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Speaking of Faith®
with Krista Tippett

Children of Abraham

TRANSCRIPT

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KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: I'm Krista Tippett. Today, "Children of Abraham." Abraham is the common patriarch of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. His story spans dramatic territory of the modern world, both physical and spiritual. It begins in what is now southern Iraq and ends in the West Bank city of Hebron. My guest, Bruce Feiler, went in search of Abraham to understand the crises and possibilities of the 21st-century world.

MR. BRUCE FEILER: God chooses Abraham in Genesis 12, and Abraham chooses God. And then each of the religions over time has chosen to link itself back to Abraham because he's so closely associated with God. In a sense, you can't get to God without understanding Abraham.

MS. TIPPETT: This is *Speaking of Faith*.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: Bruce Feiler was a secular journalist who rediscovered the stories of the Bible almost by accident. This mirrors a journey he believes Western culture has been on as a whole in recent years. The conflict between Muslims, Christians, and Jews, he says, is a family feud. This hour we explore the legacy of Abraham, the common ancestor of them all. This story, Feiler says, illuminates God and politics, sacred geography, and modern spirituality.

From American Public Media, this is *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. Today, "Children of Abraham." In what would have been somewhere between 2100 and 1500 B.C.E., the Hebrew Bible reports that Abram was born in Ur of the Chaldeans, southeast of present-day Baghdad. He settled in a desert outpost in modern-day Turkey and there, when Abram was 75 years old, God spoke to him and he responded. He turned his back on the idol worship of his ancestors. He became the original iconic monotheist. He worshipped one God.

READER: "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.'"

Genesis 12.

MS. TIPPETT: Abram and his wife Sarai traveled through lands that marked the contemporary political landscape: modern-day Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and finally what we now know as the West Bank. But Sarai was barren. The Hebrew Bible recounts that when Abram was 99 and Sarai 90, God told them they would have a child. He renamed Abram "Abraham," a word that in Hebrew suggests the father of a throng of nations. Sarai became Sarah. The name of their first-born son, Isaac, means, in the Hebrew, "he laughs," for Sarah laughed and imagined herself the object of laughter when God promised her a child in old age. Isaac would become the father of Jacob, who would become Israel.

But Abraham had another earlier son, Ishmael, born to an Egyptian slave woman, Hagar. The world's 1.2 billion Muslims revere Ishmael as their original ancestor and their line of direct descent from Abraham. And when Christianity grew from Jewish roots, one of the core messages of the early apostles was that Gentiles too could become children of Abraham.

My guest this hour, the journalist Bruce Feiler, grew up with little interest in the Bible or religion in general. That changed for him in the summer of 1997 when he visited a friend living in Jerusalem.

MR. FEILER: It wasn't really a spiritual quest, as odd as that might seem today. I actually think it's sort of a mark of my lack of spirituality that I've been to 60 countries to this point, sprained my ankle on four continents, and never been to the Middle East. And I went to visit my friend, and on the first day we went to

this promenade overlooking the city and my friend said, 'Over there is Har Homa, the controversial neighborhood, and over there is the rock where Abraham sacrificed Isaac.' These are real places you can touch and visit and feel? And this crazy way I live my life, I thought, 'Well, here's an idea: What if I enter the Bible as if it were one of these worlds and seek to become a part of it?'

MS. TIPPETT: So Bruce Feiler wrote a book called *Walking the Bible*, which became a *New York Times* best seller. His 2002 book, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, became a national sensation. Before he researched and wrote that book, Feiler's sense of Abraham came from the Torah portion he read aloud at 13 at his bar mitzvah, the passage where God calls Abraham to go forth from the home of his youth.

MR. FEILER: I always knew that this was the passage that I had read. I was fortunate that it's this epic moment in the history of the world when God chooses Abraham and Abraham chooses God. I also understood, in my own identity, that one of the reasons that I could travel to all these places and live abroad for most of my 20s and write these books about, you know, all these different places around the world was that I came from a place, right, so that I felt attached to something. It's been my observation that people who wander feel attached, and that people who want to settle down sort of felt dislocated when they were young, in many cases.

So I feel like that I understood, but I didn't really put the whole thing together. And in some ways I feel that these questions, why I did *Walking the Bible*, why I went searching for Abraham, I find myself going back to that initial moment of why really did I do this? And I feel like I can keep revisiting that forever and never really understand.

