



Walking in Abraham's Footsteps

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How retracing a prophet's journey could advance Mideast peace

He heard the voice of God, uprooted his family, gathered his flocks, and trekked 800 miles south from Harran in Asia Minor (today's Turkey) to Canaan (now Israel/Palestine), all because God told him that it was there he would father a great nation. As the traditional ancestor of the Hebrew people, the patriarch turned prophet Abraham is the spiritual father of the three great monotheistic faiths. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all revere him as a model of submission to God's will and of hope for the future.

Many have tried to use the prestige of the prophet to bring modern Israelis and Arabs together, but the region's painful political history has made most in the Mideast more conscious of what divides Judaism and Islam than of what unites them. Violence, coupled with countless angry words at conferences and on the street has drowned out the voices in the Old Testament and the Quran.

Now one man is suggesting that, where Mideast peace is concerned, walking might work better than talking. In 2005, William L. Ury, cofounder of Harvard Law School's Program on Negotiation and coauthor of the classic conciliation manual *Getting to Yes* (Penguin, 1991), began working on the Abraham Path Initiative,

an ambitious program to recreate the prophet's storied journey from Harran to Hebron on the West Bank, where the prophet's tomb is located.

As Ury told the online **Harvard Crimson** (www.thecrimson.com) on November 16, 2006, taking tourists and pilgrims on the route could be "a catalyst for intercultural interaction on a large scale, so that people can understand the roots of the problem as well as the roots of civilization itself." Walkers and drivers along the path, which would go through Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian territories, would visit some of the most revered sites in the monotheistic tradition, among them the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock, site of Solomon's Temple. (The route could later be expanded to commemorate Abraham's journeys in Mesopotamia [now Iraq], Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.) Additionally, Ury hopes that the growth of a culturally respectful and environmentally responsible tourist industry will spur economic development along the route, fostering the restoration and upkeep of sacred sites and other cultural monuments.

The initiative's website (www.abrahampath.org) details the progress of the project, which has already garnered support from individuals and organizations in 10 countries (including Syria and Jordan) and endorsements from Jimmy Carter and the Dalai Lama.

In November of 2006, Ury and a multinational group of supporters took a two-week tour of potential sites on the path. "The media tend to focus on areas of conflict," Ury told the *Crimson*, "but we had a very smooth passage." On the website, the strictly apolitical group details its intention to "work within the limitations" of the political situation: "Most visitors from the West will be able to travel the entire length . . . without any problem, and visitors from most countries of the Middle East will be able to travel large portions of the route."

The project has already succeeded in partnering with interreligious organizations, inspiring local Abraham Walks in several places around the United States, including Cincinnati, Dallas, and Austin, Texas. Organizers take participants on minipilgrimages that link local churches, mosques, and synagogues; interfaith liturgies and speakers round out the events.

As for its potential to bring Mideast peace, Ury is convinced that the initiative represents the sort of unconventional approach that may be the last, best chance, given the dismal record of traditional negotiation in that part of the world. As he told the syndicated public radio program **A World of Possibilities** (www.aworldofpossibilities.com) on June 20, 2006, "The approach we've traditionally taken [to the Mideast] is a face-to-face approach. You bring people face-to-face with each other and you try to engage them in dialogue. . . . This idea is a side-by-side approach."

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