



إبراهيم

ABRAHAM

אַבְרָהָם

Out of One, Many

CARAVAN

ABRAHAM אברהם إبراهيم

Out of One, Many

An artistic exploration on living harmoniously, inspired by Abraham,
the common ancestor of three celebrated contemporary Middle
Eastern artists from Muslim, Christian, and Jewish traditions

About **CARAVAN**

CARAVAN is an international peacebuilding non-profit/NGO with the objective of building bridges through the arts between the creeds and cultures of the Middle East and West. CARAVAN's experience demonstrates that the arts can serve as one of the most effective mediums to enhance understanding, bring about respect, enable sharing, and deepen friendships between those of different faiths and cultures. CARAVAN's exhibitions have resulted in unprecedented gatherings of renowned Middle Eastern and Western artists using art for intercultural exchange and interreligious dialogue, garnering attention from the international press, media and art world, and attracting many thousands of visitors.

For more information on CARAVAN, see: www.oncaravan.org

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"The point is, art never stopped a war . . . that was never its function. Art cannot change events. But it can change people. It can affect people so that they are changed - they then act in a way that may affect the course of events . . . by the way they behave, the way they think."

Leonard Bernstein, 20th century composer, conductor and musician

ABRAHAM: Out of One, Many A Curator's Overview

Today's climate of increasing prejudice and stereotyping, which has resulted in the rise of tribalism, populist nationalism, anti-Semitism and continuing anti-Muslim sentiment, needs to be counteracted by creative initiatives that are based on what we all hold in common.

It is in this context that Abraham, an ancestral spiritual figure of distinct significance within the three primary monotheistic faith traditions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, all "children of Abraham," has much to teach us. Within each of the sacred scriptures of these three religions that originated in the Middle East - the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Holy Qur'an - the figure of Abraham is seen as a model of welcoming the "stranger" and embracing the "other."

This timely artistic exhibition, titled "ABRAHAM: Out of One, Many" (playing off of the Latin motto "E pluribus unum" / "Out of many, one"), focuses on what we can learn from Abraham's life about living together harmoniously. For this exhibition, three celebrated Middle Eastern contemporary visual artists from the faith traditions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism (Sinan Hussein, Qais Al Sindy and Shai Azoulay) were invited to artistically interpret five important lessons from Abraham's life, that can serve as a guide toward creating cultures of peace, harmony, justice and healing – all as descendants of a shared heritage.

What can Abraham teach us today toward freeing our world from sectarian strife? That is the question this strategic exhibition attempts to answer. Our hope is that this exhibition will serve as a common starting point on which to build societies that inherently respect and honor cultural and religious diversity, and that work together to jointly enhance their communities.

Paul-Gordon Chandler (Rev. Canon)
Curator, "ABRAHAM: Out of One, Many"
Founding President, CARAVAN



Abraham: An Introduction

Visiting the Cave of the Patriarchs in the heart of the old city of Hebron, known as the burial place of Abraham, is a profoundly moving experience. It has been a pilgrimage site for Judaism, Christianity and Islam for centuries. First, a Jewish sacred site, and then a Christian one, in the 7th century it came under Muslim control until the 12th century, when a church was made out of it. It was retaken and converted back into a mosque 150 years later, and two minarets were added onto it. Today it serves all three religious traditions as a historic symbol of unity. However, as the site is entered through separate doors according to the visitor's faith tradition, it reminds us at the same time of the sectarian strife that continues to exist in our world.

Abraham/Ibrahim/Avraham, whose name means "father of many," is the most jointly beloved figure by Jews, Christians, Muslims and Druze, who all see themselves as proud descendants of this wandering Aramaean – as "children of Abraham." Jews identify Abraham as their founding father, Christians trace the lineage of Jesus Christ back to him, and Muslims revere him as a friend of God, a father of the prophets, and an ancestor of the Prophet Mohammed.

At a time when the building of bridges has become all the more essential, Abraham's legacy comes to our rescue. This wanderer's life provides us with a roadmap as to a way out of today's atmosphere of discord, on a journey toward peace and harmony. It has been thousands of years since Abraham walked this earth, and although details on his life may vary among us, we are his descendants, as numerous as the stars. Out of one we have become many, and it is we who are called to carry his legacy forward.

