

Ross Kriel | The Thriving Jewish Community in the United Arab Emirates

- Everybody. Today, I'm thrilled to welcome Ross Kriel. Two years ago, Dennis, Carly and I landed in Dubai on route to Abu Dhabi on behalf of the Guggenheim. We had heard about the Jewish community there and decided to go and check it out ourselves. We had a quick shower and headed out. We arrived in a lovely small unmarked building, and I was surprised to discover no security. You can imagine my delight when we were warmly welcomed by the head of the Jewish community, a fellow South African.

After two minutes of Jewish geography, I of course discovered that I knew his family very well. His father, Isaac Kriel was a legend and a household name. It was a fascinating trip, and meeting Ross and his community was a highlight. I'm so delighted Ross could join us today to share more about this unique Jewish community blossoming in the most unlikely of places. Ross is the president of the Jewish Community of the Emirate, the JCE, who has worked in UAE since 2008 and lived in Dubai since 2013 with his wife and children.

He's an Oxford educated lawyer who works for French energy giant Engie as a transactional lawyer, and has worked on large energy projects throughout the GCC, Africa and South Africa since 2008. He's actively built the JCE community since 2013 by creating a place of worship with regular services, originally in his home, obtaining and supporting the infrastructure for Jewish prayer, and establishing a fully functioning, flourishing, and viable community. He engages frequently with government representatives, religious leaders, and diplomats to ensure that the JCE takes its place appropriately amongst other minority religious communities of the UAE. And he's strongly committed to the UAE Project of Religious Tolerance and Pluralism. Thank you again, Ross, for joining us, and it gives me great pleasure to hand the floor over to you. Thank you.

- [Ross] Thanks, Wendy.

- Thank you, Wendy. So, Ross, as Wendy mentioned, you and I have met before, but actually that wasn't my first trip to Dubai, and it wasn't my first synagogue experience in Dubai. About eight years earlier, I found myself in Dubai and came across what then could only be described as the kind of secret door knock, clandestine way you could go to synagogue. You know, somebody taps you on the shoulder and it's in a different hotel room each week. And that was obviously very different to the situation we found ourselves in two years ago where you've built an established community. So I was hoping that you could start off just with a little bit of a geopolitical history lesson. I know you've got a map you could put up, but if you just give everybody sort of two or three minutes of where we are in the world and the various Emirates, and then we'll go from there.

- Sure will do, Carly. So first of all, afternoon to everybody and thank you to Wendy for the lovely introduction and for mentioning my father as well, which I very much appreciate. Yes, it's lovely to see you again. Last time was the end of 2018, and I'm very happy that you were in Dubai

even earlier than that in the early years, so that you sort of witnessed yourself where it all began. Before we tell that story, I will in fact share a map of the UAE just so that listeners have a sense of where we are. So if you look at the map on the left, those are the GCC countries shown in pink. The UAE is towards the top with Oman I guess to the north and Qatar to the west. And of course Saudi Arabia's its neighbour to the west. This strip of water here is, we call it the Gulf of Arabia. For anybody planning to come out here, a terrible faux pas is to call it the Persian Gulf. Across the water is Iran. So in fact, when I look at the beach, Iran is just over the water, 50 or 60 kilometres away. Kuwait, Iraq, up to the northwest.

And I guess one very important thing to mention is that the UAE in fact is on either side of that land mass that pushes up towards where it says Oman and the map. So in fact, the UAE has a strip of water, which is the Gulf of Arabia, and associated with Arabia, and on the other side is the Indian Ocean. And that's relevant because in fact for much of its history, the kingdoms that now make up the UAE, the Emirates, actually look more to the east than to the west. They were very associated with trade with Iran, India, and the coast of Africa. And I think that's quite an important piece of history to bear in mind when we start to discuss tolerance and the plural nature of the UAE. I think those are the most important things to bear in mind about the map. I'll certainly come back to it again later on if it's relevant.

- Thank you, Ross. So as Wendy mentioned, you originally found yourself in Dubai just over a decade ago, but you didn't move there until 2013. Could you tell us a little bit about how you and your family ended up there and what the Jewish community was when you arrived?

