refer to reference to the three religions as 'Religions of the Book'.[12] This taxonomy of religions is as theologically charged as I suggest 'Abrahamic' is. Reference to Judaism and Christianity, along with Islam as "Religions of the Book" is directly indebted to the Quranic presentation of these religions.[13] Is there, then, a good descriptive shorthand way of referring to the three religions that could fulfill at least some of the functions that led to coining the term 'Abrahamic'? Possibly yes.

In a recent article, Martin Jaffee (2001) discusses the inadequacy of referring to the three religions simply as monotheisms. To highlight their common monotheistic belief is to offer only one part of the complex web of theology that plays into their relationships with one another. If monotheism were their only characteristic, no competition would exist between the religions and the common faith in one God would be the guarantee for peaceful coexistence between all believers. That the interreligious history of the three religions is anything but peaceful suggests there is more to these religions than their belief in one God. Jaffee goes on to suggest that along with the belief in one God there is also the belief in God's unique message or self-disclosure, revealed to a particular community of the faithful. This community enjoys a special relationship and a special task on account of the divine disclosure revealed to it. Jaffee terms this structure, common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam "Elective Monotheism." By this term is suggested a belief in monotheism that is coupled with the election of a particular community to whom a unique revelation is offered that is of potential universal significance. It is not the 'Monotheism' component that sets the communities apart but the 'Elective' component. The history of religious competition is attributed to conflicting notions of who is the elected community and what is the form of divine revelation or disclosure that sets it apart from the other religious communities.

The importance of Jaffee's insight is not only in shifting the ground of tension from the monotheistic component to another characteristic of the three religions. What Jaffee has done is to point out how the three religions share

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[12] I recently noticed that a presentation of mine along with those of a Muslim and a Christian colleague were still classified in this way. See Bello 2000.

[13] The question of the usefulness of the adaptation of such internal theological categories to descriptive historical categories is further reason for rejecting their usage. While the use of 'Religions of the Book' in the West may be intended to cover only Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the history of the application of this term in the East suggests that Muslims themselves understood the term in a wider and more flexible way. The term was applied to Hindus because they too possessed Scripture—the Vedas.

an identical religious structure. In his analysis, there is a core structure that each religion applies according to the historical particularities of its tradition. A look beyond those particularities reveals the common structure that both unites and separates the three religions.

It seems to me that such a descriptive analysis provides a much better way of addressing the three religions than does 'Abrahamic'. It is based on an attempt to discern a common phenomenology and a common structure. The recognition of this common structure may be as significant as the putative common Abrahamic origin. The goal of the latter was to suggest a family association between the religions, implicitly calling members of those religions to better relations within the family. The description of the three religions as "Elective Monotheisms," while perhaps more cumbersome, accomplishes the same goal, without the subtle theological distortion of 'Abrahamic'. According to Jaffee, the history of competition and violence is directly attributable to the human community that receives the revelation. Jaffee makes us aware of the tension between the core monotheistic faith, itself a source of peace and good human relations, and the additional elements that constitute "Elective Monotheism," to which violent behavior can be traced. Since all three religions share the same fundamental structure, all three are in principle susceptible to the same shortcomings. Such a comparative perspective, while lacking the emotional appeal to a common ancestor, does provide a useful perspective from which members of the three religions can consider their own religion as well as the others. It allows one to speak responsibly about the histories of the religions and at the same time offers a standpoint from which to reflect upon the negative patterns that have attached themselves to the religions. If the goal of contemporary interreligious dialogue is to help religions advance beyond their traditional competitiveness along with its attendant vices, Jaffee's suggestion offers us a descriptive vantage point that can facilitate such self awareness and growth for Judaism, Christianity and Islam.[14]

Abraham in Mystical Texts
Resources for Interreligious Education

The ideology that led to coining the phrase 'Abrahamic Religions' is an irenic one which seeks to establish peaceful relations between the religions and their adherents. While I have rejected the designation of the three religions as 'Abrahamic', I have also suggested at least one sense in which the three re-

[14] It is worth devoting further attention to the question of whether there are other religious communities that might also be described in terms of Jaffee's model. Clearly, a model that is applicable exclusively to Judaism, Christianity and Islam is what is sought in the present context.