Who was Abraham? About 4,000 years ago Abraham appeared on the scene. The setting was ancient Mesopotamia, in current day Iraq. According to the biblical book of Genesis, Abraham's father Terah, a descendent of wandering Semitic tribes, moved his three sons and their families north, from the ancient imperial capital of Sumer, Ur, to Harran, another city-state along the Euphrates River, closer to modern day Syria.

Ur, in southern Mesopotamia had been a capital city, situated about halfway between the Persian Gulf and the modern-day city of Baghdad. It boasted an acropolis and a stepped pyramid, or a

ziggurat, with an altar on top. Harran, in northern Mesopotamia was on the trade route from ancient Babylonia about halfway between Nineveh and Damascus. It was a sister city to Ur, also urban in feel, and both cities were devoted to worship of the Moon. It would not have been unusual to see amulets and portable statues of numerous “gods” for sale in their marketplaces; some revered at that time for good luck, some to ward off evil, help with fertility, and for a myriad of other purposes.

There was also a belief at the time that people had their own guardian spirit, an angel or an ancestor, to guide them safely through life. So, when Abraham (called Abram at the time) first hears the voice of God calling him to leave his country and his people and his father’s household in Harran and “go to the land I will show you,” he may have been all the more open to it because of his religious culture. Yet in time, his experience made it clear to him that this was no ordinary god among many, but the One and Only, Creator of the Universe.

From Harran, Abraham ventures forth with his wife Sarah (known as Sarai at the time), his nephew Lot and a caravan of livestock and servants. He ends up in Canaan (southern Levant) until famine strikes and he journeys to Egypt for food. This is when the more familiar stories of his life unfold; the heroic rescue of his nephew Lot, the birth of Ishmael through Hagar, the welcoming of the angelic strangers in the desert with promise of the miraculous birth of Isaac through Sarah, his compassionate pleading with God to spare innocent lives in Sodom and Gomorrah, his willingness to sacrifice his son and then God’s provision of a ram to spare his son’s life.

In time, the sacred scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all refer to Abraham as one who was blessed by God to be a blessing to others. Abraham’s story is not just one of leaving his geographic homeland and journeying to a foreign place. Rather he also left behind a narrow-minded and parochial worldview, becoming one who generously welcomed “the stranger.” In so doing, Abraham mirrors for us God’s universal embrace for all humanity. The principles for which Abraham stood – compassion, sacrificial love, embracing the “other” - still speak to the needs of our contemporary context thousands of years later. It is in this way, that the extraordinary promise from God to Abraham, “that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him,” comes true.

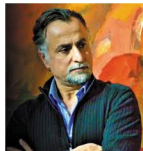
Paul-Gordon Chandler (Rev. Canon)
Founding President, CARAVAN

The Artists



SINAN HUSSEIN

Born in 1977, Sinan Hussein's artistic legacy extends from the vision of his Mesopotamian ancestors and its vast civilization and splendorous history to the challenging present. The silent discourse, the gaze of his figures and the unusual objects in his paintings are a living metaphor from the past. At the age of 14 Sinan practiced art by sketching portraits of his friends and family. His artist and musician father recognized his talent and encouraged him to continue his art journey, first with several years of self-study, observing the classic, modern and contemporary artists. Sinan then obtained his BFA at the University of Fine Arts in Baghdad. Soon after graduation, in 2004, he left Baghdad because of the war and the sectarian violence that almost ended his life three times. He found refuge in Kuwait and eventually in the United States. The nostalgia of Sinan's homeland and search for a new home have enriched and shaped his paintings. He has participated in many highly acclaimed solo and group exhibitions in the Middle East, Europe and the United States. His artwork is collected by Middle Eastern and Arab royalty, governments and private collectors around the world. He is a member of the Iraqi Fine Arts Artist Society and The Union of Iraqi Artists. Sinan is from a Muslim background.