MS. TIPPETT: That's the way Scripture works, too, isn't it, when it's living?

MR. FEILER: Yes. I said this so many times in all the conversations I ever had about *Walking the Bible*, that the objective of that experience — and in some ways the destination of that experience — was the Bible's not an abstraction, that book gathering dust. It is a living, breathing entity, intimately connected to those places and to all of us. And in some ways to my surprise — but maybe I shouldn't have been surprised — that's the story of Abraham, is that there is this figure in the past — or is there a figure in the past? — and then every generation for 2,000 years has chosen an Abraham for itself.

MS. TIPPETT: What do you mean when you say that?

MR. FEILER: Well, what I mean is — just first a little bit of narrative here. I mean basically *Walking the Bible* comes out, becomes this book that touches hundreds of thousands of people. And I'm actually off working on a follow-up, the rest of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, when I get a call from my brother saying, 'Look outside your window.' It's September 11, 2001, I'm in New York, I watch the towers fall. And in those weeks afterward, we began to hear: Who are they? Why do they hate us? Can the religions get along? And I do think that one name echoes behind those conversations. One man is at the heart of the religions that suddenly seem to be at war: Abraham. Abraham. Abraham.

So two weeks after that day, I get up and I go on this journey. And essentially I believe now in retrospect that I was — and I believed at the time I was looking for one Abraham. I was looking for this figure who sort of was out in the desert somewhere or some sort of great oasis that I could unveil to the world and we could all hold hands and dance Kumbaya around the campfire. What happened, the big surprise of this journey, was I wasn't looking for one Abraham. Turns out I was looking for 250 different Abrahams.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, that's what you found. You found that there were 250 different Abrahams.

MR. FEILER: Yes. Because basically — the basic fact, as you know, is that there's no archeological evidence that any of the great epic events in Genesis ever took place. You would think that that would be problematic for the religions who base their identity in part on his life story. Instead, the opposite happened, which is that each of the religions essentially just chucked out the initial story and proceeded to make up its own Abraham. And therein lies this great tension, because the story in Genesis is this universal story. God blesses Abraham; He blesses both of his children. Ishmael — even after Ishmael's kicked out into the desert — and Isaac, both are blessed by God.

But what happened is the religions tried to elbow aside one another. So that basically, Jews, when they felt insecure, tried to turn Abraham into a Jew. So in the Jewish commentaries, you start to see that Abraham is the reason God created the world, which occurred a thousand years before Abraham was born. Abraham becomes the reason for Passover, even though Moses lived a thousand years after Abraham was dead. Abraham even keeps kosher, which wasn't invented until 1500 years after Abraham died. And so basically they made Abraham into a Jew.

And here's the thing: This is the great gift of Judaism that allowed these biblical figures to continue to be alive, which, as they said, they didn't just live then, they also live now. But that gift also has a curse, which is it opens this door and everybody else comes rushing through.

MS. TIPPETT: So there's something here about a religious sense of time, I mean, which Judaism perhaps preserves better than anyone, right, that the Exodus story didn't just happen to your ancestors, it happened to your ancestors and it happened to you, right?

MR. FEILER: Yes. And in fact it's with the Exodus the first time that the Bible actually addresses the reader directly and says, 'You will relive this every year.' You will relieve it.

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

MR. FEILER: I mean not just read it, but actually enter it yourself.

MS. TIPPETT: And so what you're saying is that that also happens with Abraham. Is it your experience that happens with Abraham in other traditions as well?

MR. FEILER: Absolutely happens in other traditions. Early Christians like Paul also were interested in Abraham as a universal figure. His blessing could be open not just to Jews, Paul says, but also to Gentiles, and that's a universal thing. But what happens is, over time, as Christianity grows more powerful and Judaism begins to diminish after the destruction of the second temple, early Christians begin to use Abraham now as a figure to include Gentiles but to exclude Jews. So they say, 'God didn't call Abraham to go forth, Jesus called Abraham to go forth. God didn't promise the land to descendants of Abraham, but to followers of Jesus.' So in other words, in the way that Jews turned Abraham into a Jew when he wasn't a Jew, Christians turned him into a Christian when he wasn't a Christian either.

