



Shai Azoulay
"Friend of God"

"ABRAHAM: OUT OF ONE, MANY" STUDY GUIDE

From April 20, 2021 to May 21, 2021, Interfaith Ministries' Department of Interfaith Relations & Community Partnerships (IRCP) hosted "Abraham: Out of One, Many." We were the only Texas site to host the exhibition and were the first to launch this exhibit virtually. We had planned to host the exhibit in-person in May of 2020; however, the COVID pandemic discontinued the international journey of this traveling exhibit, and all subsequent sites either postponed or cancelled. IRCP was the first of these sites to reschedule because we went with an innovative, and highly successful, virtual model, taking advantage of today's technologies to host the showings through an interactive virtual exhibit hall.

This timely exhibition, with a title that plays off the Latin motto E pluribus unum/"Out of One, Many," focuses on what we can learn from Abraham's story about living together more harmoniously. For this exhibit, three celebrated Middle Eastern contemporary visual artists from the faith traditions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism each created five paintings that interpret Abraham's life and journey for us today, serving 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? This is the question this strategic exhibition attempts to answer.

The exhibition was founded by CARAVAN, an international peacebuilding non-profit/NGO that builds bridges through the arts between the creeds and cultures of the Middle East and West. CARAVAN exhibitions result in unprecedented gatherings of renowned Middle Eastern and Western artists using art for intercultural and interreligious exchange, and have garnered attention from the international press, media and art world, attracting thousands of visitors.

In this study guide, you will find resources so that you can use the recording of five of our events as learning opportunities. These study guides will help you use these videos as resources for dialogue in your community. The team at Interfaith Ministries hopes this study guide will make these videos useful far beyond their original recording. These guides will be of interest for:

- Faith community study groups
- Middle, high school, and college students
- Corporate employee resource groups
- Non-profits seeking continuing education opportunities
- Anyone looking to think more critically about the needs of the Greater Houston community.

All the videos are easily accessed on our YouTube page at:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/imghimgh>.

You will also find links to the specific videos embedded in each recording's study guide page.

We would love to hear from you! Please email **gphillips@imgh.org** if you use this guide; please share with us how you used it.

THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS & CONTRIBUTORS

We are grateful to all our sponsors and to our Lead Sponsors: Peace Sponsors Joanie & David Andrews. Harmony Sponsors Debbie & Floyd Kearns, Marian & Paul Cones, and Carol & Frank Gruen. Thank you as well to Rabbi Dan Gordon, Katie Floyd Wang, Rabbi David Lyon, and the Rev. Tamla Wilson for reviewing this guide and providing valuable contributions.

VIDEO 1: OPENING EVENT SPONSORED BY IMPOWER



WATCH HERE

IMpower, a program of Interfaith Ministries' Interfaith Relations and Community Partnerships Department, unites a diverse group of women in dialogue and action through community events, coffee chats, and service projects to empower themselves, the next generation, and the community. Contact ircp@imgh.org for information.

In this event, we welcome as our keynote speaker the Rt. Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler, Founding President of Caravan. As of January 2021, he is the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Wyoming. He is also an author, art curator and social entrepreneur. An authority on the Middle East and Africa and Christian-Muslim-Jewish relations, he grew up in Senegal, West Africa, and has lived and worked extensively throughout the world in leadership roles within faith-based publishing, relief & development agencies and The Episcopal/Anglican Church. He was previously the Rector of both St. John's Episcopal Church in Cairo, Egypt and of The Anglican Church of Qatar in Doha, Qatar.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Rev. Chandler states that we must build our relationships with each other "on the dark side of the moon," where it isn't easy to recognize what we have in common. In a society that emphasizes "otherness," how can our faith communities create more space for interactions that are centered on our "likeness?"
2. Rev. Chandler quotes Leonard Bernstein, "Art never stopped a war. Art cannot change events, but it can change people." How have you been changed by art or an artistic practice? How has a community that you have been a part of been changed by art or an artistic practice?
3. With which theme and/or trio of paintings do you feel the strongest connection? Why do you think this is so?
4. Rev. Chandler explains that his own pilgrimage includes living and experiencing other cultures. What does the word "pilgrimage" mean to you? Even if you cannot travel around the world, how can you find ways to develop an appreciation and understanding of other cultures?
5. The shared artistic themes of this exhibit produce different styles of art. Some styles were simple; others are more complicated in the use of image and symbol. To you, what parts of our spiritual connections are simple, and which ones are complicated?
6. After viewing the paintings and hearing the descriptions, how might you envision other art forms – music, dance, theater, puppetry, poetry, etc. – fitting in to these themes?

WATCH HERE:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zBMM_pDkio

Enjoy more of IMpower's programming and watch IMpowered Voices: A Unity Concert

www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6iRTIJlIkW

VIDEO 2: MULTI-FAITH COUNCIL EVENT: “ABRAHAM AND THE ART OF SHARED ANCESTRY”



WATCH HERE

The Multi-Faith Council (MFC) is a membership organization comprised of a network of allied communities of faith that sustains and expands IM’s Interfaith Relations & Community Partnership’s (IRCP) efforts to engage faith leaders in dialogue, collaboration, and respect, including feeding hungry seniors, resettling refugees, and promoting understanding.