QAIS AL SINDY

Qais Al Sindy was born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1967 and has a BSc degree in Engineering (1989) as well as a BFA (2000) and an MFA (2004) from the Academy of Fine Arts at Baghdad University. In Amman, Jordan, where he lived for four years, Qais taught "Art in Architectural Engineering" at the University of Applied Science. Beginning with his first major exhibition titled "Letters Don't Burn," which was about the burning of the Iraqi library, he has exhibited around the world on themes related to humanity, culture and civilization, winning numerous distinguished awards. Qais is of Chaldean Christian heritage and now lives in San Diego, California.



SHAI AZOULAY

Shai Azoulay studied at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, where he received both his BFA and MFA. In his paintings, Shai creates a narrative abundant with figures and scenes that radiate human warmth, compassion and slight irony. His work ranges between drawing and painting, between the sophisticated and the naïve, and between the omnipotent to the limited. As such, the work addresses the two conflicting worlds found in the mind of the contemporary painter – the classic, iconic, romantic and spiritual world, on one side, and the modern, moonstruck and saturated world on the other. Azoulay has held numerous solo exhibitions and has exhibited in the Tel Aviv Museum, Frieze Art Fair, and around the world, from Tokyo to Rome, Paris and New York. He is the recipient of the "Morasha" Award from the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and The Moses Prize from the Jerusalem Artist House. His works are in renowned collections around the world. Shai is from the Jewish faith tradition.

For Reflection

Blessed are those . . . who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.
(*Psalm 84:5*)

We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are. (*Talmud*)

I live my life in widening circles. (*Ranier Maria Rilke*)

I am not from Africa, nor from Europe, nor from Arabia. . . but I come from no country, from no city, no tribe. I am the son of the road, my country is the caravan, my life the most unexpected of voyages.
(*Hasan al-Wazzan in "Leo Africanus" by Amin Maalouf*)

Pilgrimage to the place of the wise, is to find escape from the flame of separateness. (*Jalal al-Din Rumi*)

Prayer:

May it be Your will, G-d, our G-d and the G-d of our fathers, that You should lead us in peace and direct our steps in peace, and guide us in peace, and support us in peace, and cause us to reach our destination in life. (*From a Jewish prayer for travelers*)

Let us labor night and day to make good a pilgrim's constancy, come wind, come weather. By thine aid and goodness, hear our prayer.
(*Adapted from John Bunyan: The Pilgrim Song*)

Living as a Pilgrim

Abraham lived a life of pilgrimage, leaving his homeland and journeying throughout the Middle East for the rest of his life. So often our faiths and cultures teach us that we “arrive,” thereby putting borders around beliefs and worldviews.

A pilgrim is someone on the move, journeying, always exploring and discovering. Having a “pilgrim’s mindset” requires meeting new people and learning from others who are different from ourselves. Living as a pilgrim requires an attitude of openness to receiving from the “other.”



Sinan Hussein

Living as a Pilgrim, 2019

Mixed media on canvas

45 x 60cm

This painting all takes place in the imagination. In this painting I show Abraham and Sarah thinking about their life of continual journeying, which leads them as far away as Egypt, highlighted by the pyramids in the upper left. Abraham is known as the first monotheist and in the background, idols are being destroyed. The words coming out of his mouth are in Arabic, jumbled, but invoking a prayer about God and the first prophet, Abraham.

I have painted the symbol of pilgrimage in Islam, the black box shaped Kaaba in Mecca, upon Abraham's head, and Abraham is thinking about the concept of pilgrimage. The blue glove he is holding represents positive energy, just as the Islamic folk symbols of Fatima's Hand or the Evil Eye, which are signs of protection and the desire for goodness in life, are traditionally depicted with blue.

Together Abraham and Sarah are thinking about so many things, both the joys and hardships of life's journey. Sarah is specifically thinking about not being able to have a child. The touch of their hands represents an intimate gesture; they have contact, but no child, signified by the wearing of gloves. The glass box around Sarah's head is representative of her imagination and of all that she is processing and thinking about: God, the journey they are on, her maidservant Hagar, her deep longing for a child. In her arms she is holding the soul of a child, the child she is longing for, which is in the color yellow, representing God's breath or God's presence.