And you can see where this story's going. Islam does the exact same thing. In the early years of Islam, Muhammad says, 'Abraham is a figure open not just to Jews and Christians, but to Muslims.' But over time when Islam grows more powerful, they begin to say, 'You know what? Abraham preferred Ishmael to Isaac.' He actually sacrifices Ishmael in many Muslim beliefs today, and not Isaac. And he doesn't do it in Jerusalem, as Jews and Christians believe, but in Mecca. And they even basically say he calls for the pilgrimage and builds the Kabbah, the big black house in the middle of Mecca. So they turn him into a Muslim. And basically most of my waking hours were spent trying to untangle this knot, how the universal figure of Genesis, who spreads his blessing to everyone, becomes this object of bloody rivalry among his descendants.

MS. TIPPETT: A family feud, you say.

MR. FEILER: The greatest family feud in the history of the world.

MS. TIPPETT: And one that seems to be the defining feud of our time since September 11th.

MR. FEILER: I think it is the defining feud of our time.

MS. TIPPETT: Journalist and author Bruce Feiler. I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today we're exploring the meaning and legacy of Abraham, and the way in which Bruce Feiler has discovered him as evocative and relevant for our age.

The most violent, puzzling, and memorable chapter of Abraham's story perhaps is found in the 22nd chapter

of Genesis. It is commonly known by Christians as the sacrifice of Isaac, and by Jews as the binding of Isaac.

READER: A reading from Tanakh, a modern Jewish translation of the traditional Hebrew text:

"Some time afterward God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, 'Abraham,' and he answered, 'Here I am.' And He said, 'Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.'

"So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his servants, 'You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there. We will worship and we will return to you.'

"Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife, and the two walked off together. Then Isaac said to his father, Abraham, 'Father!' And he answered, 'Yes, my son.' And he said, 'Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?' And Abraham said, 'God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.' And the two of them walked on together.

"They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there. He laid out the wood. He bound his son Isaac. He laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: 'Abraham! Abraham!' And he answered, 'Here I am.' And he said, 'Do not raise your hand against the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from me.'"

MR. FEILER: You would think that this story is so barbaric that it would have died out over time. Instead, Jews read the story in their holiest week of the year, at Rosh Hashanah; Christians read it in their holiest week of the year, at Easter; Muslims read it — the same story — in their holiest week at the end of the pilgrimage, because it asks the question we hope never to face: Would I kill for God? And as we learned on September 11th, for many the answer is still yes.

MS. TIPPETT: So we're talking — let's just clear. We're talking about Genesis 22, right…

MR. FEILER: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: …the sacrifice of Isaac, which is an absolutely fascinating piece of scripture. And, you know, one thing I know about Genesis 22 is how very unique it is and how very little referenced it is, right?

MR. FEILER: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: I mean, there are so many more pivotal events in the Hebrew Bible. The Israelites are never told to relive the sacrifice of Isaac, the way they are the Exodus.

MR. FEILER: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

MS. TIPPETT: In fact, it's extraordinary how…And it's never — is it never referenced?

MR. FEILER: It's never mentioned in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. It never comes up. It only comes up in the political context. It first re-emerges as an important story in the Maccabean time in the Hasmonean era right before the birth of Christ because Jews are being oppressed. And oppressed Jews look back to the story of the binding, but they don't look at Abraham, they look at Isaac…

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. FEILER: …and they say in the way that Isaac suffers then that is a model for how to suffer. Now, then what happens is along comes the early Christians. They begin to see in Genesis 22 a mirror, if you will, or a

precursor, depending on how you want to describe it, of what happens with the sacrifice of Jesus. And they begin to say, well, Abraham stopped short of sacrificing Isaac, God did not stop short of sacrificing Jesus, and some suggest this means God loved Jesus more than Abraham loved Isaac. What Jews do — and this is what's so fascinating — is then they say, 'Well, we're not going to let you have the story. We're going to reinterpret it.' So then there's really powerful midrash that is developed after Christ which becomes really popular in the Middle Ages, that says Isaac actually did die, that Abraham killed Isaac, that he went away for three days and then came back.

MS. TIPPETT: And he went to heaven or he was ministered to by God and the angels.