The Council is made up of members who want...

- To be bridge-builders by building respect and understanding across religious traditions.
- To support the work of IM’s Interfaith Relations and Community Partnerships Department by attending events and informing other people about our programs.
- To be a resource when we seek support to respond to community emergencies.

Learn more at <https://www.imgh.org/ircp/multi-faith-council/>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When speaking about Qais Al-Sindy’s piece, Rev. Yang says, “The artist does not pull back from the tension of the story... that invites us to reflect on why this story troubles us... that creates something and unsettles us, and that movement can push us toward action.” Are there tensions in your life and/or community from which you are pulling away? What opportunities might there be to lean into, reflect on, and act on those tensions?
2. Have you ever had a spiritual experience while interfacing with “secular” art? What contributed to the breakdown of the wall between the “religious” and “secular” in that moment that made your experience move into a spiritual one?
3. Rabbi Safran notes that Shai Azoulay’s piece depicts Abraham as facilitating unity and healing for others after he has experienced trauma and pain. In what ways might members of our faith communities foster unity, peace, and healing in the wake of the pandemic and the immense hardship it has brought?
4. Dr. Azimuddin notes in Sinan Hussein’s piece the “sacrifice for the great other,” which is both God and also for one another. In what ways can we give of ourselves for one another to create a more harmonious society?
5. Each of the three Abrahamic faiths has interpretations of sacred stories that are different than the other faiths. How do the religious perspectives of our own faith, the faith that we practice or grew up with, inform our perceptions and judgments of others?
6. In observing artistic representations of Biblical stories, characters like Abraham may be depicted with human characteristics and emotions that may not have been apparent in the original text. How might these emotions, depicted in art, help us relate to dramatic and traumatic events in our own lives? How can trauma lead to healing?
7. In what ways can those without a specific connection to organized religion relate to traditional sacred narratives?

WATCH HERE:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-3tgyCJVL0>

VIDEO 3: ARTIST EVENT

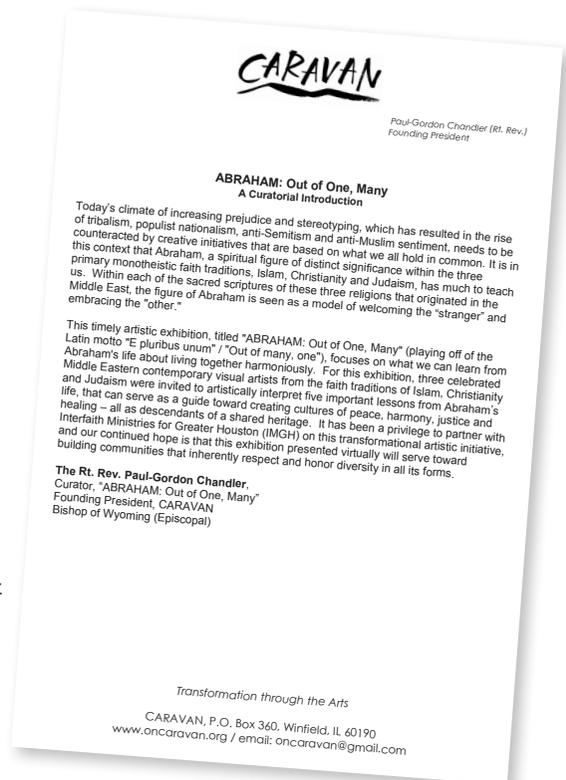


WATCH HERE

Our Artist Event was one of the highlights of hosting the exhibit. It was perhaps, even in a virtual way, the first time that all three artists were “together” in the same place! This hour-long conversation involved five people from three time zones and two continents. You can learn more about Caravan at <https://www.oncaravan.org/> and about the exhibit and its artists at <https://www.oncaravan.org/abraham>.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Shai Azoulay describes how he prepares to enter the “creative zone.” He goes to sleep early, wakes early, experiences nature, prays. What practices or rhythms lead you into your own creative space?
2. Shai Azoulay notes that he sees connections across the three artists’ work in their brush strokes and use of color. He sees their art as remarkably middle eastern. What aesthetic and thematic similarities did you detect across the three artists’ pieces? How does this contribute to your understanding of these distinct but connected faiths?
3. Qais Al-Sindy describes his co-exhibitors as painting visions and dreams. What role can art play as we envision a more just, peaceful, and unified world? How can art be incorporated into important dialogues and processes related to policymaking, the allocation of resources, the provision of critical services, etc.?
4. Sinan Hussein’s paintings bring in a variety of symbols that converge together. How might this help us find unity in diverse viewpoints that reflect potentially conflicting priorities?
5. What does the circle mean in various traditions? How can the circle dance in Shai Azoulay’s painting help bring unity to diverse cultures?
6. Qais Al-Sindy spoke about conflict, saying, “Instead of throwing stones, let’s use those same stones to build bridges.” How does art help build metaphorical bridges?



