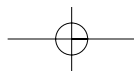
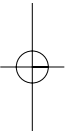
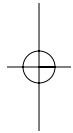
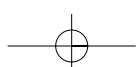
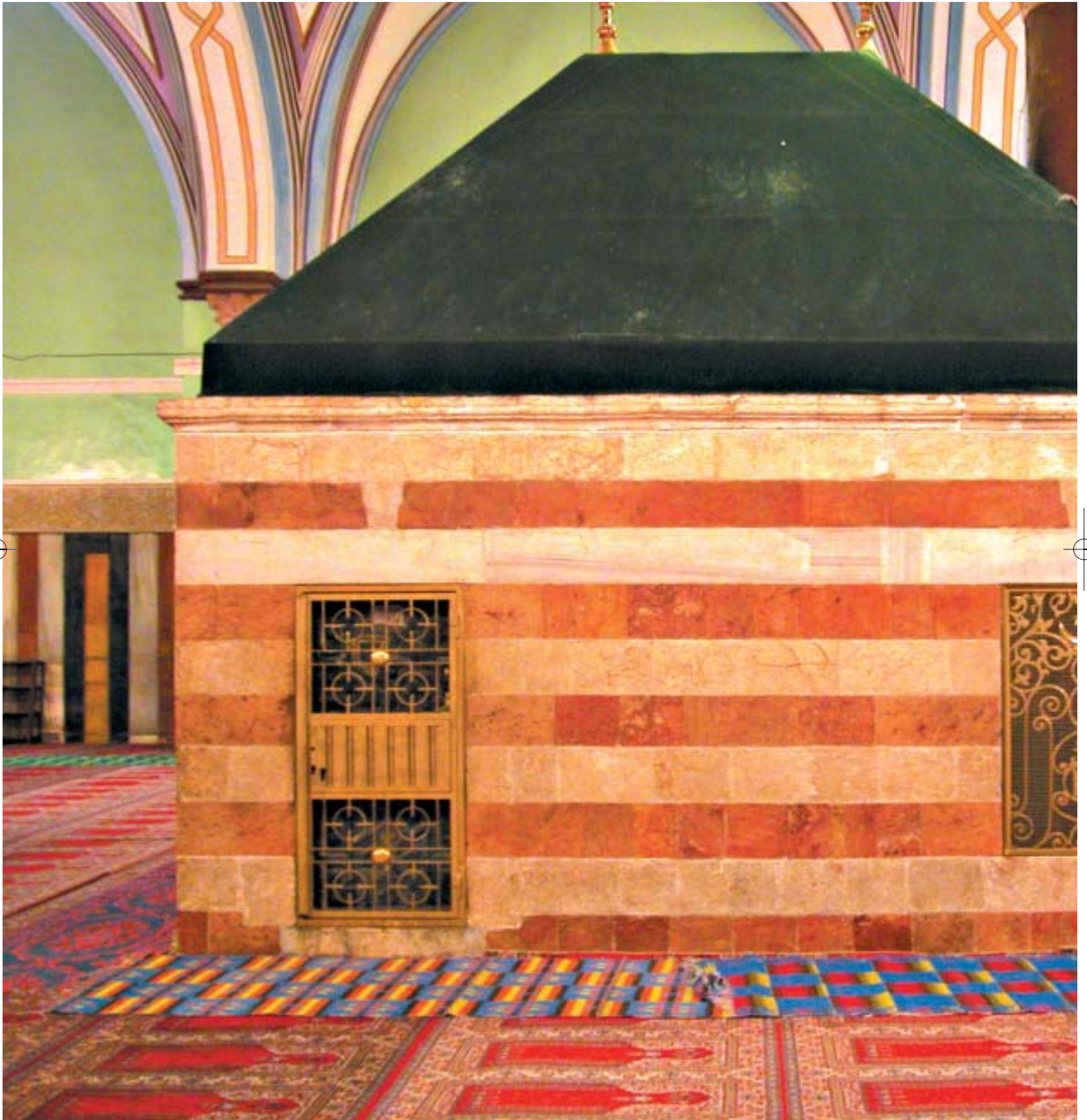
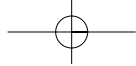


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RELIGION AND CULTURE

Operation Abraham

The dilapidated fabric covering that lay over Abraham's tombstone in the Machpela Cave was recently replaced in a discreet operation that was preceded by delicate, complex negotiations. Ya'acov Shkolnik was there and filed this exclusive report.

by **Ya'acov Shkolnik**

Photography: Jörg Waizmann

It is a cold Jerusalem night. In one of the hotels in the eastern part of town, ten people, with beards and flowing white robes, gather for a late meal of Indian food. The dinner is the prelude to a momentous operation: the changing of the covering on Abraham's gravestone in Hebron's Machpela Cave.

