

## **TOMBS OF IBRAHIM AS & FAMILY:**

In Palestinian city of **HEBRON**, about 25 km away from Jerusalem, the most attractive place for the tourists is the **Cave of Machphelah or the Ibrahimi Mosque**, Prophet Abraham AS's burial place and the main holy site in the city. It is on the border between the Palestinian and Jewish sectors. Military checkpoints staffed by the army separate the two areas and while the tourists usually pass with an ID check and after intense queries, **Palestinians are banned from crossing these checkpoints.**

**A little History please:** Islam, as sermonized by Prophet Muhammad pbuh, is the same religion preached by Nabi Abraham AS, as well as of all other prophets mentioned in the Torah and the Bible. Muslims honour all the prophets of the Jews and Christianity - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus and others [peace be upon them all] - as equally blessed and revered souls. Allah guided Prophet Muhammad pbuh to follow the religion of the Nabi Abraham AS [**Al-Qur'an** 16:123].

It remains a fact that Muslims know about and respect Nabi Abraham AS more than any of the fellow religions – Christianity and Judaism. From holy Qur'an the Muslims know that how his people disputed with him; **Al-Qur'an** 6:75-83 & 21:51-56 carry full details. How Prophet AS's father Terach [1883-1678 BC], himself used to carve and mould idols. Once Nabi Abraham AS chopped heads of all the idols with a sharp axe, the people got furious; they arrested, tried, kept him in chains and finally decided to throw the Nabi AS into the biggest fire they could build.

Every Muslim knows that how Nabi Abraham AS was thrown in rising blaze and that the flames did not harm Nabi AS because Allah the Almighty had issued His command for fire to cool down; see **Al-Qur'an** 3:173-174 & 21:69-70. How King Namrud held dialogue with Prophet AS [details are there in **Al-Qur'an** 2:258] and went speechless. In the meantime, Nabi AS continued calling people to believe in Allah – the one GOD.

## **NABI ABRAHAM AS IN 3 RELIGIONS:**

Prophet Abraham [in **Arabic**: Nabi Ibrahim] AS; is revered not just in Islam, but in Christianity and Judaism as well – better known as a friend of God – **Khalil-Ullah** in Arabic. The history sees him as the father of the **Arab** people as well as the **Jewish** people through his two sons, Nabi Ishmael and Nabi Ishaq respectively and the grandfather of Prophet Yaqub AS or Jacob. During each prayer, Muslims ask God to send His blessings upon Prophet Ibrahim - every day, five times a day, in virtually every time zone on this planet. More importantly, the direction in which every Muslim must face when praying is towards a structure Prophet Ibrahim AS had built with his son Nabi Ishmael: the Ka'aba in Makkah; see holy **Qur'an** 3:95-97 & 4:125.

**Hajj**, the pilgrimage to Makkah, is the ritual wherein Prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his eldest son Ishmael AS for God is commemorated – also called **Eid-ul-Adha**. Both father and son willingly submitted to God's command and the GOD was pleased with their commitment and performance thus rewarded Nabi Abraham with another [prophet] son Isaac AS; holy **Qur'an** 37:100-107 is referred.

**IN JUDAISM:** Jews regard Nabi Abraham AS as the first Patriarch [*father*] of the Jewish people. The event of sacrifice is different in Judaism; Jews believe that God tested Abraham's faith by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac [not Ishmael as given in holy Qur'an]; **Genesis** 11:26-27 & 22:2-13 are referred. Secondly, Judaism believes that the place of sacrifice was Mt Moriah in Jerusalem [not Arafat near Makkah as per Muslim faith]. The rest of the facts go same in the two religions.

**IN CHRISTIANITY:** Christians used to call God as the **God of Nabi Abraham AS**. According to Concise Encyclopaedia of Christianity [Oneworld–1998], [Nabi] Abraham is a great Hebrew patriarch and is considered common spiritual father of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Christianity also believes that God asked Nabi Abraham to **sacrifice his son Isaac** [not Ishmael as per the Qur'anic

version]. The Jews and Christians trace themselves back to Nabi Abraham AS and his wife Sarah; Muslims, to Nabi Abraham AS and his other wife Hagar.

Coming back to **Cave of Machpelah [the Ibrahimi Mosque]**, Jews and Muslims both agree on who is buried there: Nabi Abraham AS & his wife Sarah, Nabi Isaac AS & his wife Rebecca, Nabi Jacob AS & his wife Leah; all spiritual patriarchs and matriarchs whom both Jews and Muslims revere.

The burial of Sarah was the first account of a burial in the Bible, and Nabi Abraham AS's purchase of Machpelah was the first commercial transaction mentioned in this holy book. The next burial in the cave was that of Nabi Abraham AS himself, who at the age of 175 years was buried by his sons Prophets Isaac and Ishmael AS. The third burial was that of Nabi Isaac AS, by his two sons Esau and Nabi Jacob, who died when he was 180 years old. There is no mention in Bible of how or when Isaac's wife Rebecca died and buried but she is included in the list of Nabi Jacob AS's final words; Nabi AS himself died at the age of 147 years.

