The Old Jewish Cemetery of Chevron

While Chevron is most famous for being home to Ma'arat HaMachpelah, many people also take the opportunity to visit the Old Jewish cemetery when they find themselves in this holy city. Located up the hill from the Avraham Avinu neighborhood and below the ancient Tel Rumeida, the Chevron cemetery is the eternal resting place of a number of lesser-known Jewish heroes.

Jewish doctor and geographer, Yitzchak HaCohen ben Moshe, better known by his pen name, Ishtori Haparchi, made note of the cemetery as early as 1322. Famous Rabbis, including the Reishit Chochma – Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas, the Sdei Chemed – Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvisk and Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi, were buried in the cemetery. There are also four kivrei achim, mass graves, where 59 victims of the 1929 riots were laid to rest.

When Jews began to return to the area following the Six-Day War, their request to reopen the cemetery for burial was denied. That changed in 1975, when Sarah Nachshon, determined to bury her child in the city where his namesake was buried, carried the body of her infant son, Avraham Yedidya, past the soldiers and blockades. After his funeral, the ancient cemetery began to undergo restoration under the leadership of Professor Ben Zion Tavger, a refusenik who made aliya to Chevron, and the local residents were allowed to resume use of the cemetery, which continues to today. This past Tishrei, activist and Chevron community leader, Rabbanit Miriam Levinger, was laid to rest there.

Like the pilgrimage that takes place on the Shabbat of Parashat Chayei Sarah, albeit on a smaller scale, hundreds of people flock to the ancient Chevron cemetery every winter to pay tribute to a modern matriarch. Even on a quiet day, it is easy to find the grave of Rabbanit Menucha Rochel Slonim in the Chabad portion of the cemetery (a section located around the corner from the main cemetery entrance).

Born in Russia in 1798, a daughter of the second Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Dov Ber Schneerson, Menucha Rochel entered the world on the same day her holy grandfather, the Ba’al HaTanya, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, was released from prison. Sentenced for treason for his efforts to financially support the Jewish community in Chevron (which was in the Ottoman Empire at the time, and therefore sending money there was a crime against Russia), the Alter Rebbe had spent many weeks in jail, finally being released on the 19th of Kislev. She was named Menucha in hopes that she would continue to provide comfort to others just as the day of her birth had provided comfort to her family and her grandfather’s followers.

When her father became Rebbe, he continued to follow his father’s lead in supporting the Jews of Chevron by sending emissaries from Lubavitch to strengthen and build the Jewish community. It has been almost 30 years since the first families were sent, when Menucha Rochel was able to emigrate to Chevron, at the age of 47, with her husband, Rabbi Ya’akov Kuli Slonim.

Regarded as a matriarch of the Chabad dynasty, Menucha Rochel earned her reputation as a holy and wise woman, quickly making herself an irreplaceable part of the community. Community members and strangers alike sought out her advice, comfort and blessings. Brides would visit her before their weddings, asking for her advice and blessing. People suffering from both physical and spiritual ailments sought her counsel. Like Sarah Imeinu, for whom Chevron is an eternal resting place, Rabbanit Menucha Rochel’s home in Chevron was open to all who came to seek her comfort. And like Sarah, when Menucha passed away on the 24th of Shevat, 1888, at the age of 90, Chevron became her final resting place. Every year on that day, hundreds of people come to pay tribute to a woman who not only helped maintain Chevron’s continuity but who, in so many ways, also upheld what it means to be a mother of the Jewish people.

Rivi Frankel is a tour guide in Israel working with individuals and groups from all backgrounds, and particularly with children and teens.