The Abraham Accords: Lessons in Leadership and Creative Thinking

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It has been two years since the groundbreaking Abraham Accords have been signed. The UAE, Kosovo, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan now have full and open diplomatic and economic ties thanks to this achievement of international relations. As Israel celebrates her 75th birthday, it is a great moment to reflect upon the diplomatic accomplishment for the Jewish State and wider region.

As time passes it is incumbent for educators to celebrate this watershed mark in Israel's story as it turns the page in the 21st century. Tangible, pragmatic lessons can be gleaned from the success of the accords and should be cited by educators, parents and the wider community. The Abraham Accords are named for our common forefather Abraham and captures the essence of Israel being a blessing to the world that should be discussed explicitly and openly.

The forefather Abraham is specifically invoked in the title of these agreements as the common ancestor of the parties involved. The text of the UAE- Israel Treaty states this point unambiguously:

> Recognizing that the Arab and Jewish peoples are descendants of a common ancestor, Abraham, and inspired, in that spirit, to foster in the Middle East a reality in which Muslims, Jews, Christians and peoples of all faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities live in, and are committed to, a spirit of coexistence, mutual understanding and mutual respect;

This commonality for all people in the Middle East; Jewish, Christian and Muslem underscores the ideas of harmony and mutual purpose. Rather than focus on difference and points of contention, the framework of the Abraham Accords is a new chapter focused on shared values and united aspirations.

Israel's detractors do not shy away from any chance to point to the State of Israel's faults and make sweeping generalizations and mischaracterizations in the most vicious terms. As an educator on an American campus, I find it critical to encourage Jewish and non- Jewish students to celebrate and be proud of Israel and the Abraham Accords. As parents, educators and general supporters of Israel, we should take the opportunity to discuss Israel's achievements as a blessing to the world.

Background

Many organizations and observers were skeptical at first, but the Accords have proven to be quite popular and resilient. Whereas some predicted imminent catastrophe and discontent among Palestinians, it would seem that the reality is the opposite and the only effects have been positive. Furthermore, the Accords have proved resilient in surviving both the American Administration of President Donald Trump and the Premiership of Bibi Netanyahu.

We often hear the story of Zionism described through a framework of armed conflict. The accords open possibility for a new narrative. For youths, especially those living in the West, security concerns and historical antecedents of 21st century Israel are abstract. Indeed, the ancient Prophets of Israel imagined Israel as a "light onto nations" while modern visionaries of Zionism, such as Theodore Herzl imagined Israel as an idealistic country where armies would not be necessary.

While Herzl's utopian vision of an ideal Israel bringing prosperity to the region has in the past been difficult to conceive, there is now hope that a better future is possible. It would seem, that the Abraham Accords represent a new development in diplomatic achievement for both Israel and her neighbors with each country advancing. Evidence of this success is expressed almost daily in news of economic cooperation, healthy political relations and overall prosperity to all parties involved. In other words, the narrative for Israel's neighbors is less about security and conflict more about cooperation and stability.

It is to the credit of the trailblazing efforts of a small group of ambitious negotiators on all sides that this diplomatic turning point was accomplished. Led by former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Special Envoy Jason Greenblatt, senior advisor Jared Kushner, Ambassador David Friedman and a small cadre of others proved so many accepted dogmas to be false in the Middle East and created a new and objectively better reality for the region. Equally remarkable are the coalition of Arab and Israeli leaders who chose to engage and shatter decades long taboos, by realizing the potential of breaking away from outdated stigmas.

The full story of the Abraham Accords is available through the published memoirs of some of the aforementioned negotiators and strongly recommended for those looking to seek fuller appreciation of this story. Without delving into the elaborate and fascinating details of statesmanship that went into these Accords, below are four reflection points to consider upon Israel's 75th anniversary which are underscored by the Abraham Accords.

1. **Israel's next phase**

The Abraham Accords represents the first treaty signed with Muslim countries that were unrelated to military engagements. In other words, Israel is now in a new phase of relations that is based on mutual values and aspirations.

Early diplomatic achievements and relationships with Israel's neighbors were predicated on the use of force and ability to defend herself. For example the 9 month long Independence War of 1948 was concluded through a series of diplomatic agreements that brought the war to a close by forcing a realization that the Jewish People could not be eliminated. Similar patters emerge in subsequent wars and can be reviewed in the summary chart below.