Qais Al Sindy

Living as a Pilgrim, 2019

Oil and collage on canvas

60 x 45cm

I left my land, my land did not leave me

Abraham begins his pilgrimage from Ur of the Chaldees, which is now called Nasiriyah in the Dhi Qar governorate of southern Iraq. This is where the Great Ziggurat of Ur was built by Ur-Nammu, the Sumerian king. As he traveled throughout foreign lands, he lived harmoniously among their peoples.

I painted Abraham carrying a sheep on his shoulders, because I see him as a shepherd leading his people to the land God promised him and his offspring. In Iraq, I bought an old Nasiriyah shepherd's cloak made of sheep's wool, cut it into pieces and pasted some of them on these canvases to give shape to Abraham's clothes. I wanted to bring the spirit and soul of this great prophet through the material of his native land.

I also depict the Ziggurat as a burden on his shoulders because he carries his land with him in his heart as he journeys. The white pyramid on his left is a foreshadowing of his journey into Egypt and of what will happen to his offspring.



Shai Azoulay

Living as a Pilgrim, 2019

Oil on canvas

45 x 60cm

I had Caspar David Friedrich's famous painting of the Romantic period, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, in mind while creating this work. Abraham, standing high on a hill, is looking out at the land through which he will be journeying. So much seems to be like a mirage, where there is promise, but the vision is foggy; not everything is clear. The only way forward is to simply believe, a concept that cannot exist only in the mind, but beyond it. As a pilgrim, Abraham has to journey out in faith, forging ahead, knowing that he will need others along the way.

For Reflection

Hospitality is one form of worship. (*Jewish proverb*)

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. (*Henri Nouwen*)

People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. (*Maya Angelou*)

There are no strangers here; only friends you haven't yet met.
(*William Butler Yeats*)

Your neighbor is your other self dwelling behind a wall.
In understanding, all walls shall fall down. (*Kahlil Gibran*)

For it is often the way we look at other people that imprisons them within their own narrowest allegiances. And it is also the way we look at them that may set them free. (*Amin Maalouf*)

Just as a circle embraces all that is within it, so does the Divine embrace all. No one has the power to divide this circle, to surpass it, or to limit it. (*Hildegard von Bingen*)

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival.
Welcome and entertain them all! . . . treat each guest honorably. . .
because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.
(*Jalal al-Din Rumi*)

Every good act is charity; and verily it is a good act to meet your brother with an open countenance, and to pour water from your own water-bag into his vessel. (*Hadith*)

Prayer:

Lord of the world . . . subdue us to courtesy, guide us to unity, school us to gratitude . . . Let thy peace rule, in the great and in the small.
Give us peace with thee, Peace with men, peace with ourselves, And free us from all fear. (*Dag Hammarskjöld*)

Welcoming the Stranger

Abraham is known for his generous hospitality throughout his life. One well-known story passed down through the ages recounts how Abraham, when camped at “the great trees of Mamre,” selflessly provides food, shelter and comfort to three unknown travelers in his humble tent. This example of welcoming the “stranger” and of hospitality is one we can all embody, for as an ancient Middle Eastern proverb says, “The guest is a guest of God.”



Sinan Hussein

Welcoming the Stranger, 2019

Mixed media on canvas

45 x 60cm

My paintings frequently blend the contemporary with the historical. In this painting, Abraham and Sarah are welcoming Ishmael into their lives. Outside of Islam, Ishmael is very often viewed as secondary in importance, and therefore not always universally accepted. So, in this painting he is representative of “the other.” God is sending down a blessing upon Ishmael’s head. The sky is full of celebration. The figures are celebrating, representing angels and souls, flying souls, and as they are not human, they can take on different forms and change shapes. The cone is a symbol I often use to represent a very personal or sacred moment. As when cones are set up to block off something, preventing public access, so here it is symbolic of an inner experience, a deeper dimension. I use the green glove here to portray an extremely positive moment, as it is a sacred color in Islam. Welcoming the stranger, “the other,” is to be embraced and celebrated.