The site was revered in Judaism since at least 2000 BC as a burial site for the patriarchs. In 31-04 BC, the Jewish king Herod built a large, rectangular enclosure over the cave which still survives with 6-foot-thick stone walls made from stones that were at least 3 to 24 feet in width – but did not have a roof. Under Byzantine rule, in 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, on one part a church was constructed and the enclosure was roofed everywhere except at the centre. During this period, the site became key Christian pilgrimage destination. The first accounts are from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Till 570 AD at least Jews and Christians shared possession of the site.

In 614 AD, the Persians conquered the area and destroyed the whole structure, leaving only ruins; but in 637-38 AD, the area was taken over by the Arab Muslims and the building was reconstructed as a roofed mosque. The Muslims were fair enough to also permit erection of two

small synagogues for Jews at the site; Wikipedia is referred.

In 1099 AD, the area was captured by the Crusaders and the enclosure once again became a church; Jews and Muslims both were banned to enter the mosque or synagogue. However, during this period, the area was given new gabled roof, clerestory windows and vaulting.

In the year 1119 AD, *"In this year was opened the tomb of Abraham, and those of his two sons Isaac and Jacob ...Many people saw the Patriarch. Their limbs had nowise been disturbed, and beside them were placed lamps of gold and of silver"* - a discovery that excited eager curiosity among all three communities in the southern Levant [Hebron] Muslim, Jewish, and Christian.

In 1188 AD Saladin Ayyubi conquered the area, reconverting it to a mosque but allowing Christians to continue worshipping there. Saladin also added a minaret at each corner—two of which still survive - and the Minbar. In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, under the Mamluks, two additional entrances were pierced into the western end and also the north-western staircase and all the six cenotaphs the tourists see today. During the Ottoman period, the dilapidated state of the patriarchs' tombs was often restored to sumptuous dignity – and all the sepulchres were covered with rich carpets of green silk, magnificently embroidered with gold; those of the wives were red, embroidered in like manner. The sultans of Constantinople used to furnish these carpets, which were renewed from time to time.

After Jordan occupied the West Bank in year 1948, no Jews were allowed in the territory; however, following the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in the Six-Day War of 1967, Hebron came under Jewish control.

The tomb itself is in a cave about 40 feet under the floor. The entrance is on the Muslim side, but the tomb is on the Jewish side. The entrance is sealed – it is [light] point of contention.

Almost daily, the Muslim manager unlocks the cover to a small manhole, about the size of a dinner plate, and silver candelabra that just barely fits inside, and lowers it down a shaft on a long chain, down to the underground cave. It's a symbolic gesture of sacred religious connection from Muslims to their holy prophets.

Today, the shrine is divided — one side is for Muslims; the other is for Jews — one side is mosque and the other side synagogue. On the Jewish side of the shrine, a senior Rabbi, who had grown up in Miami [USA] but now lives in Hebron, guides visitors and the Jewish settlers of Hebron. According to details given in the Bible, the shrine stands on the spot where Abraham bought a plot of land as a burial place for his family about 4,000 years ago. In fact, it was the first documented acquisition of property by someone in the Holy Land — it was the start of it all — the Jews claim Nabi Abraham AS is their ancestor; Muslims claim he was their elder — in fact both are correct.

Inside a large carpeted hall on Muslim side of the shrine stand two structures housing enormous cenotaphs, or grave markers, for Nabi Isaac AS and Rebecca. Tourists, both Muslims and non-Muslims, are welcome to visit both the Muslim and Jewish sides of the cave when there are no prayer schedules.

**On 25<sup>th</sup> February 1994;** Baruch Goldstein, an American Jewish settler, walked into the main hall and shot dead 29 Muslim worshippers at the spot and 125 persons injured; since then the shrine is being governed by strict regime of segregation. Bullet-proof walls divide the areas where Muslims and Jews could pray separately.

The Muslim side of the Cave contains the only known entrance to the Cave below [it is locked by a marble door]. The tomb-markers [KATBAS] of Prophet Issac AS and Rebecca; and of Prophet Abraham AS and Sarah lying on the border of both the Muslim and Jewish sides of the cave. The Jewish section contains the tomb-markers of Nabi Jacob AS and Leah. Most of the

time, the building is used by Muslims and Jews for prayers — but in mutual consultation and convenience.

On a few pre-determined days each year, each religion gets to use the entire building. **For the Jews**, in addition to the normal holidays, one of these days is "*Shabbat Chayei Sarah*" each fall, on which thousands of people from all over Israel visit Hebron to commemorate moments of Nabi Abraham [AS]'s Buying of the Cave from its previous Hittite owners. **For the Muslims** it is on Fridays during Ramadan and as well during the *Eid al Fitr* and *Eid al Adha* holiday which Islam commemorates as the day Nabi Abraham AS went to sacrifice his son Ishmael AS.

