When it was pointed out to Begin that when Israeli forces surrounded the Egyptian Third Army during the Yom Kippur War he allowed them food, water and medical supplies, he relented.
The government subsequently gave its blessing to the reestablishment of a permanent Jewish civilian presence in Chevron. Prime Minister Menachem Begin stated at the time, “Chevron is also [part of] Israel. I will not allow for any place Israel to be ‘Judenrein.’” The pioneering women were eventually joined by their husbands.

In July 2020, Mrs. Levinger penned a partial memoir of those days:

“A truck was organized to come to Kiryat Arba at three o’clock in the morning to transport us to Beit Hadassah. Yeshiva students from Nir Yeshiva joined to help. We parked in the street behind Beit Hadassah, we all climbed into the courtyard by ladder and entered the building. We gave cookies and oranges to the children and put them to sleep on mattresses on the floor. That was the beginning. Our conditions were terrible. No running water or electricity. We had only chemical toilets and lots of dirt, dust and mold.

I reminded myself of the original chalutzim [Zionist pioneers] in the 1900’s and realized we were much better off than them. We slept on mattresses on the floor and the women from Kiryat Arba helped with basic needs, including food and laundry. The army realized after many days that we were not planning on leaving, regardless of our conditions.

Binyamin Ben Eliezer, Commander of Yehuda and Shomron, came and surrounded Beit Hadassah with barbed wire. He warned us that if anyone left, they would not be allowed back in. Supplies were delivered twice a week. Soldiers were placed on the second floor to guard us. They had bathrooms, electricity and running water. We took electricity from them for a small fridge. We had kerosene lamps, water in jerrycans, and baby bathtubs for washing dishes. Our days were spent preparing meals and occupying the children.”

It was a singular honor to have G-d declare that the women were right. There were elements in the army, police and Knesset members who campaigned against us. But I was secure in the knowledge that the Jews settled Israel 4,000 years ago, in obedience to G-d’s command.”

In 1980, Beit Hadassah, along with the Hason and Castel family homes, was rebuilt.

Ultimately, zoning approval was obtained, which served as a basis for the renewal of the community. During this period, Beit Hadassah and other historic buildings were renovated. They were redesigned by the noted architect David Cassuto and re-inaugurated on January 20, 1986. Cassuto also helped plan and rebuild other historic synagogues throughout Israel.

In 1999, the foundation for the Beit HaShisha building was laid as a tribute to the early pioneers of the reestablished community.

Today, about 30 Jewish families live in Beit Hadassah, which is a thriving residential complex with a playground, synagogue and a museum and visitor’s center on the ground floor.

Remembering Rabbanit Miriam Levinger

Born in 1937 in the USA, Miriam Beinhorn Levinger immigrated to Israel in 1956. After graduating from college, Miriam attended Shaare Zedek Nursing School. In 1959, she married Rabbi Moshe Levinger, a student of the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva and one of the prominent students of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook. Rabbi Levinger served as the Rabbi of Kibbutz Lavi and later the Rabbi of Moshav Nechalim.

In 1968, just after the Six-Day War, Rabbi Moshe and Miriam brought their little children along with other participants to settle in the Park Hotel in Chevron. In doing so, Rabbi Levinger initiated the resettling of the City of our Forefathers. After three years of residence under military government and another eight years in Kiryat Arba, a group of women and children led by Rabbanit Levinger sacrificed their personal comfort to live in the abandoned Hadassah building in Chevron. This opened the way for Jewish settlement in Chevron.

Since then, other neighborhoods have been established, leaning on the resolve and spirit of Rabbi and Rabbanit Levinger, who dedicated their lives to expanding settlement in Chevron and throughout Israel.

Rabbanit Levinger passed away this year on Motzei Yom Kippur. She was 83 years old and is survived by 11 children and 50 grandchildren, most of whom live in Judea and Samaria. Her husband passed away in 2015.