Qais Al Sindy

Welcoming the Stranger, 2019

Oil and collage on canvas

60 x 45cm

Three in one

As human beings, we are all visitors in the lives of others. We visit them and then we disappear. On this canvas, I depict three people, each from a different faith, visiting an Arabian sheikh. The three small cups represent equally generous hospitality. Abraham, according to the Holy Scriptures, displayed great generosity to his visitors. One of these visitors told him that upon his return to them next year, his wife Sarah would have a son. In this work, I focus on the three visitors, rather than on Abraham the host, in an attempt to say: we are the hosts.



Shai Azoulay

Welcoming the Stranger, 2019

Oil on canvas

45 x 60cm

I have painted three scenes in one work, wanting to create a dynamic sense of the encounter of Abraham's historic welcome of three strangers in the desert. I did not want to put all the emphasis on just one point of meeting, because welcoming "the stranger" is an ongoing act of embracing the other.

For Reflection

He that gives should not remember, he that receives should not forget. (*Talmud*)

To save one life is to redeem the whole world. (*Talmud*)

Love alone is the only reasonable activity or pursuit of humankind. . . . For love not only annihilates our fear of meaninglessness but empowers us to seek the happiness of others. And this indeed is our greatest happiness. (*Leo Tolstoy*)

Blessed is the one who can love all people equally...always thinking good of everyone. (*St. Maximos the Confessor*)

Are there locks upon your hearts? (*Surah of Muhammad 27*)

My heart has become capable of every form; it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks, and a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Kaaba, and the tablets of the Torah and the book of the Qur'an. I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith. (*Ibn al-Arabi*)

Prayer:

I ask of God mercy . . . For God is gracious and liberal in kindness. Peace be to you . . . whom it is my duty to aid, and the mercy and blessing of God be upon you.
(*Ibn Tufayl: Concluding prayer in "Alive, Son of Awake"*)

Sacrificial Love

Abraham demonstrated “sacrificial love” throughout his lifetime, both for God and others. This is seen time and time again, from his willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for God in the land of Moriah, to allowing others to have the best choice of land. It is impossible to love deeply without sacrifice. True friendship with the “other” requires the investment of ourselves.