The muezzin recites the *Adhan* [Muslim call] to prayer, but the microphone is on the Jewish side of the site, so soldiers escort him to the microphone. When he's done, they quickly usher him back through the bullet-proof divider to the Muslim side — he goes through the same exercise five times a day. On the other side, the Jewish Rabbi recites morning prayers in front of a large wooden Torah ark, which is attached to wheels so Jews can cart it out for the 10 days when Muslims take over their part of shrine.

Neither side trusts the other to respect its property and nor they are very happy with how this place is shared. Two religious factions are claiming the same one place — in nutshell this is the Israel - Palestine conflict.

### **HEBRON City - AL-KHALIL:**

It is an ancient city in the southern West Bank — is mentioned in the Bible as the **home of Prophet [Nabi] Abraham AS**; burial place of him and several generations of his family. The Jewish population of Hebron was evacuated after killing of nearly 70 of them in 1929. Then, after the 1967 war, a few Jewish settlers went back and decided to renew their old life. Today, about 500 Israeli settlers live in old city of Hebron under continual security; the remaining 166,000 residents are Palestinians. The Old

Town of Hebron was declared as **World Heritage Site** by UNESCO on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2017.

**The Oak of Abraham Monastery** in Hebron town is a Christian holy site which observes Prophet Abraham [AS]'s visitation by three angels. In addition, in or nearby Hebron there are **Tombs of Biblical figures Jesse, Ruth, Abner and Tomb of Nabi Lut AS**; 8 km from Hebron city in the town of **Bani Na'im**. Their are tombs of his two daughters, also there is another Muslim monument associated with Nabi Lut's settlement and prayers in the town [called **al Maqam an Nabi Yateen** in Arabic].

#### **GETTING IN HEBRON:**

If you want to go to the Palestinian side of Hebron: grab bus 21 from **Arab bus station** just outside the Damascus gate in Jerusalem; tell them Hebron or *Al-Khalil* they will take you to a mid way **drop off point at the Bethlehem bus station** and from there you need to go to the very bottom floor of the Bethlehem bus station where a collective taxi or minibus will take you to Muslim side of Hebron. The minibus drops you in busy city centre from where no vehicular access to the Ibrahimi mosque; the tourists go on foot for about a km distance. Today, the shrine is divided — one side is for Muslims; the other is for Jews — one side is mosque and the other side synagogue. Everyone must pass through an Israeli military security checkpoint either way.

**Direct Route:** If you want to go to the Israeli controlled side, which includes the Cave of the Patriarchs, take **Bus 160 from the Jerusalem Central Bus station**. This is the easiest route to get to Hebron within 30 minutes because it is a direct bus ride that is quite fast and requires no transfers. There are **buses 380, 381 / 382 too, going every 15-30 minutes**, from here; no hassle but you may miss to see the tombs of Nabi Isaac AS & Rebecca because of security checks. However, the plus point is that you'll see tombs of Nabi Jacob AS & Leah which are not accessible from Muslim side.

The keen and serious tourists opt for both routes separately though it takes away their full one day's business. **Palestinian taxi drivers are not allowed into the Jewish settler's section**, so you will need to travel there from an Israeli town or a Jewish settlement. For seeing sights out-of-town, it's best to take a **service-taxi**, the Palestinian equivalent of *sherut*, at the bus station.

Though it is not a meal but the travellers do try **tabun** [large, soft, round] bread in **Bab il Zaweya** with a container of hummus from nearby. **Falafel** is one of the most famous '**snacks**' in Palestine in general. Hebron has many famous falafel restaurants that are always crowded because of their world-known taste. From the beginning of **Ein Sarah Street** to its end, you will find many falafel stalls or restaurants.

Hebron is famous of its traditional dish called **Al-Qidrah Al-Khaliliyah**; a meal that contains mainly rice and meat [chicken or lamb]; eaten usually on Fridays and other festivals. Since it needs time to prepare and it should be cooked in an oven or in bakery, it is not easy to find it in casual restaurants. However, it is available in restaurants like **Abu Mazen** and **Al-Quds** in **Ras al-Jora**. It is expensive for most local citizens; often costing \$10 plus. In sweets, do not miss *Kinafa, Baqlawa, Harisah, Kolaj* and the list can go long.

Situated on the edge of Hebron's Old City, **ABU SALAH**, this busy restaurant is one of the best for shawarma. It has a handful of chairs where locals rest on to chomp down on their pitas, either chicken or lamb.

Alcoholic drinks are not available in Hebron, at least in the Arab areas. Nevertheless, natural juices can be found in many coffee shops with nice atmosphere. **Ein Sarah Street** is the main street for night life between 7PM to 11PM. Many coffee shops are available there where you can smoke **shisha** and have soft drinks.