MR. FEILER: Exactly. And they find — the hook in the text is that the angel tells God — the angel tells Abraham not to slay the son twice, and so they say the first time he did it, he then comes back, and the second time they repeat it. This becomes so popular that Jews in the Middle Ages actually put ashes on their forehead to commemorate the slaying of Isaac. And if that sounds familiar, it's because it is familiar, because they were taking it from Christianity. And what — you begin — this is what you see with Abraham and why the story is so knotty, because these interpretations went back and forth and are as much a reflection of the rivalry among the religions as they are a reflection of the original gaps or ideas in the story.
MS. TIPPETT: Journalist and author Bruce Feiler. This is *Speaking of Faith*. After a short break, how Muslims interpret the figure of Abraham and his other son, Ishmael, the ancestor of all Muslims.

Find deep background on the sounds and voices in all of our programs at our award-winning Web site, speakingoffaith.org. This week, find the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's lyrical reflection on the characters in Abraham's story. Also on our play list, hear full-length tracks of Bob Dylan and Louis Armstrong on Abraham and all the music in this program. Sign up for our weekly e-mail newsletter with my journal, and subscribe to our free podcast so you'll never miss another program. Discover more at speakingoffaith.org. I'm Krista Tippett, stay with us. *Speaking of Faith* comes to you from American Public Media.

MS. TIPPETT: Welcome back to *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. I'm Krista Tippett. Today, "Children of Abraham." Across the ages, the story of Abraham has been told and retold by the three religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And tantalizing gaps and contradictions in the story lend themselves to different interpretations. Jews draw their lineage from Abraham's family tree through his son Isaac, born of his wife Sarah. But Muslims draw theirs through Ishmael, Abraham's son born of his Egyptian servant Hagar. The Hebrew Bible does not hide the fact that Ishmael was truly Abraham's firstborn son, though it later also refers to Isaac as his firstborn. The Bible also reports an ambivalence on God's part about the fate of Ishmael even after Sarah and Abraham had banished him and his mother.
READER: Unidentified speaker: "Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. She said to Abraham, 'Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.' The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed.'

"Early next morning, Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, 'Let me not look on as the child dies.' And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears. Genesis 21:9-16."
MS. TIPPETT: So you have the Bible's first homeless single mother, who's been cast out…

MR. FEILER: Proof positive that everybody — every generation can have their interpretation of the story.

MS. TIPPETT: That's right. Well, seriously, now there she is — and as you pointed out in your book, the Hebrew Bible strangely makes room for incredible sympathy towards Hagar and her son. Mr. FEILER: I do think that that is the headline. The Bible does not treat losers or apostates, or whatever you want to call

them, well. Abel is murdered. Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt. What happens here with Ishmael is that he's kicked out into the desert. Remember, Abraham comes down, Sarah gives him Hagar, Ishmael is born--ta-dum--but as soon as Ishmael is born, Sarah gets pregnant and Isaac is born. So we have two sons.

MS. TIPPETT: And Sarah wants them away.

MR. FEILER: And Sarah says to Abraham, 'Kick Ishmael out into the desert.' And he clearly doesn't want to. Ishmael is his first son. He's been looking for a son for 90 years at that point. And what happens is God says it's okay, that he too will become a great nation. And so Ishmael is kicked out into the desert. But unlike a lot of people — figures in the Bible — he never leaves Abraham's realm of love and paternity, and he never leaves the sphere of God's blessing. And what is interesting is how the text seems to be bending over backwards to create a sort of balance.

Ishmael goes out into the desert, but his mother, Hagar, is much more elevated. Isaac gets the land, but through the malice of his mother. Hagar is the only person, male or female, in the Hebrew Bible to ever speak and name God directly. And God promises Abraham that he will have many generations — Isaac and Jacob — but He promises the same to Hagar, which means Hagar is, in effect, a female patriarch. And this balance, I think, is stunning because the split — when this story comes along, the split among the religions is still thousands of years in the future, and yet the text seems to understand that all of these people are related to one another, that there will be violence, but there also is peace.

I mean the thing that I hold onto here — one of the last things I did, as you know, is I went to Hebron, one of the bloodiest cities on the planet, the epicenter of Muslim-Jewish conflict. I drove south on this sniper road where the Israelis and Palestinians shoot at one another, before arriving at the Tomb of the Patriarchs. It's this giant building that looks like a cross between a gymnasium and a castle. The last time I had been there, there were 10,000 Jews dancing in the festival. Today, it was empty, so dangerous that four soldiers with helmets and machine guns had to escort me inside — four.