ligions could share a vision of the person of Abraham. I would like to conclude this essay by reference to some Jewish portrayals of Abraham that could be significant in the context of interreligious education. Unlike the image of Abraham the monotheist, shared by strands of all three traditions, the following sources are relevant primarily in the internal educational context. They suggest how the image of Abraham can be presented in ways that are the opposite of the exclusivist understandings that are characteristic of "Elective Monotheisms." To the extent that our present interreligious task is also to educate our religious communities to new ways of living alongside and viewing one another, these sources offer some suggestions of how the image of Abraham can play such an educational role, within the Jewish tradition. I would like to offer three examples of Jewish teachings on Abraham that might provide interreligious inspiration for Jews as well as for Christians and Muslims. Not surprisingly, all examples are taken from Jewish mystical texts.

I have already mentioned Yehuda Liebes' work on *Sefer Yetzira*. Liebes makes the important distinction between two different philosophical-religious axes: the axis of idolatry-monotheism and the axis of plurality-unity (Liebes 2000: 35-48; 73ff.). The goal of *Sefer Yetzira* is to uncover the unified ground of being, going beyond the multiple manifestations of the visible world. The hero of *Sefer Yetzira*, as well as its classically attributed author, is Abraham. Abraham in this work, argues Liebes, is a paradigm not only of monotheism but of the move from phenomenological multiplicity to metaphysical unity. Following this train of thought, we might suggest that all religions are themselves part of the multiplicity of the phenomenal world. They do, however, point to a unified reality that transcends the manifestations of the religions themselves. Following *Sefer Yetzira*, it is Abraham who inspires us to transcend the multiplicity of reality and discover the unified ground of being.

A similar suggestion can be made following another early mystic, Philo of Alexandria. Sharing this text with an interreligious audience at Haran, where I first shared these ideas, obviously had a particular resonance. I would like to evoke this resonance also with the present audience, taking them with me back to Haran—both the Haran I visited not long ago and the Haran of Abraham. In his tractate on the migration of Abraham, Philo offers an allegorical interpretation of Abraham's migrations from Chaldea to Haran and then to the land of Israel. When God shows Abraham as leaving Chaldea for Haran, which is rendered by Philo as the place of the senses, which is also the house of the mind, he is bidding us to discard astrological speculations (chaldea) for the Socratic study of ourselves, symbolized by Haran. And when we have done this we may also leave Haran in order to contemplate God Himself

(Philo: 176-89). Paraphrasing Philo here in the proximity of Haran, I would say: gathered here in Haran to study our religions in their diversity, in their distinct realities of senses and mind, we are called upon to follow Abraham in his journey from self-knowledge and engagement of mind to the spiritual domain symbolized by the holy land where the diversity of mind and senses, and of all phenomenal appearance can be transcended. This reality, transcending the reality of religions in their diversity, is the ultimate destination of Abraham. It is God Himself.

A different way in which the figure of Abraham can be harnessed for present educational purposes can be found in the works of Rabbi R.Nahman of Breslav, the great 18th-century Hassidic master. Unlike many post-biblical representations of Abraham that cast him in the image of later Mosaic Judaism, R.Nahman highlights the fact that Abraham, the first convert, worshipped God before the Torah was given.[15]

> Therefore Abraham, who was the first of converts, and had no one to learn from, had only the heart, that had great desire for the service of God .... And for this reason converts are named after him, and are called (Ps. 47) "the generous of the nations, the people of the God of Abraham", in the aspect of (Ex. 35) "generous of heart". Because all they have is their heart's desire for God, like Abraham. (Likutey Moharan 142)[16]

Where there is no Torah there is only the heart's desire. The desire of the heart to worship God is the hallmark of Abraham, the archetypal expression of the generous heart in the service of God. If Abraham is not cast in the image of later Judaism, shaped by the observance of the Torah's commandments, then he provides an image of a legitimate form of the worship of God that is not expressed through the path of Torah. The desire to worship, the aspiration of the heart, is seen as equal in value to the particulars of proper worship, later revealed by Moses. Following R.Nahman, we may suggest that Abraham provides a symbol for all who show true desire to worship God, and for the validity of such aspiration, even when it is not expressed through the Mosaic way of life.[17] Christians and Muslims may not follow the

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[15] This issue is central to Levenson's thesis. See especially Levenson 1998: 19. Levenson's ecumenical move, concerning the figure of Abraham, is very similar to the one I am suggesting based upon R.Nahman's teaching. Following Paul, Levenson highlights faith, while R.Nahman highlights the will and the aspiration of the heart.

