



## From Israel

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### **Children of Abraham**

One hundred and thirty Arab and Jewish children aged 9 and 10 reflected *The Image of Abraham* in a coexistence program held in Jerusalem's Bible Lands Museum during June 2003. Supported by the Abraham Fund and the Israeli Ministry of Education, the museum has hosted the program for the past five years. The goal of the project is to build friendships and to highlight similarities between Jewish and Arab cultures. It also explains differences with the aim of increasing understanding and respect for the common heritage.

Issa Jabbr, head of education for the Abu Ghosh regional council, reported that the project was more successful every year. Artwork produced by the children was placed on display by the Bible Lands Museum.

The Abraham Fund supports other projects that promote tol-

erance and co-operation between Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel. In its annual presentation in December 2002, Alan Slifka, founder and chairman of the fund, awarded \$890,000 to 50 organizations committed to coexistence.

Information on the Abraham Fund can be found on [www.abrahamfund.org](http://www.abrahamfund.org).

### **Dysfunctional family**

Arabs and Jews both look to Abraham as their forefather. Both acknowledge that he is buried in Hebron. Yet the relationship between the two is more like that between Cain and Abel than Joseph and Benjamin. The sad history of Arab-Jewish violence goes back at least to 1929 when rioting Arabs forced the survivors of the massacre to leave their homes in Hebron. Jews reestablished their presence in Hebron only in 1968.

For almost 20 years, coexistence benefited residents and visitors alike. Hebron is one of the four holy cities of Judaism, the burial place of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their wives—a place of pilgrimage for all religious Jews. However, it is also a densely populated Muslim city where a few Jews live in the midst of hundreds of thousands of people who consider them to be intruding colonizers. Muslim and Jewish worshippers at the Tomb of the Patriarchs are separated from one another. Soldiers are assigned to protect Jewish worshippers going to and from services. Some soldiers lost their lives in an ambush in November 2002. It is difficult to see how the present tragic situation can be resolved. Israel would not willingly leave Hebron again and give up access to the religious sites. The Palestinian Authority would not tolerate a Jewish pres-

ence in a future state. Abraham was noted for his kindness to his fellow human beings. It would be well for his children to be more like him.

### **From Ur of the Chaldeans**

Jews have had a continuous and important presence in what is now Iraq since the destruction of the First Temple and the exile of much of the population, including the prophet Daniel, about 2,600 years ago. Even before then, it was from Ur that Abraham responded to God's call. The Babylonian Talmud, a major collection of Jewish learning, was written there. It is estimated that more than 130,000 Jews were living in Iraq in 1947, most of them in or around Baghdad. Following the establishment of the Israeli state, persecution by the Iraqi government became so bad that Jews were forced to flee the country. Only about 40 are still there. Most came to Israel where the community has now grown to more than 250,000. Since the Iraqi war, many are remembering their first homeland and considering visiting the country of their birth.

### **Temple Mount troubles**

The Temple Mount marks the traditional site of Abraham's offering of Isaac. However, Muslims believe that it was Ishmael who

was offered, laying the foundation for controversy that continues to this day. The First and Second Temples were built on the site making it the most important place of worship in Judaism. Since it was also the setting for events in Jesus' life, it is important to Christians, too. After the Moslem conquest, the Al Aksa mosque and the Dome of the Rock were built on the mount and it became the third most holy site in Islam, after Mecca and Medina. Access by Jews to the Temple Mount was severely restricted, so the focus of their worship shifted to the western retaining wall.

After the 1948 war of independence, the Old City of Jerusalem, including the Temple Mount, was in Jordanian territory. All Jews were expelled and denied entry. In 1967 when Jerusalem was reunited, Muslims were allowed to retain control over the Temple Mount, with free access to all. Over recent years, construction work has been carried out especially in the area of Solomon's Stables in the southern section of the mount. However, since September 2000, the Wakf (Islamic Trust) has barred non-Muslims from entering the Temple Mount. This has meant an absence of archaeological supervision over any work being carried out. Fears that irreparable damage was being done to archaeological material have been confirmed by

the finding of artefacts amongst debris discarded from the construction work.

### **Weeping wall**

Moisture dripping from a 10 cm x 40 cm section of stone in the Western Wall generated much interest in July 2002. Some considered it a miracle portending the soon coming of the Messiah. Others thought the wall itself was crying in response to the thousands who have come to the Wall to pray for an end to the current violent situation. A young soldier admitted she didn't know what to make of it. Others, more sceptical, thought it was a leaky pipe. However, there was agreement that nothing like this had been seen before. The phenomenon was certainly a first for a guard at the Wall for 11 years, and an almost daily visitor for 30 years. The mystery was solved when Antiquities Authority archaeologists and a geologist examined the 'weeping' stone and found the moisture to be not water, but plant resin from the broken root of a shrub growing out of the Wall.