- Sure. So I'd been coming to Dubai since 2008. I worked for a French multinational called Engie, and I was quite familiar with Dubai at that time, but I never imagined living there. And in fact, I thought as a Jew, the idea of living there was more or less impossible. But at a certain point around 2010, my company started urging me to move across. Because it's a global company and mobility is a sort of a key to career progress. They're more or less told me that if I wanted to progress in the company, I needed to be more mobile. And I said no to them for two years and they just kept asking me. And eventually I said to my wife, well, come with me and tell me if you think this is possible. And my boss very clearly said to me, get your wife's permission before we take any of this further.

So I came with Elli my wife, and the first thing we did is we went into a supermarket to see if there was any kosher food. And in fact, we found a huge amount of kosher food and we realised that it was possible to be kosher. And then my boss, who again is a bit of a super sleuth, was able to find one or two members of the sort of proto Jewish community. And within a few minutes, I had phone calls from many people who told me that there were Jews there, a smattering of Jews, not yet organised into a community. And I was able to ask them what life was like. And then I read the report of the US State Department on the UAE, which is a report that they produce about countries all around the world, produced annually. It's an excellent report. And I read up very quickly about antisemitism and anything else that might have been a concern to me. And I realised that in fact we could do it.

And my wife and I decided to have an adventure. I consulted intensively with an army of Rabbis before making the move. And eventually one Rabbi, a very senior, wise Rabbi by the name of Rabbi Lipska, he was the one that I focused on. And I went to him a few times to speak about various detailed issues about Jewish life, you know, sort of out in the wilderness at the furthest end of the Jewish world. But he never offered any opinion on whether coming out was a good or a bad idea. And eventually I said to him, almost slightly frustrated, Rabbi, is this a good idea? And he said to me with a kind of awry smile, it could be good and it could be bad.

And I think the point that he was trying to make to me in his wonderful Rabbinical style was that this would really depend on me, and Elli as well, and what we made of it, that if we turned it into something spiritually significant and meaningful, then it would be amazing. But if we just went there, in fact for career purposes, it could be very negative. And within two weeks of arriving, Elli and I were hosting Rosh Hashanah services in a part of Dubai that we'd never even heard of before using Google to sort of find out where it was. But we sort of never looked back. And I would say it's probably been the most beautiful thing that we've ever done in our lives.

- And how big is the Jewish community in Dubai now? I know obviously it's probably split between those who come and go and those who actually live there, but if you could just give us an understanding of the scale.

- Sure, so we know that Jews always have an influence that's out of proportion to their numbers, but it particularly applies to the Jews of Dubai and the UAE. If you look in the media, you'll see estimates going up to 3000, et cetera, which I think really are not accurate at all. The truth is nobody knows the real number, but I think it's in the hundreds and probably in the low hundreds. And I think that that number will grow quite rapidly for reasons that we can discuss in the course of this call, Carly.

- And you know, the old Jewish joke of, you know, you find a Jewish guy on an island and he's built two shuls, you know, one that he goes to and one that he never sets foot in. How many synagogues are there? What are the streams of Judaism that are there?

- Well, for a long time the joke didn't apply to us, which is one of the most beautiful things about our community. When you met somebody and discovered that they were Jewish, you didn't ask them whether they were conservative or orthodox or reform, what have you, you were just thrilled to find another Jew, thrilled to find somebody that had the courage and the sense of identity to tell you that they were Jewish and to allow themselves to be discovered as Jewish. And that became the ethos of our community and something in fact that we want to attain going forward. But the truth is, going forward as we move towards being formalised, what we'd like to do here is try to, in a certain way, recognise the mainstreams of Jewish life out in the world.

And what we've said to the government is that if you broadly recognise three streams within the structure, there will be a place where everybody will be more or less comfortable to pray. And

that's the criterion. The government here wants people to feel comfortable to pray, because that allows 'em to feel at home. So the three streams that we've recognised are mainstream orthodoxy, which is me and the stream that I identify with. A stream that we call egalitarian, which sweeps up all the various progressive denominations within Judaism, reform, conservative reconstructionist, et cetera. And then Chabad which includes Hasidic and you know, the more, the more outer versions of orthodoxy.