Figure 1 below summarizes, that while Israel's adversaries did not officially recognize the Jewish State, armed confrontation forced the Arab States into negotiated covenants. This older group of diplomatic agreements with Syria (1974), Egypt (1979), and Lebanon (1983) are important achievements from an earlier part of Israel's history. This first phase of peace agreements were precarious at best and were mostly based upon security concerns for all parties. Following the assassination of Anwar Sadat in1981 and the ejection of Lebanon from the Arab League in 1983 for negotiating with Israel, it would seem that all progress with the wider Arab World would only occur through military resolution.

Figure1. Israel's First Phase Treaties

Negotiated Agreement	Conflict/ Problem	Israeli Concession and Reservations	Outcome
1949 Armistice Agreements February 12 **Egypt** February 23 **Lebanon** April 3 **Jordan** July 20 **Syria**	**Israeli Independence War** 15 May 1948 – 10 March 1949 6,373 Israelis killed	Many Israelis including Gen. Yigal Alon favor continued fighting until defensible borders are reached at the Jordan River. Jerusalem is also divided. In a bid to create stability and international favor, Prime Minister David Ben- Gurion agrees to end the conflict.	The borders of the Jewish State are established for fhe fledging State. Open conlfict and war ceases. A shaky peace is maintained until 1967 with Jordan and Syria. Egypt and Israel engage during the Suez campaign.
UN Ceasefire Agreement June 10, 1967 Israel, Syria, Jordan, Egypt	**6 Day War** June 5, 1967 – June 10, 1967 983 Israelis killed	Israel has little reason to want to end fighting	The cease-fire went into effect on June 10 and remained until Oct. 6, 1973. Israel extends its borders and is condemned as occupier one year later through UN Arab lead resolution.

The Agreement on Disengagement Syria- Israel Agreement **May 31, 1974**	**Yom Kippur War** 6–25 October 1973 2,800 Israelis killed	Israel withdrawal from Syria. US and UN agree to post Peace Keeping forces	Syria and Israel immediately exchange prisoners of war. Israel withdraws from territory deep in Syria. Syria agrees to a demilitarized zone. This is the longest lasting agreement between Israel and an Arab country
Camp David Accords (1978) Egypt Israel Peace Treaty (1979)		Israel must relinquish Sinai, Egypt agrees to keep area demilitarized	Ends long standing rivalry between Egypt and Israel and establishes relationship which has been in place until today
"**May 17 Agreement**" Israeli-Lebanese US Brokered Accords **May 17, 1983**	1982 Israel- Lebanon War	Land concessions, relinquishing control of Lebanon amid a civil war to Syria. Full withdrawal from Lebanon only occurs on 2000.	The agreement terminated the official state of war between Israel and Lebanon that had lasted since 1948. Lebanon is ejected from the Arab League for "surrender to Israel", repudiates the treaty in 1984 Hezbollah conducts cross border raids that lead to a conflict with Israel in 2006
Wadi Araba Treaty Jordan- Israel Peace Agreement **October 26, 1994**		None	Full diplomatic and economic relationship established. Jordan abandons in writing its claims to Judea and Samaria which it lost during the Six Day War

This status quo changed in 1994 with the Israel- Jordan treaty. Unlike the former agreements, where diplomatic achievement only occurred in the wake of a confrontation, Jordan and Israel had not been in military conflict since the Six Day War. As it turned out, Israel and Jordan had a lot of common interests. Economic benefits, the sharing of resources and the prosperity of each country's respective citizens were the primary objectives that led to a new type of agreement not predicated on armed conflict.

The Abraham Accords is the next step in this new phase which has been dubbed the "new order" of the Middle East. As the Moroccan Foreign Minister observed:

> There is a need for a new regional order where Israel is a stakeholder and no longer an outsider in its own region. This new regional order should not be perceived as against someone, but rather to benefit us all. Also, this new regional order should be based on an updated joint assessment of threats, but also on how to generate opportunities that favor stability and development forward.[1]

The Abraham Accords is the next chapter of Israel's history in which the Jewish State plays a positive regional role in the Middle East with her neighbors. It is as the US state department succinctly puts it: "friendly relations based on shared interests and a shared commitment to a better future."[2]

2. **Pragmatic Diplomacy**

Today's college students in Israel, the Arab World and the United States were born after the 2000 Camp David summit. Yasser Arafat was dead before they were in Kindergarten. This new generation does not have the privilege to meet the pioneering generation that built Israel, but also is not burdened or shoehorned to diplomatic dogmas of the previous generation. The Abraham Accords is an opportunity to have an Israel conversation that breaks away from a generation of failed Oslo policy in favor of a more pragmatic approach.

The more than 25 year lapse between the Jordan Peace treaties in 1994 and the Abraham Accords is cause for reflection. The time gap represents a generation of stalemate and quagmire of little hope and resolution that has impacted Israel negatively.

