

ABRAHAM PATH INITIATIVE

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AT HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

Tucson Region

Focus on Abraham unites 3 religions on a path to peace

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Heeding God's call, Abraham embarked on a journey to a new land, where a covenant with God, believers say, made him the patriarch of Jews, Muslims and Christians, celebrated for his faithfulness today by nearly half the world. That same path through the Middle East is drawing new attention as a way to ultimately inspire and promote reconciliation for his children.

The Abraham Path Initiative calls for a renewed focus on the journey itself as a way to emphasize the shared ancestry of three often divided faiths. The group hopes to draw people to the region to retrace Abraham's footsteps and spiritually connect with a prophet known for his hospitality as well as his faith.

"Abraham is a powerful story for all three religions — Jews, Christians and Muslims," said Martha Gilliland, an affiliate faculty member at the University of Arizona and a leader of the initiative.

"He's the same guy with the same values of inclusivity, hospitality, respect and faith," she said. "Nobody inside that story has to be wrong."

The Abraham Path project started at Harvard University's Global Negotiation Project with a plan to chart Abraham's path as closely as possible, from where he heard God's call to his burial site. The route starts at the ruins of Harran in what is now southeastern Turkey and proceeds through Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Palestine. It ends in Jerusalem at the tomb of Abraham in Hebron, known in Arabic as al-Khalil.

"I've come to believe that things change through conversations, and they change because people share life projects, share information about their children, share a meal together," said Gilliland, a former dean and vice provost of the UA who returned in the summer to assume her new role. "They experience each other across the divides, and they experience each other as human beings, not stereotypes."

In November, a delegation with the project made a study trip to the region, traveling the 600-mile route by bus to bring U.S. and international scholars together with local businesspeople, religious leaders and residents.

"My own personal experience on this was of two kinds," Gilliland said. "One where I was so touched by the hospitality and one of an overwhelming sadness I'm still processing, particularly in Israel and the West Bank, where manifestations of violence and anger are simply an assault on your emotions."

Though Abraham's exact route is likely impossible to determine, the project will link sites of historic and religious significance along the route, said Joshua Weiss, managing director of the initiative and associate director of the Global Negotiation Project. Weaving together the sites under the banner of Abraham will create a greater significance overall, he said.

"Everybody resonates with who he is and what he stood for," Weiss said. "The path itself is really the vehicle, a multiplier effect, for people-to-people interactions and the preservation of cultural and historical sites."

Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson also said he's encouraged by the idea of people making pilgrimages along Abraham's Path.

"The Bible and the Quran and really many sacred writings tell us humanity is on a journey of spiritual discovery, and a pilgrimage is a sign of the commitment to the challenge of that journey," he said. "With this initiative to invite people to walk in the footsteps of Abraham, who is our father in faith and who ventured into the unknown on a call from God, we too are being called in a sense."

Kicanas said the project is a blessing in its invitation to people to find ways of reconciling and living in peace.

"My prayer would be this initiative would be fruitful, that hearts could be transformed and that God's intention of man living peace and harmony could be realized," he said. "The encouragement there is the journey of humankind is toward peace to restore what's broken, and this is critically needed today in the world."

Stuart Mellan, president and chief executive officer of the Jewish Federation of Southern Arizona, called the initiative a "wonderful vision" and said it would bring people together who didn't previously have a chance to create a dialogue of peace.

"We all become a little jaded, and sometimes we're afraid to allow ourselves to dream, and this is a wonderful dream," he said. "To try to move beyond the realm of politics and somehow overcome the obstacles in accomplishing this kind of process is perhaps exactly what this world needs."

Mellan said he hopes new voices join the discussion, moving away from politicians to include scholars, historians and people of all religions.

"So much of what we hear about is on a political realm, and that's what's exciting here: It transcends the politics," he said.

Muhammad As'ad, administrator of the Islamic Center of Tucson, said the initiative is a good way to bring the three Abrahamic faiths together, calling it a breath of fresh air compared with the usual negative news about the Middle East.

"I think we have to do more of this, because our leaders in general aren't showing any guidance or direction in improving the situation," he said. "A grass-roots thing like this is excellent. In today's world; maybe the people should lead and the leaders should follow."

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