And I go to this little tiny room between Abraham and Sarah's tomb. All three faiths agree this is where they're buried. There's a ramshackle synagogue there with a chandelier hanging down with half the bulbs out, and it's there that Abraham, at 175, dies. And in one of the most haunting and overlooked passages in the Hebrew Bible, Genesis 25:9, his sons Ishmael and Isaac, rivals since before they were born, estranged since childhood, leaders of opposing nations, come, stand side by side, and bury their father. Abraham achieves in death what he could never achieve in life, this moment of reconciliation. A hopeful side-by-side flicker of possibility when they're not rivals or warriors; Jews, Christians, or Muslims. They are brothers.

MS. TIPPETT: Is that incident also referenced in the Qur'an?

MR. FEILER: The thing about the Qur'an that's important to remember here, as you know, is that it never really tells the story and…

MS. TIPPETT: Right. It's not a chronological account.

MR. FEILER: It's not a chronological narrative. It sort of refers back and it says, sort of, 'Remember when?' So it's not mentioned explicitly, but most of the events in Abraham's life are not mentioned. What I think is relevant here is that this is also a Muslim shrine. It's been a Muslim shrine for hundreds of years. Muslims and Jews now divide the shrine. In some ways the shrine is sort of an awkward but really practical model for how you can get along. It ain't pretty — like Jews and Muslims, they split the shrine and 10 days a year each side gets unlimited access to it. It's almost like, 'Wow, it ain't pretty, but it does work.' And like maybe that's the model here.

But what's important to me about that moment is that they stand side by side. It doesn't say they hug, doesn't say they had dinner, doesn't say they moved in and sat down and said, you know, 'Let's forgive.' And remember, Abraham tried to kill each of them. Like to me, that is the model. And again the text seems to understand — predict, almost — where we're going to be so many thousands of years later. So it's not —

the destination here is not some Esperanto mumbo-jumbo of a giant religion. It's standing side by side and respecting that coexistence.

MS. TIPPETT: Journalist and author Bruce Feiler. In his book *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, Feiler says he came to understand the Middle East as the cradle of God. I asked how this has changed the way he understands what happens in that part of the world.

MR. FEILER: In the weeks after September 11th, the feeling that began to rise up inside of me was one of being violated, a physical sense of being afraid, and it was confusing to me. And then one day I recognized that feeling. It's the feeling one has every day in the Middle East, of terror and pride and connection to place.

For me, September 11th, 2001 is the day the Middle East came to America. And I think the reason that that's important is that until that time, I still think there was a separation between those places and our place. I think that separation had long since gone away for Europe. If you go back to the Crusades, if you go back even to English history where so much of it is connected to the Middle East because it's so much closer, and I think that what's happened now is the idea that we are different from that land, that this land is separate from that land, is gone away.

If you listen to the conversation in America today, any day, any place, on the radio, on television, at a dinner table, it has to do with those themes, about the intersection of God and politics and geography. That little triangle — God, the politics, and land — that is the Abrahamic triangle because Abraham — God promises Abraham land. That little triangle is the defining story of the Hebrew Bible. And if we do not understand that land is part of it, you take land out of it, you don't understand it. And now I think that triangle is something that is — it has really resonated deeply with Americans. And therefore, the answer to your question, in my view, is that we have to realize that that is not happening there.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MR. FEILER: It's happening here also.

MS. TIPPETT: And if we'd been taking our texts and religious traditions more seriously, even this biblical view of time that you and I talked about a minute ago, I mean that distance was always collapsed. And, you know, you think there are groups, say, of evangelical Christians in this country who've insisted on that connection. It seems to me what's new is that it's come to the rest of Americans as well.

MR. FEILER: And it's no longer metaphoric. That largely the way it's conducted in America, yes, there's always been this fascinating connection between evangelical Christians and…

MS. TIPPETT: Israel, mm-hmm.

MR. FEILER: …Zionist Jews because of the land issue. But for most people, while most people understand that, 'Ah, I can take a lesson from the scripture and relate it to my life,' I do think a lot of people who are believers, who engage — I think they get that connection. But the difference is now it affects place, right, and that's the thing that Americans feel most passionate about, like our land. I mean, look at the just upsurging — uncontrollable upsurging of patriotism that occurred after September 11th. It climbed — it's been over the top because now it's place. Like now it's — we're threatened, and that's the equation that I think that we miss here when we only read it as metaphor and as story, as opposed to something that's real and that has sort of geographic consequences.