The preoccupation and aspirational hopes of an elusive peace Initiated by the Oslo Accords (1993-1995) is a critical factor. The powerful idea of Oslo, while based in praiseworthy aspirations led diplomats to reflexively ignore the wider opportunities of engaging with willing counterparties. Like so many other idealistic goals, the means to an unrealistic end produced a worse off reality than the original status quo.

While at an earlier time, an achievable peace through the Oslo accords may have been possible, the violent, selfish and illogical rejection by Palestinian leadership of all overtures should have made clear that goal would remain intangible and required a re-assessment of a difficult situation. The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs counts the following major acts of terror that were committed in the short time between the initial Oslo signing and before the tragic Yitzhak Rabin's assassination[3]:

1. Apr 6, 1994 - Eight people were killed in a car-bomb attack on a bus in the center of Afula. Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack.
2. Apr 13, 1994 - Five people were killed in a suicide bombing attack on a bus in the central bus station of Hadera. Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack.
3. Oct 19, 1994 - In a suicide bombing attack on the No. 5 bus on Dizengoff Street in Tel-Aviv, 21 Israelis and one Dutch national were killed.

4. Nov 11, 1994 - Three soldiers were killed at the Netzarim junction in the Gaza Strip when a Palestinian riding a bicycle detonated explosives strapped to his body. Islamic Jihad said it carried out the attack to avenge the car bomb killing of Islamic Jihad leader Hani Abed on Nov 2.
5. Jan 22, 1995 - Two consecutive bombs exploded at the Beit Lid junction near Netanya, killing 20 soldiers and one civilian. The Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attack.
6. Apr 9, 1995 - Seven Israelis and one American were killed when a bus was hit by an explosives-laden van near Kfar Darom in the Gaza Strip. The Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attack.
7. Jul 24, 1995 - Six civilians were killed in a suicide bomb attack on a bus in Ramat Gan.
8. Aug 21, 1995 - Three Israelis and one American were killed in a suicide bombing of a Jerusalem bus.

Six out of eight of these major attacks were perpetrated against civilians, not to mention countless other attacks in which civilians were only injured and not killed. Towards the end of his life, even Ytizhak Rabin acknowledged that his original grand vision for a Palestinian “State” should be downgraded to an “entity”. The Palestinians, he believed, would have “less than a state,” and Israel would have to preserve security control over the Jordan Valley “in the broadest meaning of that term” [4].

The ongoing campaigns against Israeli civilians led many early supporters to be reluctant of initial support of the Oslo framework. Pedagogical hate spewed wholesale in Palestinian schools coupled with rejection of even the most generous overtures such as the Camp David Accords in 2000 and the unilateral 2005 Gaza pullout left little incentive for progress on either side. The continued belief in the ideal at Oslo became increasingly abstract. This is what former Ambassador Ron Dermer called on multiple occasions the “two State illusion”.

The small group of negotiating parties on all sides of the Abraham Accords recognized the pragmatism of working together. The UAE ambassador for example goes on record saying “…understanding that countries can have very fruitful and forward-looking relations but can disagree on issues and need to work the disagreements together. It can’t be just zero-sum games but it has to be positive as we move forward.” Indeed each party had more to gain from cooperating and acting in their respective citizens own interests, rather than holding old grudges.

Small incremental victories are preferable to overarching and intangible goals. Surely there are average Palestinians that want a better life for their families through cooperation with Israel and her citizens before any “final status” is reached. Many sovereign Arab leaders recognize the common destiny of the region and choose to embark on a new chapter in which Israel is an active player.

3. **Creative Thinking**

Former US ambassador to Israel David Friedman’s memoir of the Abraham accords is titled “Sledgehammer: How Breaking with the Past Brought Peace to the Middle East”. The title recalls that the Accords only came to fruition from a decisive departure from the established narrative and status quo.

The Abraham accord was initiated by creative and daring establishment outsiders that had the audacity to challenge the dream of Oslo and come up with something better. The Status quo conventions and talking points were hardened into a political correctness at the expense of pragmatic possibility for over twenty five years. The “two state solution” of peace was repeated while seldom explaining how that step would achieve peace even in the face of decades of failure and bloodshed.

Breaking the inertia of the establishment created the Abraham Accords. It was only “outsiders” that could have created these important developments through fresh pragmatisms without the liability of previous statements, ideas and hypocrisies.