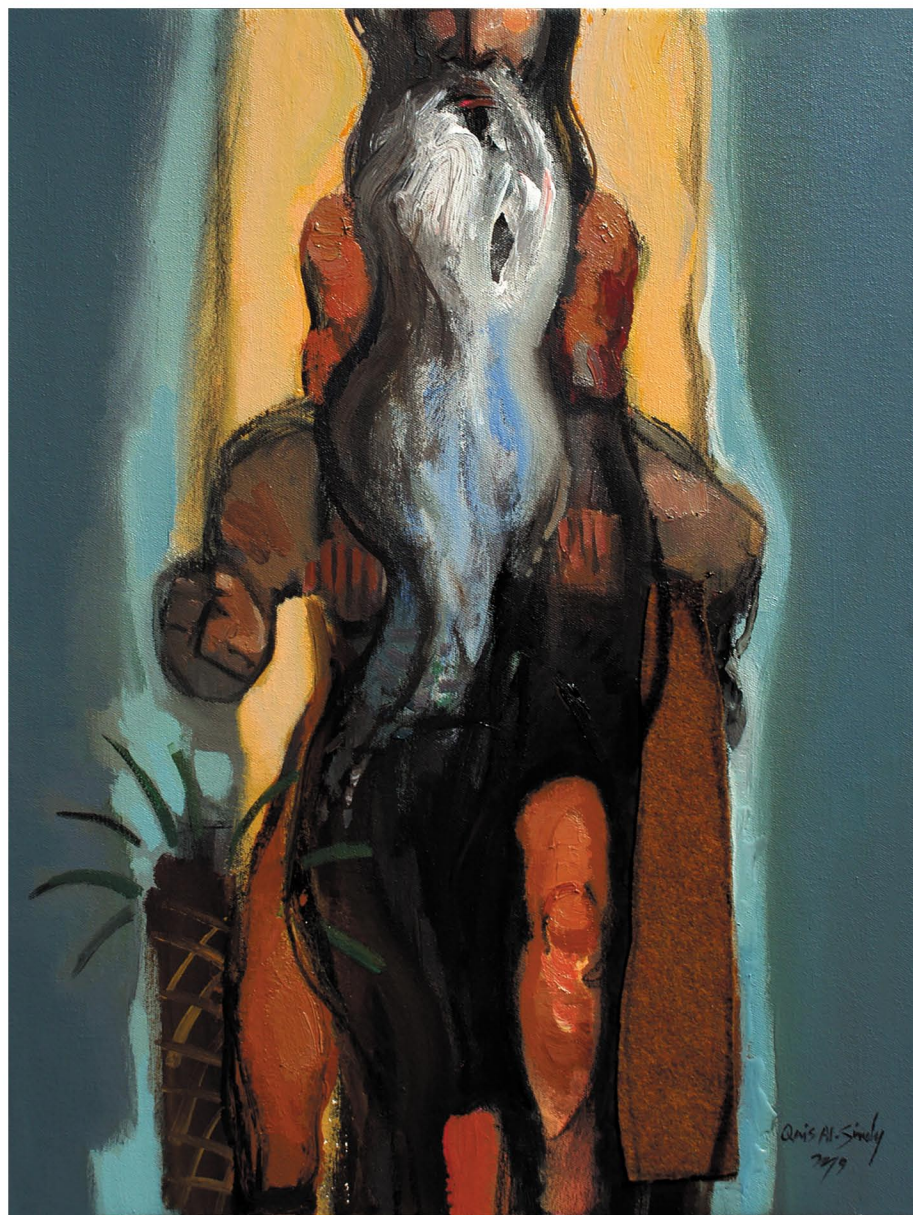
Sinan Hussein

Sacrificial Love, 2019

Mixed media on canvas

45 x 60cm

Here I have painted Abraham sacrificing his beloved son, Ishmael. In the Qur'an the story is told as a dream, not as something that actually happened. Although it does not specifically name the son, our tradition holds that is Ishmael, expressing Abraham's true sacrificial love for God in his willingness to sacrifice his son. This is a sacramental moment we commemorate every year on the same day and at the same time for the Eid al-Adha. The figure behind Abraham is wearing a sheep's mask and holding Abraham's arm to prevent him from actually killing Ishmael. The black glove is representative of evil and the red of bloodshed. Even today, whenever something evil is happening, such as a religious fundamentalist group doing evil, black is often worn. The souls in the sky are talking with Abraham and offering comfort to Ishmael, assuring him this is only a dream, an illusion. Ishmael's face is marked on the sheep and the cones represents the presence of a sacred moment, God's provision of a ram, and how sacrificial love for both the "Great Other" (Allah/God) and for "others" is what we should demonstrate in our lives.



Qais Al Sindy

Sacrificial Love, 2019

Oil and collage on canvas

60 x 45cm

He is yours

One of the main stories in the life of Abraham is the sacrifice of Isaac. God commanded Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice. As I meditated on this story, I found it difficult to capture Abraham's expression at the moment he was preparing to sacrifice his son. This is why I do not reveal his eyes in this painting. As such an extraordinary sacrifice required full obedience, Abraham was promised numerous descendants and abundant blessing. Thus, the short palm tree symbolizes that everything is small compared to sacrificial love, demonstrated by Abraham in this great act of selflessness.



Shai Azoulay

Sacrificial Love, 2019

Oil on canvas

45 x 60cm

In this work about Abraham's sacrificial love for God and others, I show the patriarch Abraham on a flying carpet observing a large circle dance whose participants illustrate the diversity of our world. Circle dancing is very much part of Jewish culture. For me the circle represents something that connects people from all backgrounds and breaks down all walls. In a circle we become one.

For Reflection

The highest form of wisdom is kindness. (*Talmud*)

Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. (*Simone Weil*)

Compassion is the keen awareness of the interdependence of all things. (*Thomas Merton*)

The more you know about another person's story, the less possible it is to see that person as your enemy. (*Parker Palmer*)

Show the greatest gentleness toward all people.
(*Evagrius the Solitary*)

Know ye not that the most precious of offerings is the relieving of sorrows, and the firmest cord of salvation is the imparting to those who have need? (*Al-Hariri*)

Be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder. Help someone's soul heal. Walk out of your house like a shepherd. (*Jalal al-Din Rumi*)

Prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring love: where there is injury, pardon: where there is doubt, faith: where there is despair, hope: where there is darkness, light: where there is sadness, joy: and all for thy mercy's sake.
(*St. Francis of Assisi*)

Compassion

Abraham exemplifies compassion for others, regardless of who they are or their actions. This is profoundly illustrated by his repeated pleading to God to spare the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.