MS. TIPPETT: OK. So it's not just that the sense of that part of the world, the sense of land and place has impinged on us, but that we are developing that sense within ourselves of our own place.

MR. FEILER: We are realizing that we carry those places around within us, and that what happens to those places affects us and affects our faith.

MS. TIPPETT: Journalist and author Bruce Feiler. In much of the devotional tradition of Islam, the prophet Abraham is linked to the founder of Islam, the prophet Muhammad. The two of them, along with Noah, Moses, and Jesus, are held up as the greatest examples of guidance that the divine has sent to humanity.

The literal meaning in the Arabic of the word "Islam" is submission to the will of God, and Abraham, who turned away from the idol worship of his ancestors, is considered to have been the first Muslim.

The Qur'an includes references to many of the events of Abraham's life which are in the Hebrew Bible, and it also recounts others. For example, the Qur'an says Abraham once made a trip to visit his son Ishmael in what is now Saudi Arabia. There he laid the foundation of the holy mosque of Mecca. In the Muslim Hajj, the pilgrimage which every Muslim hopes to make once in his or her lifetime, virtually every ritual is linked to Abraham.

Here is a traditional prayer recited in the Muslim world from Morocco to India:

READER (OMID SAFI): (Arabic version of prayer read first) "Oh, our Lord, bless Mohammed and his family as you blessed Abraham. Send your spiritual power upon Mohammed and upon the family of Mohammed as you sent your spiritual power upon the family of Abraham. In this universe and in all universes, indeed you are praiseworthy and noble."

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today, "Children of Abraham." After my guest Bruce Feiler's book about Abraham was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 2003, Abraham study and action groups sprang up across the country.

MR. FEILER: I mean, look, we are at this moment. We can continue to go where we're going, which is all-out warfare among the religions, or we can find an alternative way. And I think that September 11th is going to be seen as a defining moment in the interfaith movement because, among other things, it's flushed out the people who actually believe in a lot of its values but who didn't realize that they needed to speak up and that they needed to reach out. And every — this is what I've been, this is…

MS. TIPPETT: Who are you thinking of when you say that?

MR. FEILER: What I'm thinking of is every city in America has an interfaith movement that's popped up. In Portland, Oregon, they got 800 people participating in an Abraham initiative. In Portland, Maine, they had three — representatives of the three faiths, Children of Abraham, under this umbrella of Abraham, to go meet the governor to sign a peace agreement, OK? In Minneapolis, Minnesota; in Atlanta, Georgia; in Muncie, Indiana — every one of these places — in Charlottesville, Virginia — they all have these interfaith things that are coming up and they're all using the rubric of Abraham to have this conversation. So it's like, 'Oh, I guess we do have to speak out. If not, the fanatics and the extremists will carry the day.'

MS. TIPPETT: Someone I had a wonderful conversation with about fundamentalism is Yossi Klein Halevi, who I see you mention in your book also. And so one thing that he said that changed the way I have watched all this unfold, is that whereas even in the peace processes that Americans lead often and when Americans try to make sense of the news from the Middle East, we tend to try to bracket out the explicitly religious dimension, the theological dimension of what's going on. I mean, whether Abraham matters is not really a question that would seem relevant. But what Yossi Klein Halevi said is that, you know, you bracket that out, you're not going to understand or be able to get close to what's going on there or to any possible future solution. So I think it feels frightening to include this explosive irrational subjective religious dimension of that part of the world, but, you know, what have you learned about how that's possible? And what changes when you bring figures like Abraham into the way you think about the news over there?

MR. FEILER: I went to see a woman named Petra Heldt, who is a German reverend who had studied the use of Abraham in early Christian texts, and actually Yossi Klein Halevi is the one who introduced me to her. And I went to see her and she was interesting. When I was sitting with her, she had her hands between her legs as if she was trying to hide something. And it turned out — I learned later — she had been in one of the suicide bombings and had been injured and her hands were covered in these grafts and she was still self-conscious.

