

# An Extraordinary Camaraderie

## THE THRIVING JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

By Ross Kriel

PRESIDENT, JEWISH COUNCIL OF THE EMIRATES

Since 2008, I have worked in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and I moved permanently to Dubai with my wife and children in August 2013. I have led the Jewish community in the UAE since 2014 along with other founders and builders, following the example of pioneering Jewish families who built the foundations of our community. From them, we gained our ethos – a camaraderie that cuts across Jewish denominations and linguistic and national differences.

Our Jewish community is the first new Jewish community in a Muslim and Arabic country for at least 140 years. What makes our formation all the more significant is that it occurred post-1948 in the context of the state of Israel and the disappearance of Jewish communities in the Islamic and Arabic world.

So how was it possible for a Jewish community to emerge in this setting?

The UAE is a remarkable place, and among its many virtues, it embraces religious expression, accommodating 1,000,000 Christians; 660,000 Hindus; 50,000 Sikhs; 38,364 Bahá'ís; 200,000 Buddhists; and so on. This is a legacy of the late Sheikh Zayed (former president of the UAE) and results from the ongoing work of UAE leaders at every level in developing the radical tolerance that typifies the UAE's society.

As Jewish lay leaders, we made certain choices that helped us find a space in the social ecosystem of the UAE. We could have chosen to be a secret community, concealing our practice from the authorities and creating



a covert religious life. Instead, we actively sought to build relationships with government leaders in the UAE and were always affirmed and encouraged to do so.

However, we also did not seek to sensationalize or actively showcase our presence and in the early years accepted that our religious life would be essentially a private one. This allowed us time to make sense of our Jewish life in the UAE and to respect the privacy of our members. Our media shyness changed in 2019 during the Year of Tolerance when the Jewish community was included in a book called *Celebrating Tolerance*, which featured the various religious communities of the UAE. At this point, we began telling our story and taking our place more publicly in the UAE's plural religious life.

Through hundreds of acts of kindness, guidance, and intervention, a group of Jewish lay leaders were enabled to achieve something extraordinary: the founding of our community in the UAE. This help spanned many great Jewish organizations, including the American Jewish Committee, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and of course PJ Library; religious leaders, such as the Rev. Andrew Thompson; and key UAE leaders, including Ambassador Yousef Al Otaiba and H.E. Dr. Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi.

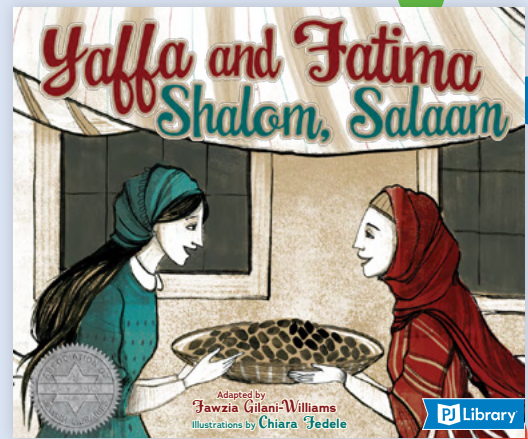
As Jews, we are poised to embrace a future version of ourselves – a future in which Israel is deeply integrated in the region and Jewish-Muslim affairs are positive, reciprocal, and conducive to peace, stability, and prosperity. We look toward a future in which we as diasporic Jews find new relevance in how we relate both to Israel and our new home, the United Arab Emirates, as we work together to build a thriving Middle East.

# GLOBAL CONNECTIONS THROUGH BOOKS

**By Reva Gorelick**

PJ LIBRARY COORDINATOR, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

I love working for the PJ Library community in Dubai for many reasons, one of which is that it gives me an opportunity to meet families who read the books in multiple languages. Many of our families previously received PJ Library books in other cities before they relocated to Dubai as expatriates; they are really happy to have something like PJ Library, which links them to a globally connected Jewish community.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, I've delivered PJ Library books by driving around Dubai and dropping them at families' homes, which has been a really nice opportunity to meet or catch up with children and parents face to face in their backyards. In April, we sent out the book *Yaffa and Fatima: Shalom, Salaam*. When I gave the book to one of the parents, her face lit up, and she was so excited about how culturally appropriate the book is. She knew it would be such a good opportunity for both of her children – not only her 5-year-old – to learn about friendships with people of different cultural backgrounds.

I'm really excited to have an opportunity to deliver such an important book to families in our community, and I'd love to be able to distribute that book more widely to families who didn't necessarily receive it this year. It's a wonderful example of how PJ Library books are not only age appropriate but also culturally relevant, which is something the families here in Dubai are really looking for, especially in a place where so many diverse cultures are represented. I'm really happy to play a small role in making that happen.

## DONOR SPOTLIGHT

My family and I have been regularly visiting Dubai for several years. In that time, we have witnessed its development into a place that not only accepts its Jewish community but openly welcomes and encourages the growth of that community.

Early on, we were struck by how isolated the younger members of the community were, having limited contact with other young Jewish children and *cheder* (Jewish elementary school). That is why we felt so strongly that the sponsorship of a PJ Library program would be especially meaningful and beneficial. Not only is it a rich source of Jewish content, but it also provides a link to the wider community of PJ Library readers.

**Jacob Lyons**

London, England