WATCH HERE:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8N3HJbELDVU>

VIDEO 4: DINNER DIALOGUE: “ABRAHAM IN CONVERSATION”



WATCH HERE

Started in 2007, our Dinner Dialogue program is one of IRCP’s longest running initiatives and has taken many forms and covered many topics since its inception. Even in a virtual format, our Dinner Dialogue allowed time for both compelling presentations as well as virtual small group conversation. The title of this Dialogue, “Abraham in Conversation,” highlights IMGH’s commitment to dialogue across all religions. Recognizing the Jewish/Christian/Muslim focus of the exhibit, this Dialogue brought the Buddhist and Hindu artistic traditions into the conversation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Both of the guest presenters highlight the importance of material objects (e.g., sculptures, figurines, and even jewelry) in the way we understand our faith. How do your material surroundings and possessions inform and/or reflect your spiritual experience?
2. What aspects of the guests’ presentations piqued your interest? What do you want to know more about?
3. Where and how does art (visual, auditory, kinetic) inform, deepen, and transform the practice of your faith?
4. Hindu art depicts gods with male and female characteristics in the same deity. In what ways might this duality of divine representation help us learn to understand those with differing viewpoints as well as help us understand potentially conflicting views within ourselves?
5. Bishop Myokei Caine-Barrett told a story from Buddhist tradition about a demon becoming a protector after receiving teaching from the Buddha. She commented about the story, “It reminds me daily that I don’t have to change in order to become awakened.” How can a story like this help us in our personal judgments of others and of ourselves?
6. Bishop Caine-Barrett also quoted, “It’s more important for 1000 people to take one step than for one person to take a thousand steps, as we will cover more ground when we walk together.” What is one step to take to help transform yourself that might help transform the world?
7. How does viewing art from other traditions help influence our own sense of spiritual connection?

WATCH HERE:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5rzq4Bscnl>

VIDEO 5: THE GERSHENSON LECTURE: “ABRAHAM AND BEYOND: THE FUTURE OF INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT”



WATCH HERE

The Third Annual Gershenson Lecture honors Elliot Gershenson. Elliot was the President & CEO of Interfaith Ministries from 2004-2015 and was honored at his retirement with the title of President Emeritus. The Gershenson Lecture focuses on topics of religion, ethics and peace. This year’s Gershenson Lecture was given by the Rev. Gregory Han, IM’s Director of Interfaith Relations & Education. Offering commentary were two nationally recognized scholars, Rabbi Dr. Rachel S. Mikva, Herman E. Schaalman Professor in Jewish Studies, Senior Faculty Fellow, InterReligious Institute and Hussein Rashid, PhD, an Independent Scholar based in New York City.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Rev. Han says, “In the title ‘Abraham & Beyond’ the ‘beyond’ is a call and a plea to expand our understandings of religions far beyond where we are now.” What do you know about religions and the role of religion, and do you think your knowledge could be enhanced? If so, where would you begin?
2. Rev. Han took some time to reflect on his background about occupying multiple spaces. What “spaces” do you occupy in your life?
3. “‘Interfaith’ is an encounter that happens when we meet each other at the borders, and then find ways to invite each other across those lines and create new space for understanding and for solving problems with fresh eyes and new voices.” The lecturer and the respondents noted that this work relies on community. Dr. Mikva reflected on being “informed and co-formed” by our engagement with each other. Both Dr. Mikva and Dr. Rashid noted that it is in engaging in our differences that we learn more about each other. What communities do you rely on for your dialogue? What other communities do you need to learn more about, and learn from?
4. Dr. Mikva thinks about interreligious work in “waves.” Rev. Han also noted this idea in his claim that we need a new “language” to discuss our next evolution of interreligious engagement. Dr. Rashid noted that the “Abrahamic” language we use has unintended inadequacies. What do you think needs to happen in the next, say, 20 years, for interreligious dialogue to address our changing world?
5. Along with the previous question: all three speakers spent a great deal of time on “language,” on how we talk about our religions. Dr. Mikva introduced terms such as “lifestance” as well as refining what we mean by the sacred/secular dichotomy. How does our language about religion hinder our interreligious engagement? What needs to change in how to talk about our religious experience to move into the next era of religious engagement?
6. Dr. Rashid noted that there is a difference between becoming more inclusive and less exclusive, and that he wants to become “more” of something. Reflect on if there is a difference between becoming “more” of something vs. “less” of something else, and what is important in this difference.
7. “Religious ideas don’t get a ‘pass.’” What portions of your own religious ideas need a critical eye?

WATCH HERE:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=towssbtWTRY>

OUR MISSION

Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston (IM) brings people of diverse faith traditions together for dialogue, collaboration, and service, as a demonstration of our shared beliefs.

OUR VISION

IM envisions a community working and acting together in response to the needs of a Greater Houston to create a more respectful, connected, and caring society.

CONTACT US

For more information about the educational programs and services we provide to support a greater understanding of our diverse community please contact the Department of Interfaith Relations and Community Partnerships at Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston.

Please visit imgh.org/donate/interfaith to support the work of Interfaith Relations & Community Partnerships.



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For more information, contact **Gevetta Phillips** at gphillips@imgh.org or
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