And we were talking about this, the fact that each of the religions, the interpretations over time have tended to make Abraham into this sort of radical exclusive figure for each of the religions and not the universal figure. I jumped out — I was in this library and there was a whole bunch of chairs. I'm like, 'Well, you're there and you're Abraham, and I'm here and there's two centuries' worth of bookshelves between you and me. What am I going to do?' And she said, 'Well, just push them over.' I'm like, 'What do you mean?' She's

like, 'Well, just push them over.' Her point to me was you're never going to be able to eliminate this dimension that you're talking about, that each of the traditions has a series of customs and a series of legends and a series of beliefs that have been built up and ossified over time, realizing that you can have an interpreted tradition for Abraham, he can have an interpreted tradition for Abraham, and I can have an interpreted tradition for Abraham. But the thing is, as Walter Bruggeman, the great theologian, said to me, 'You just cannot believe that your interpreted tradition is the only one.' You're allowed to believe what you want to believe. I'm allowed to believe what I want to believe. But I can't believe that mine is the only way. So I don't think the route is to go around the religions. And I think that the interfaith movement has done that for a lot of times, and maybe that's the American instinct, is just try to avoid what we…

MS. TIPPETT: Sort of simplifies it and puts it on a more superficial level, right?

MR. FEILER: Yes. Whereas the harder thing — and what the smartest people I've talked to about this suggest to me — is that you have to accept that yours is an interpreted tradition, still believe it, but just don't believe that yours is hegemonic and therefore must be right. And I'm not saying it's easy, because I know that that's difficult.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, the way that makes sense to me is to say, 'This is what I believe to be true and this is the tradition that is mine.' But in each of our traditions, there's also an acknowledgement of the essential mystery and the fact that what we're trying to put words around is much bigger than we'll ever be able to grasp in this lifetime.

MR. FEILER: I believe that the stories contain an enormous amount of truth that is still relevant to my life and to most people's lives that I know. That really matters to me. And what I find myself doing is trying to go around the religions or go behind the religions, back to the initial story. And I think I'm at the point where I've got them all separate. I don't think they've all come back together in a puzzle…

MS. TIPPETT: You mean the stories are separate from the religion?

MR. FEILER: Absolutely.

MS. TIPPETT: OK. Because I think, you know, the religion is the carrier of those stories, or has functioned that way. I mean that's one of the important functions…

MR. FEILER: Or has proffered itself as.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, all right, all right. Well, that has kept them alive in some sense even through just, you know, writing down scriptures and passing them on to other generations, for you to discover and read for yourself and decide that the way they taught them was not what you're reading.

MR. FEILER: Or maybe, maybe the stories are so great that they survived the religions recounting them over time. I mean, you know, you can take your story — but, yes, I mean, I'm not, I'm not hostile toward the religions. I believe there's a way to integrate the religions back into this conversation. I'm just saying that sort of I haven't gotten all the way to doing that yet. I still have some lingering bitterness toward the religions for turning me off, I think, and turning a lot of other people off to the stories because religions are interested, by nature, in preserving themselves.

MS. TIPPETT: Journalist and author Bruce Feiler. We're talking about the meaning and legacy of Abraham, the common spiritual ancestor of the three monotheistic religions: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. In this multimedia piece, "The Cave," contemporary composer Steve Reich synchronizes music with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish voices reciting texts and reflections on the Abraham story.

(Excerpt played from "The Cave")

MR. FEILER: I recently sat with someone I think is very wise, a rabbi named Brad Hirschfield in New York City. And we were having this conversation about my experience and why people have come to these books of mine. And Brad said something that has stuck with me, and that is that if you look at the last sort of —

oh, gosh — half century of American religious life, that you basically had people turn away from organized religion, we'll just say 30, 40 years ago for purposes of this conversation. And they experimented with a lot of New Age thing, ta-da-da, and those don't seem to have as much currency, and certainly after September 11th, they have even less currency. So people were in religious institutions, broke away, and now what they seem to be doing is going back to traditional texts. I think the Kabbalah movement is an example of that, and now people going back to the ancient texts, looking for meaning. And then once they go back to those ancient texts, what they then tend to do is reinstitutionalize themselves.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. FEILER: Because people, once they go back to the texts, feel the need for community, you know…

MS. TIPPETT: I mean, I think that creates a more empowered religious sensibility because if people — it's starting in a different place, it's not starting from what you've been spoon-fed or, you know, the interpretations that have been handed down to you, but it's starting with reading the texts for yourself, discovering that they have meaning, and then going with that knowledge back into what the institution has to offer.