Sinan Hussein

The Compassionate, 2019

Mixed media on canvas

45 x 60cm

Here I painted the red, the fire, and the emerging figures on the right as if they have come from Hell, representing the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah. Their faces are disfigured because evil does terrible things to a person. But not all the people in Sodom and Gomorrah were evil, and here Abraham is pleading to God to have compassion on them. God is sending a message to Abraham through a yellow bird-like form, as in Islam birds are sometimes used to send messages. The yellow of Abraham's boots is representative of his divine protection from the evil in Sodom, so that nothing unclean or evil may cling to him. After God accepts Abraham's compassionate plea for them, he will ask Abraham to take off his boots. The cone is symbolic of a sacred or hallowed moment and upon it is a herald from God. God has accepted Abraham's prayer and will take the message of compassion captured at this moment to the entire world for all time, hence we know of the story today. The grass on the left represents good, hope for a good future, full of compassion and mercy toward all.



Qais Al Sindy

The Compassionate, 2019

Oil and collage on canvas

60 x 45cm

He is my stronghold; of whom shall I be afraid?

Sodom and Gomorrah is synonymous with human depravity, and their subsequent fall was a legendary manifestation of divine vengeance. In the Book of Genesis, Abraham pleaded with God to spare the city if a certain number of righteous people were found. In this painting, Abraham's long arms are a sign of compassion and protection as he embraces three children, representing the three Abrahamic religions. With such an intrinsic and universal link among these religions, I trust there will be greater tolerance and acceptance of others.



Shai Azoulay

The Compassionate, 2019

Oil on canvas

45 x 60cm

I portray Abraham, who was a Seer, with a “thought bubble,” visualizing those suffering in Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham was known throughout his lifetime as a compassionate person, knowing that God is a God of mercy.

For Reflection

Our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty. (*Albert Einstein*)

All that we see – The heaven, the Earth, and all that fills it – all these things are the external garments of God.
(*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi*)

The problem to be faced is: how to combine loyalty to one's own tradition with reverence for different traditions.
(*Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*)

. . . now beyond your own life build the great arch of unimagined bridges. (*Rainer Maria Rilke*)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
(*Gerald Manley Hopkins*)

And if you would know God be not therefore a solver of riddles. Rather look about you and you shall see God playing with your children. And look into space; you shall see God walking in the cloud, outstretching His arms in the lightning and descending in rain. You shall see God smiling in flowers, then rising and waving His hands in trees. (*Kahlil Gibran*)

There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.
(*Jalal al-Din Rumi*)

The souls of all friends of God, are connected with one another.
(*Jalal al-Din Rumi*)

All that is in the heavens and in the earth magnifies him, the Almighty, the Wise. (*From "Surah of the Exile 23-4"*)

Prayer:

I call upon thee, O God, by the Names inscribed around thy throne. I call upon thee by the Names written upon thy Seat. I call upon thee, O God, by the Name written upon the leaves of the olive tree. I call upon thee, O God, in the mighty Names with which thou hast named thyself, those of them that I have known and those I have not known.
(*Prayer of the Sufi Naqshbandi Order*)

Friend of God

The sacred scriptures of Islam, Christianity and Judaism all refer to Abraham as a “friend of God.” Like Abraham, a true “friend of God” is someone who is a friend to all that God loves - all peoples, nature, wildlife and the environment.



Sinan Hussein

Friend of God, 2019

Mixed media on canvas

45 x 60cm

This painting is a celebration of life. All the earth, people, creatures, vegetation and animals come together for a festival around Abraham. God has sent a pink horse, a sign of celebration, for his friend Abraham to ride on in this great festival of life. Because Abraham embraces all that God has created, people throughout the whole world never stop praising his name. The earth is alive, and the face of the souls all around him are in a state of ecstatic joy. Even a cat's face has taken on the appearance of a dog, in the glorious embrace of all things. Abraham's green gloves symbolize God's endorsement and pleasure. Everything is swimming around Abraham as he blesses all on this sacred earth.



