I wanted to be there when the IDF liberated Chevron. I thought there would be a tough battle like there had been everywhere else because if the Jordanian Legion had fought for Bethlehem, they would fight even harder for Chevron. I reached Gush Etzion at 1:30 am. All the forces we would need were already there – the armored corps, a company of jeeps, infantry, and all the others.

Lt. Col. Tzvika Ofer and his soldiers were planning to set out toward Chevron at six o’clock in the morning.

As part of their preparations, I asked the commander if I could speak to the soldiers. He agreed and said he would assemble his entire brigade at three o’clock. At the appointed hour, the soldiers assembled on a small hill near the vehicles and the commander handed me a megaphone.

And this is what I said:

Dear soldiers, today we liberated our nation’s Holy of Holies in Jerusalem – the Temple Mount and the Kotel. Tomorrow, we are going to liberate the second-holiest city in Eretz Yisrael. You are going to liberate the Jewish people’s city of the Patriarchs, the foundation of the Kingdom of David. King David ruled for seven years in Chevron before he ruled in Jerusalem. You are going to fight against the worst and wildest murderers. They carried out the pogroms all over the country and killed 164 fighters right here, where we are now after they surrendered and laid down their arms. There is no absolution for that! Know how to behave with them and in the name of the L-rd, take action and succeed, and go from victory to victory! From the victory in Jerusalem and Judea to the victory in Chevron!

At six, I went out onto the road to look for Tzvika Ofer’s battalion, but there was no-one there. I thought he had perhaps taken the first tank
and driven to Chevron to get there first.

I told my driver to advance toward Chevron, regardless of what the battalion was doing. We were two vehicles, the one I was in and the escorting Military Rabbinate jeep. On the way, we passed the battalion’s reconnaissance company.

Suddenly, my driver said, “Rabbi, we’re the first ones here. There are no soldiers ahead of us. The entire brigade is behind us. We could get stuck in Chevron alone, and who knows what they’ll do to us.”

“Drive on,” I told him.

When we drew closer to Chevron, I saw white flags waving over all the houses along the way. There would be no battles here I thought. There wasn’t a single Jordanian flag, so there was nothing to fear. We were entering Chevron as victors, without having fired a single shot.

“There’s a Jordanian flag flying from the third floor of one of the houses,” my driver said as we drove past Halhul. “They might fire on us.”

“Take the Uzi and cover me,” I said. “I’m going up there to take down the flag.”

My driver said they might kill me, so he would go.

“You’re still young,” I told him. “You still have to build a home and a family. I’ve already lived my life. I’ll go up, and whatever happens, happens.”

One of the drivers accompanied me to the second floor, and from there I went up to the third floor. I reached the flag and took it down.

“Salaam Alaikum,” I said to the tenants. I took the flag and they didn’t say a word.

We advanced toward Chevron, and when we entered the city we saw all the houses along the main road festooned with white sheets hanging from the balconies. The Chevron Municipality and the military forces had decided on a self-imposed curfew and ordered that no-one leave their homes. I wanted to inform them that the IDF had already conquered Chevron, even though the IDF force was only me and the jeep at this stage.

In the center of town was a podium where a policeman usually stood to direct the traffic. I climbed onto the podium and fired a magazine of bullets into the air, to notify the residents that the Israel Defense Forces had captured Chevron.

My declared goal had been to be the first to reach the Cave of the Patriarchs. I saw an Arab boy at one of the windows. “Where is the grave of Avraham Avinu?” I shouted up to him, but he said he was afraid to come down because of the curfew. He wouldn’t be able to get back home. I promised him my driver would bring him back, and the boy agreed to show us.

We reached the Cave and began to climb the stairs toward the gates at the top of the two staircases. I climbed to the top of the staircase on the north side, where everyone prayed, and saw the gate was locked.

“Ifta el-bab!” I shouted in Arabic. “Open the gates!”

I heard voices inside.

“Mefish maftuah,” they said. “We don’t have a key.”

If they don’t have a key, I thought to myself, how did they get inside? I began firing bullets at the gates, but they didn’t budge. To this day you can see the holes I made, which the Arabs call “Rabbi Goren’s holes.” For three hours, we tried to break down the gates, until I heard the sound of a tank approaching. That was the first Israeli tank to enter Chevron, and it was adorned with an improvised flag – a sheet on which someone had drawn a blue Magen David.

When the tank arrived, I saw the soldiers had a crowbar. My driver and I put the bar into the gate and worked it off its hinges until the gate fell to the ground and we could enter the Cave of the Patriarchs.

We saw two Arabs inside, trembling like a lulav, and one of them was holding the keys to the gate – even though they had told me they didn’t have any keys. My driver went over to him, took the keys, and we went into the Cave of the Patriarchs, where I blew the shofar.

I took the sefer Torah I had brought with me and read the portion of Chaye Sara, which relates how Avraham bought the Cave of the Patriarchs from the sons of Chet. It was still early in the morning and we were able to daven Shacharit there, the first Jews to daven freely in the Cave of Machpelah in 19 years.