

*Translated from Hebrew*

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## **Slaughter of the Jews of Hebron: The computer game version**

**The animated clip in the style of a video game created by artist Orit Hasson Walder, whose great-grandfather was murdered there in the 1929 riots, proposes an alternative to those riots**

By Carmit Sapir-Weitz

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The fear of the impending demographic threat on the freedom of worship at the Western Wall and the burning of synagogues all sound like the main headlines from last week. But if we go back in time to 1929, we will discover that these were also the main reasons for the 1929 Arab riots, a series of violent terror attacks by Arabs against the Jews living in Mandatory Palestine.

History has taught us for n<sup>th</sup> time that it's always the same material and only the characters change. Among the 113 Jews murdered in the riots was one of the three Sephardic rabbis - artist Orit Hasson Walder's great-grandfather. During that same incident, her grandmother and aunt, then two years old, were saved by an Arab friend.



The computer game recreating the slaughter of Hebron Jews in 1929. Screenshot from the game.

Eight decades later, the reality in which Hasson Walder lives took on a new look. She decided to integrate the historical and family story in an animation work, "Create a House, Create a Hebron Family," corresponding with the design of the computer game SIMS. The creative idea enables the player to create an alternative life, as Hasson Walder presents the various options of plot developments each with its own outcome.

“It’s as if you can control Fate, control life, through the option to choose a different ending, to check out what would have happened ‘if...’,” states Hasson Walder, artist and lecturer at Hamidrasha College of Art Beit Berl. “What interested me is how I could connect the traumatic past with a computer game that offers choice. In the game, the player presses a button to change the outcome. Sometimes you build, sometimes you destroy, you can create a character and deconstruct it.”

Together with animation artist Arik Pe’er Hasson Walder created a model based on the Hebron buildings Beit Hasson and Beit Hadassa, as well as on the well-known American suburban model home. The characters, all dressed in traditional garb, move between the painful reality and the absurdity of everyday life for example, by pressing a button in the clip, the murderous mob can change into the prayer quorum for a “quickie wedding” the rabbi conducts in the middle of the night with a background of breakdancing to Ladino music. The diamond form dancing around the head of the figures in the SIMS game which shows how alive they are, was changed by the artist into a *hamsa* [Eastern hand symbol]. When the slaughter takes place in the clip, the *hamsa* shatters and turns red.

The figures in the animated clip are based on relatives and friends. “All of a sudden, I had a digital grandma and aunt, while all of the small black and white photos turned into real characters.” Hasson Walder will be speaking about her work at the Sixth Bezalel Academy of Art and Design Conference. “I’ll be speaking about ghosts in psychology and will mention Selma Fraiberg’s article ‘Ghosts in the Nursery’ in which she asks why tragic history is repeated in the second or third generation.”

**We are raised on the myth that “we owe the dead who laid down their lives that we may live.’ Wasn’t there a stage at which you felt you were desecrating something holy?**

“This is a piece that’s a bit of heritage but presented in a roundabout way that is ironic and funny. Very many years have passed since those pogroms. The aunt who gave me her testimony was very moved when she saw the video. It’s possible to touch upon pain using irony and humor, too. It was very important to me to convey a reality in which the family is in great pain but I didn’t want the artwork to become a political ‘poster’ – for either side.”

**So what did you want?**

“What comes from my grandfather’s family is a very strong family feeling, that some use our family history and the past and bend it to their own political ends. It’s exactly like many traumas in this country that are ghosts. Half of the things here stem from the past and are present underneath the surface. No one puts them on the table.”

In the SIMS game, ghosts appear in the courtyards to repair the situation. In Hasson Walder’s video, the spirit of her great-grandfather hovers over military zones and returns to modern day Hebron. It remembers his neighbor Muhammad, looks at the exhibition of photographs of those murdered in Hebron and doesn’t recognize himself. Another character is writing his memoirs as justification for his actions. At the end of the video, the rabbi faces the option deconstruct. Hasson explains: “In movies, many times there is a ghost to promote the plot or complete something that wasn’t finished, so that the spirit can rest in peace, and only then it dies again. Here, the figure of my great grandfather doesn’t complete a thing.”

**Why did you choose this ending? You could have chosen marching into the sunset.**

“It was a political statement that is correct for the present. It’s me saying that under current circumstances I don’t want the house in Hebron. What did my grandfather used to say? If we live, good and well, I’d be happy to return. But given the way things are now? I have no wish to go back there.”