Qais Al Sindy

Friend of God, 2019

Oil and collage on canvas

60 x 45cm

One apple for all

One of the critical issues in our world today is the struggle to exist in a global economy. This struggle to thrive often weakens the universal values of love between peoples and respect for all creation. In this painting, I depict Abraham at the center of a circular table, sitting among friends of different ethnic and religious origins. This friendship leads them to share the one apple they have been given. I strongly believe that with positive dialogue and well-intentioned conversation, the iceberg that represents our differences will be melted away to open the gates of a harmonious future together.



Shai Azoulay

Friend of God, 2019

Oil on canvas

45 x 60cm

My painting is a metaphor of a famous blessing that says, “When you open your hands to all, everything you need comes to you.” Above Abraham’s hands, I have painted floating figures, like angels, symbolizing God’s blessing on those who are generous in spirit toward all.

Questions for Discussion and Dialogue

LIVING AS A PILGRIM

What do you think it means to live with a “pilgrim’s worldview”?

What does your faith tradition say about living as a pilgrim? Do creeds and dogma sometimes teach the opposite?

Can one who has no faith tradition lead a life of pilgrimage - exhibiting a “pilgrim’s outlook”?

How do you think the experience of an intentional pilgrimage to a specific destination differs from the idea of journeying and living out life with the mindset of a pilgrim?

Did one piece of art depicting Abraham’s life of pilgrimage resonate with you more than another?

WELCOMING THE STRANGER

What does the concept of showing hospitality or “welcoming the stranger” mean to you?

Did any of the art depicting Abraham “welcoming the stranger” speak to you more than another?

How does the artist Qais Al-Sindy’s use of pieces from an old Nassiriyah shepherd’s cloak contribute to your reaction to his work?

What does your faith tradition say about showing hospitality and “welcoming the stranger”?

Do you think the concept of “welcoming the stranger” varies from culture to culture?

SACRIFICIAL LOVE

How would you define sacrificial love?

What does your faith tradition say about sacrificial love?

Which piece of art depicting Abraham's sacrificial love resonated with you the most?

Do you think one's motivation for showing sacrificial love matters?

In the work "Sacrificial Love" by the artist Shai Azoulay, does reading the artist's statement change your understanding of the work?

THE COMPASSIONATE

Did one piece of art depicting Abraham's compassion toward others resonate with you more than another?

When you have experienced suffering of one type or another, what compassionate act was helpful to you?

In what situations is it easy to be compassionate? When is it difficult? Why?

Do you expect some people to be always caring and compassionate? Do you expect others not to be caring and compassionate?

What does a compassionate organization (company, school, place of worship, community) look like?

FRIEND OF GOD AND OF ALL GOD LOVES

What mood have the artists created in their paintings of "friend of God and of all God loves"?

How does the artist Sinan Hussein's use of color contribute to your reaction to his work?

Did one piece of art depicting Abraham as a "friend of God and of all

What do you think about the way this exhibition has defined “friend of God”?

Can you think of an experience related to the theme “friend of God and of all God loves” that has been inspirational to you?

GENERAL QUESTIONS

Have you had the opportunity to befriend someone of a different faith tradition than your own? If so, how did that experience affect your perspective on “the other”?

What commonalities have you discovered with people of another culture or who hold religious beliefs different from your own?

What experiences have you had, if any, where you were inspired or challenged by the faith or practice of someone from a different religious tradition?

Are there religious experiences you wish you could share with someone from another faith tradition? Are there questions you would like to ask?

Have you personally or do you know someone who has ever felt stereotyped because of religious beliefs or lack of belief?

Do you feel the media portrays your religious tradition or other traditions accurately?

In experiencing Abraham through the eyes of these artists, have you learned anything that surprised you?

Does the location or context (sacred space vs. art space) of this artwork affect its meaning?

Does this artwork affect the way you think or feel?

What surprised you about the artwork?

