

ABRAHAM PATH INITIATIVE

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AT HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

(A brief report by William Ury on the first Abraham Path Study Tour in November 2006.)

November 15, 2006

Dear Friends,

As I fly home from Jerusalem, I am happy to report to you that the first Abraham Path Study Tour has successfully completed its mission. Twelve days ago, my colleagues and I, over twenty of us from ten countries, began our journey in Urfa in southeastern Turkey, the place where many believe Abraham was born in a cave. We traveled by bus from Turkey to Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Israel, retracing the footsteps of Abraham. The day before yesterday, after passing by Jericho and Jerusalem, we reached the West Bank city of Hebron/Al-Khalil, where Abraham is buried in the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Our journey began in a sacred cave and ended in another, going from womb to tomb, so to speak. On a personal note, after years of dreaming of this Abrahamic journey, I am feeling grateful, enriched, moved, and humbled

The purpose of our Abraham Path Initiative, as you may remember, is to study the possibility of creating – or rather recreating – an historical route, a path for travelers and pilgrims, that might last for generations. On this trip, we have sought to deepen our understanding of the obstacles, which are very real and not to be underestimated. Conflict and violence in the region, multiple international boundaries, worldwide perceptions of insecurity deterring visitors, volatile political situations, stretches of inhospitable desert, lack of infrastructure for tourism in the countryside – these are just a few of the principal obstacles we have encountered.

However great the obstacles may appear to be, the potential we have discovered in our study is even greater. The Path can serve as a catalyst for mutual understanding across cultures and religions, including sister city exchanges, fostering an alliance of civilizations. It can serve as a magnet for tourism, service projects, and economic development. And it can become a focus for books, newspaper articles, and films that highlight the rich heritage of this region and the deep hospitality of its peoples.

On our trip, we had a chance to consult with a wide range of leaders from deputy prime ministers to ministers of tourism, governors, mayors and parliamentarians, to university presidents and scholars to muftis, patriarchs, imams, bishops and rabbis to business leaders and of course the heads of many NGOs. From our consultations with national leaders at the highest levels and local leaders, governmental and nongovernmental, we emerge, if anything, more hopeful about the long-term benefits such a Path could engender and the local and national support it could enjoy.

We experienced first hand the story of Abraham, who is present not only in places where his memory has been revered for centuries, but also alive, as we found, in the hearts of ordinary people. In the village that lies astride the ancient Mesopotamian ruins of Harran, where Abraham heard the call to go forth, the mayor and it seems almost the half the town is called Ibrahim. People invoke his name in daily life and in daily prayers. He is a companion and friend, a symbol of hospitality and faith. I remember in particular one visit we made to a cave associated with Abraham that is inside a private house in a poor neighborhood. The site is tended by an elderly widow, the owner of the house, an animated soul with a bright smile who charges nothing for the visit. "If you want to bring a rug to add for the floor, that would be good," she beams as she talks delightedly about Abraham and sings his praise as an intimate friend of God.

We also came to appreciate more deeply how traveling the Path is not just about the stories of old, but about the tragic present-day conflicts among the children of Abraham. In Syria, where we met hospitality and welcome as tourists, we were requested not to have meetings to discuss our

project because of the delicate present political situation in the aftermath of last summer's war in Lebanon. In Jordan, our conference was held in a hotel ballroom which, as we were reminded by our hosts during the meeting, was the very same room where almost exactly a year earlier, forty innocent people at a wedding were killed by a suicide bomb. In Bethlehem, the deputy mayor took me aside to tell me how three years ago, he and his family were driving and tragically caught in a crossfire and his twelve year old daughter was killed and he himself was wounded. "But I forgive. I am for peace. I support this Abraham Path Initiative."

Everywhere we met hospitality – the hospitality of Abraham – courtesy and warmth from people and invitations to people's homes. Nowhere did we appear to be unsafe, whatever our prior fears and concerns had been. All the countries along the way are eager to receive more tourists, seeing tourism as a vital foundation for their economies. In Palestine, the number of tourists has greatly decreased since the intifada began in 2000, and is just beginning to recover a little. Where once there were long lines to visit the birthplace of Jesus, now there are virtually no lines at all. One story comes to mind. At the destination site of Abraham's tomb in Hebron/AI-Khalil, our group, as a symbolic gesture, placed at the foot of an olive tree a sprinkling of soil that we had collected from Harran and all the places we had visited retracing Abraham's footsteps. A local man stood there watching us and asked, "What are you putting near my tree?" After we apologized and explained what the earth was, the man was touched and vowed that he would tend that soil for years to come. "But please don't just bring earth," he said. "Bring people."

And that is our aim and hope — to bring people. It is to serve both hosts and guests, enabling each to learn about the other and allowing both to benefit enormously, as we did on our journey. What the Abraham Path has going for it are some of the most extraordinary and revered sites in the world from the Ummayyad Mosque in Damascus to the Holy Places in Jerusalem to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The Path serves like a golden necklace on which are strung rare jewels of astonishing beauty and power. Add to this the intense global interest in these lands – whether because they are a cradle of civilization, the sites of the stories of the Bible and the Koran, or the stage for the wrenching present-day conflicts of the children of Abraham. Not least of course is the compelling and deeply meaningful story of Abraham, known to three billion followers of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism – fully half of humanity.

In a fundamental sense, we are not creating the Abraham Path, for it already exists. We are merely connecting the dots and dusting off the footsteps. And the travelers are beginning to come. Around the world we have discovered in the last three years of our study process, there is enormous interest among people, particularly the young, in coming to walk and visit the Path. We share the strong sense that our study tour is just the leading edge of a coming wave – and it may arrive sooner than we imagine.

Those of us who are working on the Path have come to understand the virtues of flexibility, patience, a step-by-step approach, and a consultative approach. We have a deep commitment to rooting the Path in the local communities through which it passes. We acknowledge that, while those of us from outside the region can study and connect and serve, the real leadership and organization of the Path will come from those who are its hosts in the region. While holding the large r vision, we will seek the strategic opportunities for moving it forward that exist at any particular time.

One of our purposes on the trip was to discern the next steps in the development of the Path. We received a great many suggestions from our hosts: a dedicated week to celebrate Abraham in Urfa and Harran, including a walk by youth between the two cities, a proposal to open the first way-marked multi-day segment of the Abraham Path in Jordan, a walk with youth from around the world including Israelis and Palestinians from Jerusalem to Hebron/AI-Khalil. We are studying the possibility of having these walks all take place within the same two week period in the fall with a global delegation moving from walk to walk along the Path. At the same time, people from around the world could join in Abraham walks in their own communities. The walks could be accompanied by such events as interfaith dialogues, music concerts, academic symposia, and

tourism trade fairs.

One step at a time, the Path is being created. We have already begun mapping the Path on the ground and begun to create the beginnings of a guidebook. As our working motto goes, "less talk, more walk."

Developing the Path will require a lot of work; we are still in the very beginning. We invite your involvement and support in walking the Path with us, literally and metaphorically, in your communities and in the Middle East. If you have any questions or offerings, please contact my colleagues Josh Weiss at josh@abrahampath.org or Martha Gilliland at martha@abrahampath.org.

One thing is certain: this initial journey along the Abraham Path was life-changing, an adventure of the body, mind, and spirit for everyone who was on it. And it marked a definite step forward for our common dream. No longer can skeptics easily say, "You can't go from Harran to Hebron." Because we have – and countless others, including many of you, we hope, will do the same in the years to come. As one of our hosts announced on our last day in Jerusalem, "with this first study tour, the baby is born."

My colleagues and I are deeply grateful for your ongoing support.

With respect,

William Ury