MR. FEILER: I think that's exactly right. And that's the way in which I feel myself already and anticipate myself getting over this antipathy toward organized religion. It's sort of like what we all do with our parents, right? When we're young, what our parents tell us, we do. OK? Then we go through this rebellion where whatever our parents tell us, we don't do. And ultimately we realize, 'You know what, our parents are people. They care for us. We can listen — it's worth it to us to get their advice, but we don't have to accept their advice.' And I think that's the same — there's a lot of truth in the way we relate to these religious institutions as well, which is understanding that they are institutions. They have their own objectives, they have their own foibles, they have their own problems. They care for us and I think they care for our souls and they care for our moral well-being much more than most institutions in our life do. But they — we're not obliged to do everything they tell us, or just to accept what they — the interpretations they give us.

MS. TIPPETT: So this has been a roundabout way of answering a question that I had, which is, you know, why — I think the figure of Abraham is incredibly important, practically important, but it was a question in my mind why lots of Americans should see that or, you know, why this should be on the cover of *Time* magazine, or if it can really have an effect, but what you're — now I'm sort of seeing that this figure can have a different relevance because of the sort of new religious sensibility of the time we're living in.

MR. FEILER: Well, first of all, I think there are some basic things that we ought not to forget because we are having this conversation at a high level, which is, it is a family feud, and for a lot of people, that's a headline, that Jews and Christians and Muslims all came from the same land, from the same family; that Abraham is a figure that is central to Jews, Christians, and actually more central to Muslims than arguably to the other two. That's a really important realization, that we do all come — and that also leads to the next assumption, which is that we all share the same God. And the reason that all three religions have gone back to Abraham — this is the thing: God chooses Abraham in Genesis 12, and Abraham chooses God. And then each of the religions over time has chosen to link itself back to Abraham because he's so closely associated with God. In a sense, you can't get to God without understanding Abraham. They could have chosen anybody. They could have chosen David, they could have chosen Moses, they could have chosen, Isaac, they chose — they could have chosen Adam. They chose Abraham. That choice is powerful. And to me, that suggests that we can choose Abraham as well. We can choose an Abraham for this moment. Abraham Number 241 is what I say in my book, but that's just sort of a whimsical way of saying we can make him relevant to our time.

And the moment that we live in now is the religions about to descend into war. They've been at war for a long time, but the weapons are a lot bigger now. Planes are weapons. Nuclear bombs are weapons. And we need to remember at least that we do have this family feud, that at the center of it is one man, and I think he contains the seeds of hope because I really, I really feel that the story of Abraham is not Pollyannaish, and that's what's so great about it. There's violence in it, as well as peace in it. He's a flawed vessel, but he is the best vessel we've got, and so I think that's why people are grabbing for him.

MS. TIPPETT: He's fully human.

MR. FEILER: He's fully human. He's fully us.

MS. TIPPETT: Bruce Feiler is the author of *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*. And here is a reading from Genesis 25, where the Hebrew Bible leaves Abraham's story:

READER: "This was the total span of Abraham's life: one hundred and seventy-five years. And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. His sons, Isaac and Ishmael, buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites; there Abraham was buried and Sarah, his wife."

MS. TIPPETT: Bruce Feiler's most recent book is *Where God was Born: A Personal Journey to the Roots of Religion*. It describes his yearlong trek retracing the Bible through Israel, Iraq, and Iran.

Contact us and share your thoughts at speakingoffaith.org. This week, read a lyrical reimagining of the story of Abraham by Kierkegaard and hear full-length tracks of all the music in this program on our play list. Also, subscribe to our e-mail newsletter with my journal and subscribe to our weekly podcast. Sign up for free so you'll never miss another program. Listen when you want, where you want. Discover more at speakingoffaith.org.

In an upcoming show, we'll be exploring the revered spiritual teacher and poet of Central Asia, Rumi. Diverse readers find nourishment in the writings of this 13th-century Islamic mystic. He's one of the best-selling poets in the United States today, yet many people may not recognize him by name. That's where you come in. We'd like to hear your stories about reading Rumi. When did you first hear of him? What in his spirituality surprises or draws you in? Look for Share Your Story on the Speaking of Faith homepage and tell us more.

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