While the expert establishment insisted that all Palestinian issues must be solved before any progress is made, The Arab World actually believes the opposite. Upon the one year anniversary of the accords the UAE Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash stated officially in a conference with Israel organized by the United States that:

> Politically, also, we feel that the Abrahamic Accords will allow us to help and assist further in the peace process, leading to what we all see as the ultimate goal of a two-state solution. This, of course, will be up to the Palestinians and Israelis to agree. But I think we can all be more constructive as we build a network of trust, and that network of trust I think will allow us to put away a lot of the fears of the past and replace it by the hopes for the future.

In other words, the UAE believes – in stark contrast to many established organizations and policy experts, that the Accords accelerated the peace process. Dialogue, relationships and trust increase mutual understanding which only helps peace.

These accords prove that we can all make a difference. Informed, conscientious stakeholders have the ability and right to make a change. The expert class does have insight and experience, but also more inertia and less creativity and willingness to try new avenues of success. We would be doing ourselves a favor to engage with Israel and voice our concerns in a meaningful way. No matter who you are, a good idea has currency and the ability to make a difference. Through hard work amazing result are possible and we can all contribute to that great success.

4. **Regional Prosperity**

Are The Accords the beginning of the end of the BDS movement? It is ironic that it was in Sudan, now a partner in the Abraham Accords, which the Arab League declared in the aftermath of the Six Day War: “No Peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel and no negations with Israel.” Lebanon was formally ejected from the Arab League in 1983 for negotiating with Israel. For decades no progress was made. Jordan, Egypt, UAE, Bahrain, Kosovo, Morocco and Sudan have now all reversed course and made a decision to improve the lives of their respective citizens by allowing them to trade freely with a willing partner.

Instead of boycotting and marginalizing the Jewish State, the accords explicitly pronounce the opposite as something to strive for. In the Declarations section of the official Accord documents the following is recounted regarding cooperation and Dialogue:

> We believe that the best way to address challenges is through cooperation and dialogue and that developing friendly relations among States advances the interests of lasting peace in the Middle East and around the world.[5]

The Arab League’s long running embargo against the Jewish State predated the founding of the county. The old idea that parties could be coerced by unilateral hostile actors through boycotts and embargos, has been rejected by the Arab World. The Abraham Accords find Israel freely trading with her neighbors, where all involved prosper. The optimism can be encapsulated by UAE minister of Economy Abdulla bin Touq Al Marri who projects “$1 trillion dollars of economic activity over the next decade," between his country and Israel.[6]

Many critics abounded at the outset of the Abraham Accords. Among experts it was considered ludicrous to focus on other Arabs States before “solving” the Palestinian problem. In fact the Arab and Palestinian conflicts were so closely associated that the two were often conflated into a single cause or used interchangeably. Hardened ideology linking the Palestinian Peace Process to the rest of the

Arab Nations and wider regional concerns proved false.

Secretary of State Anthony Blinken remarked the following in closing statements during a conference with Israel and her new allies:

> “Abraham, in our Bible, had the temerity to engage God, to argue with God, to ask why, and maybe more important, to ask why not. And I think each of you and each of your countries asked, “Why not?” And the answer now we see before us with the accords, with normalization, and with the manifest benefits that it’s bringing to people not just in the countries concerned, but I think increasingly more broadly.[7]

The answer in the past to Mr. Blinken’s rhetorical question “why not” was the long standing policy by experts which interlinked the Arab and Palestinian problem as one issue. It proves that aside from uninformed college students and radical leftist peace groups, even the Arab World now embraces Israel.

The Abraham Accords remind us that the Middle East reality is complex. Solving conflicts requires nuance, and the ability to separate problems and deal with them individually. There is no magic solution to a myriad of difficult problems. Trying to find a singular solution or coercing one party and expecting positive outcomes is relegated to the imagination. The Abraham Accord separated two long standing problems and dealt with each individually: The Arab- Israel conflict and the separate Palestinian issue.

By separating the two issues and viewing each as independent, diplomats found room to negotiate. This development is an incremental yet crucial step towards achieving wider goals. Pragmatically dealing with problems as solutions and ideas present themselves is a recipe for success that has increased opportunity and prosperity for all parties.

Discussion

The Israelite Prophets Isaiah and Micah famous vision of “beating swords into ploughshares “is spread across the walls of the General Assembly hall in the United Nations Headquarters. The universal hope of a better tomorrow in which foe becomes friend finds no truer expression than the Abraham Accords. As Zionists and lovers of Israel, we should celebrate this monumental achievement.

In the Western World, we have been blessed with stability, peace and prosperity. Other developing nations such as Israel and her neighbors are building towards a better future. In light of the Russian war with Ukraine and Iranian aggression, we are reminded once more about the horrors of war and armed conflict. The Ukraine Jewish refugee crisis prompts us once again of Israel’s primary role as a haven and protector as the one and only Jewish state. We ought not to forget how fragile a peaceful future is.

