



From Dubai, global lessons in Jewish pioneering

By Jake Berger

Each week on Shabbat, Jews around the world pray for the welfare of the country they live in.

I've heard this prayer in many places, and in many languages. I never thought I would ever be reciting it for the United Arab Emirates while living in Dubai.

This remarkable twist on our shared practice, changing from place to place and culture to culture is something that's always fascinated me.

From my home communities in Manchester and London in the U.K., and in my travels to places like Helsinki, Jerusalem and Istanbul, I have been blessed to not only experience diverse Jewish communities, but to actively contribute to them. I have seen the beauty in unique traditions, while at the same time taken solace in familiar tunes at Friday night services hundreds of miles from home.

For the last seven months I have been in Dubai serving as the JDC Entwine Jewish Service Corps (JSC) Fellow. The Fellowship places recent college graduates and young professionals in global Jewish communities and international development projects in places where JDC, the global Jewish humanitarian organization, works. This includes the UAE where, in partnership with the local Jewish community, the JSC Fellow supports the community's growing development.

Dubai is a place where it is easy to get lost, especially among the glistening skyscrapers and glamorous attractions. What has had the greatest impact on me in my relatively short time here are the lessons I have gleaned from finding my place in this unique Jewish community and, more broadly, what these lessons may hold for Jewish communities around the globe.

The first thing I've learned is that being a pioneer, in any form, is essential to building a Jewish community. In a place like Dubai where for years there was no central home for Jewish life – no community center or synagogue – the process took patience and pragmatism, finding other Jewish residents one by one and creating opportunities for them to meet, gather and collectively celebrate their shared Jewish backgrounds. They met in peoples' homes and other private locations. Above all, they have discovered ways to pool the different strengths and talents of the Jews who call Dubai home.

Then, in 2020, the Abraham Accords further opened the door to Jewish life in the region in ways that previously were unimaginable. Since arriving in Dubai, I have been working alongside a group of lay leaders from across the community to develop programming that meets the emerging needs of the Jewish community here. It is thanks to the spirited leadership of community members who volunteered countless hours that robust Jewish life has taken root in this city, from activities on Shabbat and festivals, to kosher restaurants bustling with patrons, to the regular cultural and educational gatherings now taking place. To create where there once was not is no easy feat, and that's exactly what's happening now in Dubai thanks to these community members.

My second learning is that being welcoming and inclusive is at the heart of successful, thriving communities. Across the Torah, the obligation to “welcome the stranger” is mentioned 36 times. For the Dubai Jewish community, this is a value that is in its DNA.

This community was uniquely born in a place where very few people are native to the area. In fact, expats greatly outnumber local Emiratis; approximately 15% of Dubai's population are UAE nationals. In addition to fostering diversity, it means that most people who live in Dubai once had the experience of being new in the city. Therefore, when a newcomer arrives, that moment of searching for community is a familiar one, and people tend to go out of their way to learn about each other's stories and

welcome them. In addition to being warmly welcomed to participate, newcomers are often asked how they would like to contribute, engendering a feeling that this is a community that is formed by its members. Invitations to Shabbat gatherings abound, and many community members have opened up their homes to me during my time here so far, with that same warmth extended to any new community member or visitor. By taking the time to nurture each individual relationship and develop communal bonds, this small group of individuals forged together to become a strong Jewish community. It is this radically welcoming spirit, the attention given to each individual who touches this community, that has allowed it to thrive and offers lessons for Jewish communities working to build strategies for inclusion and spaces for members of different backgrounds to find a shared cause.

This sense of welcoming extends into my third learning: to reach beyond the bounds of the Jewish community. I have been inspired by how the community here has created ties with its neighbors, and I believe this example is something to be emulated by Jewish communities around the globe. Here, it is not uncommon to see Emiratis in national dress at Jewish communal gatherings, with genuine friendships and a deep respect for cultural exchange forming that enriches both communities. In 2019, a Torah scroll was gifted by the Jewish community to the then Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, who last month became President of the UAE following the passing of Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed. That Torah scroll is loaned back to the community for use on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur each year and is a symbol of the mutual respect and admiration between the communities.

Many in the Jewish community cite 2019 as a year of significant change, as it was celebrated as the Year of Tolerance across the country in the UAE. That tolerance is a value felt and shared by the Dubai community, creating an environment that is not only outward-looking and positive, but shows the important role that community relations can play for both emerging and established Jewish communities around the world. The Passover Iftar arranged by the American Jewish Committee that I attended in Abu Dhabi, which brought together young members of the Jewish and Emirati communities in a shared expression of our traditions, was a beautiful illustration of this. At a time when Jews face numerous struggles, including rising antisemitism and socioeconomic instability, it is important for us to reach out to our non-Jewish neighbors and forge a path ahead, provide mutual aid, and celebrate our shared humanity.

While the community here in Dubai can be seen as unique to the rest of the Jewish world, it is also a place that holds a mirror to our collective aspirations. For centuries we have drawn strength from the old and the new, and from our ability to build a Jewish future with an audaciousness and hope that grows from generation to generation. It is clear to me that here in the UAE, the Jewish future is bright indeed.

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