[16] See also the paraphrase of this passage by R. Noson of Nemirov in Likutey Halachot, Orach Chayim, part 2, p. 45a.

[17] This is actually less of a stretch of meaning than might seem at first sight. R.Nahman's reference to converts and conversion as fundamental processes in the spiritual life is unparalleled in Hassidic literature. By conversion R.Nahman intends not only formal conversion to Judaism, but also the conversion of the heart and the

path of Torah, but their appeal to Abraham can be understood along the lines of what Abraham means in the present context: the paradigmatic aspiration of the heart, an aspiration that precedes the particularity of the Torah. What can unite Jews, Christians and Muslims, in their common appeal to the figure of Abraham, is this common aspiration to serve God.

Invoking Abraham in Interreligious Prayer
A Testimonial Postscript

The piece was finished and with it my thoughts had congealed. For me, reference to Abraham in interreligious dialogue was at best a matter of convenience, a politically correct interreligious code, that practitioners of Judaism, Christianity and Islam could agree upon. It lacked a sense of real spiritual significance. It was something the legitimacy of which had to be constructed, an intellectual exercise in service of political ends. Legitimate, but uninspiring. That was about to change and only a day after the completion of this article. Father Benedikt of the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem had invited us to an interfaith meditation the following day. Ever since the recent outbreak of violence in Israel, we had been getting together every so often for a peace meditation, A rabbi (myself), an abbot (himself) and a sufi sheikh, sometimes joined by one or two other friends. A small gesture of peace and goodwill, ultimately counting on the fact that no prayer, no matter how insignificant or seemingly unimportant, is ever wasted. It was mostly a silent meditation/prayer sitting, with occasional verbal expressions, offered from each of the traditions. As our silent sitting ended, Father Benedikt started a chant, perhaps better described as a haunting mantra. Gently chanting a single word, carried on a tune that made its way from the Middle Ages to strife-torn 21st-century Jerusalem, he took our attention along with his. First he chanted "Jerusalem." And then it came: "Abraham," a simple evocation of the name of the figure that all three religions recognized. There was no theology, no history, no attempt to make sense of why Abraham was invoked. Yet the context made it perfectly clear. We were there praying for peace between Jews, Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem. Evoking Abraham provided a focus, a reminder, a goal of higher aspiration, that allowed

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recognition of God, even without entry into the boundaries of Judaism. In this sense, R.Nahman at times uses 'conversion' in a way similar to Christian usage, unlike conventional Jewish usage, which focuses upon change of religion rather than upon change of heart and of religious attitude. In view of this wider application of conversion in R.Nahman's teaching, the suggestion that Abraham legitimates conversion also outside the framework of Judaism does not violate R.Nahman's own logic. Note also the inherent difficulty in this quote. Converts become a part of the religion. Why then do they only have their aspiration of heart? A wider understanding of conversion could constitute one solution to this difficulty.

us to focus and to anchor our common aspiration. It did not really matter whether he was thought of as a common ancestor or as the founder of one or more religions. What mattered was that each of us in his own way could connect with this powerful Abrahamic mantra. Clearly, Adam or Noah would not have achieved the same effect. Something more was invoked than the memory of our common humanity. And in prayer it mattered little what precisely that meaning was. Its effects were clear, and they were felt in our hearts, that had already been joined in the common prayer for peace.

No piece is ever finished, it seems. The search for the deeper meaning of what or rather who Abraham really is and for how his presence can shape our lives as believers will go on. Yes, we must be careful, thoughtful and conscious of how we evoke Abraham's name. But we must also be open to the reality that a sincere invocation can reveal.

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