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Abraham

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Q: Why did you write a book about Abraham?

A: I was actually working on another project about the Middle East when my brother called me on the morning of September 11th and told me to look outside my window. A few hours later I watched the towers fall. Like everyone else, I was mute for several weeks as we began to hear these questions: Who are they? Why do they hate us? Can the religions get along? We had been told for years that the world would soon face a clash of civilization, the Islamic world versus the Judeo-Christian world. Was this the start of that moment?

And if you listened closely to those questions, one name echoed behind all those conversations. Abraham. He is the shared ancestor of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He is the father—in many cases, the biological father—of twelve million Jews, two billion Christians, and one billion Muslims around the world. And yet, he is virtually unknown.

I wanted to know him. I wanted to figure out whether he was a hopeless fount of war or a possible vessel for reconciliation. And so, two weeks after September 11th, I got up off my couch, went back to the Middle East, and tried to answer the question: Can Abraham save the world?

Q: What is the message of Abraham's life?

A: The message of Abraham's life is that God's blessing is universally shared by all humankind. God chose Adam to pass his blessing to humans, but Adam disappointed him. God chose Noah, but Noah disappointed him as well. Finally God chose Abraham, who was so devoted to God that he left his family and set out for the Promised Land. God rewarded Abraham with two sons—Ishmael and Isaac—and both received God's blessing. Isaac became the father of Jews, and later Christians. Ishmael became the father of Muslims. All families are blessed through Abraham.

Q: If you could have witnessed one episode in Abraham's life, which one would you chose?

A: So many episodes in his life are fascinating: when he hears God for the first time, when he later argues with God over Sodom and Gomorrah. But I guess I would like to have witnessed what happened on that mountaintop when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. What did he actually say to his son? Would he have done it? And most importantly of all, which son was it? Jews and Christians believe it was Isaac. Muslims believe it was Ishmael. The answer might help us find common ground.

Q: You have a scene late in your book with a Muslim cleric that seems reminiscent of Danny Pearl. Were you scared?

A: I was invited deep into Palestinian East Jerusalem to meet a Muslim cleric. I piled into a car of someone I barely knew and we drove a very circuitous route. The man was very elegantly dressed and very articulate. For a while we talked calmly about Abraham, but then he started to be harshly critical of non-Muslims and even invoke Hitler. Finally he told me I should die for not believing in Islam. I tried to stay calm and think how I might get home. In this, like the trip I took in Hebron—one of the bloodiest cities in the country—I was scared, but determined. I don't think of myself as a reckless person, but I do get consumed by my projects. In the end, I feel it's my calling, if you will, and that steels my resolve.

Q: Did you ever feel endangered during your travels?

A: Clearly the most dangerous thing I did was travel to Hebron to Abraham's burial place. Hundreds of people are killed in Hebron every year; someone had been killed just the day before. I had decided not to go before I went to Israel—and even assured my Mom, who cried the night before I left. But there seemed to be this window of peace. The main reason I wanted to go was that the story of Abraham's burial contains a powerful glimmer of reconciliation, when Isaac and Ishmael come together after decades of estrangement. I didn't want to be Polyanna-ish about the prospects for peace; I wanted to see if I believed in such glimmers even in the bloodiest place in the conflict. And I did.

Q: Who was the most interesting person you met in the course of your research?

A: Without a doubt the imam of El-Aksa Mosque, the third holiest mosque in Islam. I went to see him in the Old City. He was nervous. He wouldn't sit next to me. He refused to put down his briefcase. It was his first-ever interview with a Western reporter. We talked about Abraham and he was somewhat stiff, until I asked him about the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage that all Muslims are called on to make. He had made it five times. And the Hajj is ceremony built entirely around Abraham. The central shrine was built by Abraham. Many of the rituals echo his life. Even the idea was his, according to the Koran. The imam described how close he felt to Abraham at that time. But still, Abraham need not be a dividing force, he said. If we just look past the details that differ among the religions, he said, and focus on the principles. Abraham can unite us all. I wanted to embrace him, but stopped short. His comments were embrace in themselves.

Q: How did this experience compare with *Walking the Bible*?

A: *Walking the Bible* was about my trying to get closer to the Bible by retracing the Five Books of Moses through the desert. It was largely a journey of place—three continents, five countries, four war zones. *Abraham* is more a journey of time. Since my objective this time was to draw closer to Abraham, I quickly realized that I had to understand the Abraham of Genesis, the Abraham of the Gospels, and the Abraham of the Koran—and how the universal figure of Abraham changed over time. In the end I realized that Abraham, like the Bible, continues to live and have profound relevance for our lives today.

Q: What message do you hope people will take away from *Abraham*?

A: Abraham embodies the fundamental human yearning to be descended from a sacred source. At every turning point in history, and in every generation, people have turned to Abraham in times of crisis to help guide the way. And we can, too. We can tap into his vast history and draw out a figure for our times. So the message I would like people to take away from this book is that Abraham can be a source of hope and unity in a fractured world. He can play such a role because he is the most prominent figure that Jews, Christians, and Muslims hold in common—the father of all.

Q: In the wake of September 11, can the religions get along?

A: I believe that September 11 will come to be seen as a defining hour in the history of world religion. It is the moment when the nascent Interfaith Movement faces its biggest challenge and#8212if it succeeds#8212will have come of age. Though the weapons of hatred are stronger than even among the people who want to divide the religions, the forces of unity are also greater. The Pope made a historic trip to Israel in 2000 and placed a prayer to Abraham in the Western Wall and asked for forgiveness for the Church's sins against Jews. Acts like that are not insignificant and suggest epochal change is underway.

Q: But in the last year, suicide bombers in the Middle East have called for the destruction of Jews and some evangelical Christian leaders in the United States have called for the destruction of Muslims. Are you being naive?

A: I don't think so. Not everyone has signed off on the values of the interfaith movement. The people I spoke to suggest the percentage of believers who agree that the religions can coexist and need not try to extinguish one another probably totals around two-thirds of Jews, fifty percent of Christians, and one third of Muslims. But that's remarkable progress in just a few decades. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all agree that they are descended from Abraham, for example, and the lesson of Abraham is that God used him to extend his blessing to all humankind.

Q: How did this experience affect your faith?

A: This experience strengthened my faith by making it much more personal. It deepened my appreciation and awe for the stories of the Bible and made me feel less dependent on biblical commentators and even religious institutions. I learned that even deeply believing people over time spread hatred in the name of Abraham. But the oldest and most long-lasting stories of Abraham actually contain the message that God's blessing is universal. At this hour in world history, that message is both highly political and deeply personal#8212and fills me with joy, hope, and determination.