A Volatile Setting

The Machpela Cave, the Tomb of the Patriarchs, is a powder keg. Since King Herod turned it into a large and elaborate site some 2,000 years ago, it has gone through various stages. In the Byzantine period, the main hall was converted into a church, and in the Islamic period, it became a mosque. From the Mameluke period (thirteenth century) onward, the Muslims barred non-Muslims from visiting the site, though there

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were some times when Jews were allowed to climb seven steps leading to a small opening in the wall of the cave in order to pray.

Things changed again after the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) entered Hebron during the Six-

Day War. The cave was opened to all who desired to visit it. In order to maintain order, separate times were set for Jews and Muslims to pray there. But on February 25, 1994 – the holiday of Purim – the powder keg finally exploded. Dr. Baruch Goldstein, a resident of Kiryat Arba (a Jewish suburb of Hebron), positioned himself at

the opening to the site’s mosque, the hall containing the tombstones of Isaac and Rebecca, and opened fire on the Muslim worshippers, murdering 29 and injuring about 100.

A Delicate Balance

Since then, Jews and Muslims have been kept as far apart from one another as possible at the site. The Shamgar Commission, established to investigate the incident, concluded that the cave should be divided into two areas – one for Jews and one for Muslims.

The hall containing the tombstones of Isaac and Rebecca, which has been used as a mosque for hundreds of years, was assigned to the Muslims. The Jews were assigned the hall on the other side of the cave that contains the tombstones of Jacob and Leah. Each group was given the right to exclusive access to the entire site for 10 days each year, with the exact days agreed upon in advance each year.

This is the Jews’ opportunity not only to pray in the “Isaac Hall,” but also to peek through the two openings leading to the lower section of the cave and see the *minbar* (pulpit) and *mihrab* (niche indicating the direction of Mecca) that Saladin brought to the site. The *minbar* is an exquisite piece of art that was built in 1091 and transferred to the cave from the Hussein bin Ali mosque in Ashkelon in the Crusader period.

Abraham and Sarah’s tombstones are in chambers in the center of the cave. Since Abraham is revered by both sides, there was a need for a creative solution that would allow both sides to worship at his grave year-round without coming into

contact with one another. Since the chamber has three barred windows and a door, it was decided that Muslims could look into the chamber from the two windows near the Isaac Hall and Jews could look into it from the window and the grating in the door on their side. The entrance to the chamber is from the Israeli-controlled side and the big, heavy key was given to the Palestinians. Therefore, nobody can actually enter.

The Shamgar Commission's conclusions have been strictly enforced. Any change, no matter how minor, requires coordination between all of the concerned parties, and there are plenty of them. On the Muslim side, there is the Palestinian Waqf and the Jordanian Waqf (a *waqf* is a charitable trust that oversees religious sites). Part of the area outside the cave is under the jurisdiction of the Hebron Municipality. All of these bodies are under pressure from Muslim extremists. The Jewish side is just as complex. There is the Machpela Cave Council, which represents different groups in Kiryat Arba and Hebron, the Kiryat Arba Religious Council, and the Rabbinical Council of the Old City of Hebron. The border police and the IDF are also involved. Getting all of them to agree on something is just about impossible.

A Sacred Mission

Due to the delicate situation, even a simple decision about changing the lightbulb that illuminates Abraham's tombstone can reach the desk of the minister of defense. Replace the old cloth covering on the tombstone? You must be joking. It would be easier to send a man to Mars.

However, a group of people noted for their tolerant outlook wanted to change the situation out of respect for the tomb of the Jews' and Muslims' common forefather: a Muslim sect whose members mainly reside in India. The members of this peace-loving sect make pilgrimages to the tombs of holy men and wholeheartedly believe that it is possible to bring Jews and Muslims together. They therefore decided to undertake a sacred mission: to make a new covering for Abraham's tombstone.

They received the assistance of Moshe Hananel, who is a well-known figure in Israel's tourism industry and has a deep knowledge of the land. Very familiar with the Indian communi-



Above: The covering being taken to the tombstone.

Right: The group from India (in white). On the right is Moshe Hananel, who worked behind the scenes.



Below: Carrying the new covering in a suitcase to the Machpela Cave.

