

Harvard University hosts a conference on the Abraham Path



A one half-day conference on the Abraham Path was held on September 8th at the



Harvard Faculty Club. The purpose of the conference, according to Harvard Business School professor James K. Sebenius, was “to provide a forum for scholars from multidisciplinary backgrounds to critically evaluate the Abraham Path

Initiative via a case study that had just been completed, to create future research questions for academic study, and to make future plans for individual and collaborative teaching and study.”

35 participants participated in the lively discussion from eleven distinct disciplines, ranging from negotiation to Islamic Studies, and from education to archeology and divinity studies. Some of the specific participants included: Robert Mnookin, Harvard Law School, Howard Raiffa, Professor Emeritus Retired at Harvard Business School, Farouk El Baz, Boston University, William Graham, Dean of the Harvard Divinity School, Jamil Mahuad, Former President of Ecuador, James Carroll, Author and Journalist for the Boston Globe, and Mari Fitzduff, Brandies University, Jeswald Salacuse, Tufts University, and Andrew Vaughn and Joe Greene from the American School of Oriental Research (ASOR).

The discussion began with a broad range of views on the case study, highlighting its value as a teaching tool and the interesting questions it raised from an academic



perspective. For professor Robert Mnookin of Harvard Law School, the case brought to the forefront the potential for the Abraham Path to be a particularly appealing subject of study, about which disciplinary or interdisciplinary seminars could be organized and theses could be written.

From an archeological perspective, Joseph Greene, Associate Director of the Harvard Semitic Museum, explained that the Abraham Path has the potential to have a long-

term beneficial role in promoting local and global interest in archaeological sites in the region, thus helping the cause of cultural preservation. He also added that what was so interesting about the process of creating the Abraham Path – much like a lot of work in archeology – would ultimately not be remembered unless it was consciously captured. That is the role of the initial case study and of the academic analysis that will ensue.

Others brought a number of thought-provoking questions, including:

- how the different narratives related to Abraham have been expressed and how they might be woven into the project
- what the local interpretations of Abraham are and how those can be captured and amplified
- how a functional concept, such as tourism, can be used most effectively to encourage cultural diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges
- to what extent should an “open source” model—like Wikipedia or software projects such as Mozilla (Firefox)—be pursued in which a center heavily stimulates and coordinate efforts of others but also leaves much of the other work to the teams on the ground
- the Path in its current form is intended to enable travel and economic development. Is it best designed for these kinds of specific purposes or more as a *platform* for as-yet-unrealized activities
- how the challenge of acoustic separation can best be managed in the context of the path

Finally, the conference concluded with people offering ideas and ways in which they would like to become involved in the Abraham Path Initiative. These ideas included:

- research opportunities for graduate and doctoral students
- internship with the country teams
- engaging student groups at Harvard and elsewhere to travel the Path
- providing academic oversight for different aspects of the project – such as the cultural and historical preservation efforts
- contributing to an Abraham Path ‘wiki’ with academic content and research.

The participants felt the conference was highly productive and an excellent start to exploring the scholarly aspects of the Abraham Path.