While the peaceful vision of the Biblical Prophets are essential Jewish values, these peaceful visions should not be confused with the irrelevancy of security in a pre-messianic and imperfect world. In Israel’s chronology, maintaining security has proved essential in order to guarantee the safety of her citizens. Security allows countries and their leaders to perform their principal obligation to ethically protect the lives, rights and property of citizens and should not be confused with the utopian ideals of a world peace and universal fraternity among men.

The covenant of the citizens of Israel is first and foremost the security of her citizens and second of worldwide Jewry. Consideration of other sorts as noble as they might be are tertiary to the safety and survival of the Jewish People. Eloquently commenting on the balance between security and peace Martin Luther King declared at the Rabbinic Assembly on March 25th 1968[8]:

> Peace for Israel means security, and we must stand with all of our might to protect its right to exist, its territorial integrity. I see Israel, and never mind saying it, as one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be

done, how desert land almost can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy. Peace for Israel means security and that security must be a reality.

Israel the country- a beacon of personal freedom, morality and biblical values can only exist if Israel's people can survive. George Washington is credited as saying that "To be prepared for War is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace." That is, that power is a necessary tool in statecraft, and in our context one that Israel has had to maintain to promote peace.

The audacious players that pulled this agreement together should be celebrated for their courage and creativity. The results have been a new narrative and better reality in the Middle East where daily non-stop flights and constant announcements of economic agreements have created prosperity for each respective country's citizens. Where others would not dare venture, these individuals risked, persevered and succeeded.

The Abraham Accords therefore is another pragmatic step towards a long lasting peace that should be celebrated universally. Unlike earlier treaties that contained an element of military capability, these accords focus on the aligning incentives and purpose. A strong and prosperous Israel has much to offer counterparties willing to negotiate with her. It demonstrates a shift in the Arab World's approach to Israel based on pragmatic considerations. This new phase in the Middle East examines what Israel and her neighbors have in common instead of how they are different.

This new narrative is now the counter-point to the college campus narrative of Israel. Where the latter finds anger, negativity and hate the Accords tell a story of progress, hope and prosperity. This new narrative of the Middle East embodies an Israel embraced by her Arab and Muslim neighbors working in partnership for a better future in the region and ultimately the world.

There is a comedic paradox in all of this. Where Israel was the scorn of the vanguard intelligentsia of recent years, it is Israel who has proven most progressive. Where Israel is portrayed as a warmonger; Israel chose peace. Where political science experts and diplomatic professors thought impossible, Israel made possible for all. Where convention preached fatalism, Israel exemplified action and possibility.

The new Middle East narrative encapsulates a larger lesson of the Abrahamic values of self-determination and freedom. Delegitimizing Israel and by extension America and her Biblical values for the sins of an imperfect past is to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. We can focus our attention on the shortcomings in our governments, communities, personal lives and turn to the darkness of nihilism and embrace a fate of failure with no escape. The Bible rejects fate, and believes in the ability to attain a better tomorrow. Celebrating success, breeds further optimism and confidence in creating that better future.

Conclusion

Israel's success has once again proven an inspiration to all who those who dare to dream. The Abraham Accords demonstrates the possibility of working together with our neighbors and achieving a once unthinkable mutual exchange of "peace for peace". In so doing, the daring, pragmatic, creatives of the Accords have provided leadership and hope for humanity during troubled times. When darkness and despair cloud possibility, Israel and her neighbors have integrated in unexpected ways. The fact that these efforts were initiated by fresh and creative thinkers demonstrate the impact that we can all have to effect big changes on the eve of Israel's 75th Birthday. In signifying success amidst despair, Israel has provided hope by being "a light onto nations" and embodies the Prophecies of being a "blessing to the inhabitants of the world".

[1] https://www.state.gov/at-the-one-year-anniversary-of-the-abraham-accords-normalization-agreements-in-action/

[2] https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/

[3] Https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Terrorism/Palestinian/Pages/Suicide%20and%20Other%20Bombing%20Attacks%20in

[4] https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/19/ron-dermer-we-must-stop-pursuing-two-state-illusion-commit-realistic-two-state-solution/

[5] https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Abraham-Accords-signed-FINAL-15-Sept-2020-508-1.pdf

[6] https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-aims-1-trillion-activity-with-israel-by-2031-2021-09-14/

[7] https://www.state.gov/at-the-one-year-anniversary-of-the-abraham-accords-normalization-agreements-in-action/

[8] https://www.wsj.com/articles/notable-quotable-martin-luther-king-jr-on-israel-1427843696