

The Generation of the Candles

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A week ago Tuesday we had a presentation at our Lunch and Learn about a unique program in Israel that brings together 14 to 17-year-old Israeli Jews and Palestinians to study computer science and entrepreneurship. Presenting on behalf of the Jewish half of the equation was a young man who described himself as part of “the generation of the candles.” I needed a moment to figure out what he was referring to.

You might remember that after Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin was assassinated in 1995, at a peace rally in Tel Aviv, many Israelis, especially young people, came to the spot where Rabin had been shot—to light candles. The pictures of that scene were incredibly moving portraits of young people placing candles, crying, and singing. Etai, our speaker, was one of those kids, just a teenager at the time. As he spoke to us at Lunch and Learn, over two decades after that fateful night, he remembered that period as the last time he felt hope for peace for his region. Today Etai works with an organization that promotes working together and mutual understanding, but he has little confidence that the politicians will advance the cause of peace. Rather, he hopes to create a constituency among average citizens on both sides, a coalition of people who will be ready for peace and who will be its supporters.

For some people, this week's Torah portion, Lech Lecha, is the source of the conflict in the Middle East. It is in this portion that God promises Abraham, "Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and the south, to the east and the west, for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever." (Genesis 13:14-15) The portion seems to indicate that Abraham, who was standing at that time near Beth El, a spot from which there is a good view of the entire southern Jordan Valley, had a right to the land of Canaan.

For traditionalists and those with a more fundamentalist view of the Bible, this claim has total force, encompassing legal and moral rights. In their eyes, this claim is beyond dispute.

The promise is repeated again after the battle of the four kings against the five kings. God says to Abraham, "I am the Eternal, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land as a possession." (Genesis 15:7) Furthermore, after the ceremony of cutting a covenant, God explains, "To your offspring I give this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates." These are the largest borders of the Promised Land described in the Torah, greater even than the borders identified by the contemporary Greater Israel Movement.

While some see this text as the source of the conflict in the Middle East, for others the text provides a hint at possible reconciliation. In this week's Torah portion, Abraham, whose name was originally Avram, is given a new name by God, a name that means *av harmon goyim*, the father of many nations. Abraham

is the father of Ishmael and of Isaac, and in modern theological circles he is claimed by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Though all three religions claim Abraham, they each have a different approach to who he is. For Jews, Abraham is the father of our people, the first one to believe in one God. For Christians, what is very significant about Abraham is that he was chosen by God when he was uncircumcised. Thus, Abraham represents salvation through faith and not through the Commandments, a core view of Paul's version of Christianity. Within Islam, Abraham is important as a link in a long chain of prophets beginning with Adam and culminating in Muhammed, through whom the Koran was revealed.

In our desire for reconciliation, we sometimes ignore the differences in our understandings of Abraham, even to the point of distorting our faith traditions. But true reconciliation comes not from trying to erase differences, but from recognizing them and pursuing them to their natural conclusion.

When Rabbi Reuven Firestone was with us as our scholar in residence back in 2003, we read comparative texts about Abraham from the Torah and the Koran. We noticed that the Torah is comfortable with flawed heroes, but that the Koran is self-consciously Scripture, Holy Writ, in which all heroes are without blemish. Furthermore, Abraham, in bringing Hagar and Ishmael to Arabia, is understood in the Koran to have set the stage for Muhammed's later emergence in that exact spot.

Next Sunday morning Professor Firestone will be with us again. This time he will focus on sorting out just what are the mainstream beliefs of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and how we can distinguish mainstream beliefs from the extremes that exist today in each of the three Abrahamic faiths.

The yahrzeit for Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin is marked on the Jewish calendar on the 12 Cheshvan, this Sunday, October 21, 2018. The battles over its observance reflect the political divisions in Israeli society today. To some extent, these divisions are also a reflection of differences in the understanding of this week's Torah portion. For some, it is to be understood as the ultimate negation of alternative claims and narratives relating to this embattled land. But for others, it emphasizes our relationship with other peoples in the region, sharing a common ancestor.

This year Yitzchak Rabin's yahrzeit will have a special poignancy for me as I think of those who were teenagers back in 1995 and whose hopes for peace were dashed in such an abrupt and brutal way. As they lit candles to light the way forward, so may we with our own lives be a light that shows a path to a better and more peaceful world.