Facing page: Door to the chamber housing Abraham's tombstone. Part of the tombstone is visible, as is a member of the Indian group changing the covering.
Inset: Text in Kufic script, an ancient form of Arabic calligraphy, embroidered on the covering.



Opening pages: Isaac's tombstone. The chamber, now used as a mosque, contains the famous *minbar* and *mihrab* brought to the cave by Saladin.



Above: Completing the installation of the covering.

ty, as well as the Jewish and Muslim communities in Hebron, he had already had some experience at the Machpela Cave. A few years ago, he actually succeeded in getting Abraham's burial chamber cleaned.

The filth there was unbelievable. Over the years, a 30-centimeter layer of dust had accumulated. Moreover, the Jews have a tradition of throwing notes with prayers onto the grave, and Muslims have adopted that custom. Likewise, the Jews customarily throw candles and coins into the chamber, and so the Muslims have followed suit.

But no one cleaned the chamber – the Palestinian Waqf, which had the key, also had the right to clean the room, but only with the Jews' approval. Hananel managed to persuade both sides to agree, and the chamber was cleaned.

The notes were sent to a *genizah*, a place where old religious documents are stored, the coins were given to charity, and the dust and candles were cleared away. Since then, the room has been cleaned every few months, under the watchful eyes of the Jews and Muslims.

Considering the complexity of achieving that simple task, it is amazing that the negotiations to replace the cloth covering on Abraham's gravestone took only two years – especially

since even more complicated religious, political, and security issues were involved. Only after the mutual suspicion was finally overcome, in November 2004, was it possible to make the change. The leader of the Indian group selected a delegation of his followers and they set out from India. The leader's favorite grandson was chosen to head the mission, a sign of the importance that the leader attached to it.

Night at the Cave of Machpela

The meal at the Jerusalem hotel ended. Two people carried the heavy suitcase bearing the new covering. Silence prevailed on the bus as it made its way along the dark, desolate road to Hebron. Despite all of the negotiations and arrangements, no one was sure if the mission would be accomplished.

The bus reached the gates of Kiryat Arba, where the head of the Religious Council, Shmuel Margi, was waiting. Margi invests much of his time in bringing together the different parts of the Jewish community and creating a welcoming atmosphere for the soldiers and border police serving in the region. He climbed on the bus and it continued toward the cave.

The group arrived there late at night, after all the worshippers had left, and were met by border police, soldiers, and representatives of the Kiryat

A few years ago, Hananel actually succeeded in getting Abraham's burial chamber cleaned.



Arba Religious Council and Palestinian Waqf. One of the Muslim representatives delayed the proceedings slightly in order to quickly tidy up Abraham's chamber before allowing the honored guests from India to enter.

And then, the miracle happened. The door to Abraham's room opened, and the old covering was removed, revealing a wooden structure, 3.5 meters high, about 3 meters long, and about 2 meters wide, that enclosed a stone tombstone approximately 10% smaller.

Installing the new cloth covering was a complicated task, but the Indians were prepared – they cut, pulled out stitches, arranged, and restitched, and three hours later the new covering was in place.

The new covering, which was made in India, is a work of art that took half a year to complete. It is made of heavy material of a deep green hue, decorated with floral and geometric designs embroidered with golden thread, and studded with jewels and crystals.

From the "Jewish side," only the designs can be seen; the Muslim side offers a view of sayings embroidered in Kufic script, an early form of Arabic calligraphy. The sayings take into account the sensitivities of both sides, and include such statements as "Peace unto Abraham," "This is how those who perform good deeds are treated,"

Above: Members of the Indian group listen raptly to a demonstration of a Torah reading, which they requested despite the lateness of the hour.

They cut, pulled out stitches, arranged, and restitched, and three hours later the new covering was in place.

and "He was one of God's faithful believers."

Late that night, the tired delegation made its way outside, passing through the Circumcision Hall. The visitors noticed an ark containing a Torah scroll, dedicated in memory of Rehavam Zeevy, the Israeli minister assassinated in Jerusalem in 2002. They asked the Jewish Religious Council representative for an explanation, to which they listened with great interest. He then complied with their request to demonstrate how the Torah is read, chanting according to the traditional trope. The Indians were moved by the tune.

To express the group's thanks, the leader's grandson, an expert Koran reader who knows the entire text by heart, chanted a section of the Koran, to the amazement of the group of Jews and Muslims and even our Christian photographer. It may have been the first time such a scene had ever taken place in the Machpela Cave.

For a brief moment, it seemed as if the spirit of Abraham had risen in the cave to bless both of his sons. ■

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