And we've said to government that those are the three streams that should be recognised and introduced into our structure. And then we have a council, single council, which gets back to your joke about the desert island because even if we are going to have different facilities, which may not be in different places, by the way, they could all be together in one facility. We do want to have a place where we really come together still, that's the fundamental ethos of our community and something that we want to attain as being fundamental to who we are as Dubai Jews.

- So you've mentioned the word recognise there a few times, and could you tell the audience a little bit more of what you mean by that? I know that a couple of years ago Dubai introduced a Minister for Tolerance and Sheikh Nahayan has been looking to, you know, bring in versions of all the world religions. But I think it's important to understand, you know, is the community unrecognised now? And what does recognition mean?

- So the first point to make is that indeed, Sheikh Nahayan of the Ministry of Tolerance has turned tolerance now into a government policy, which is an extraordinary thing and something that we should discuss more Carly. But I do want to mention that religious pluralism is not new to the UAE. In fact, you had Hindu temples going back to the beginning of the 20th century. You had churches opening up 50 or 60 years ago, and in fact there's records of churches going back to the seventh century, et cetera.

So in fact, Dubai, UAE is bursting with religious pluralism. But what they've done as a kind of high functioning administration is that they've decided to regulate religious life and all the different religious groups are now applying for licences to come under government structures. And we've been invited to do the same after 10 years of slower community development. So what that means is that fairly soon, and I can't give a timeline for it, we will be the first officially recognised Jewish organisation in Dubai and the UAE and with the exception of Bathran, that will be the first new Jewish community in an Arabic country literally for centuries. So we are very, very excited about that development, which is happening in real time as we speak.

- So let's just explore that a little bit further. You know, the UAE, you know, is one large country, but within that there are the state structures of the different Emirates. And whilst I know that Dubai is where we are speaking to from, you know, Abu Dhabi has also been growing in its engagement with the Jewish community and is soon to open a Abrahamic Family House, you know, in the same area as where it is opening all of the, these other museums, the Louvre, the Guggenheim, et cetera. So perhaps you can just tell us a little bit about the different Emirates

and then touch on the Abu Dhabi Jewish community there.

- Of course. So it's an important factor about the UAE is that it's a federation of these seven different Emirates, and they're all quite different, with different histories. If you look at that map again towards the peak, you have Ras Al Khaimah and Sharjah, which previously had been the dominant Emirates. And slowly the sort of sphere of influence moved southwards towards Dubai and Abu Dhabi. And that was partly because they had very clearly associated themselves with Britain, which of course at that time the UAE was a British protector, or the Emirates were under British protection, and also because of oil, which was discovered in Abu Dhabi most significantly in the 1950s. So they've all developed in very different ways, and I think for us as Jews, what's really interesting is that the expression given to Jewish life in Abu Dhabi will be very different from how it's given life or how it's given expression to Dubai.

So in Abu Dhabi you will have the Abrahamic Family House, which is this monumental symbol of religious tolerance on Saadiyat Island. And I'm going to show you a picture of it just because it's such a phenomenal building and it's in a very, very interesting location. So I'm going to share my screen again just wait for the slides to advance.

Slides are displayed.

So this is what the Abrahamic Family House looks like. It's the structure in the front with these three sort of platonic blocks. At the back is a synagogue to the left, a mosque, and to the right, a church with a single campus uniting all three. The structure at the back left with that wonderful dome is the Louvre. The structure to the right is the Zayed Memorial, an exquisite museum. And of course the Guggenheim that Wendy Fishers of course, are deeply involved in is also going to be situated here on Saadiyat Island. It's the centre of Abu Dhabi, it's the repository of all its most important symbols. And so the fact that they've put a campus of three different places of worship right in the heart of the UAE, just really says everything about their ethos.

They ran a competition and the winner of the competition was to David Adjaye. I saw some of the other entries, for example, Santiago Calatrava did a beautiful design where all the buildings were in a single structure. And I think in the end, what they're very clearly, I'm surmising now, but what's interesting about this design is that they wanted all the buildings, all the houses of worship, to be in the same campus, united by that beautiful garden, but they didn't want them all to be in a single building. And the point they're trying to make is that the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are strongly associated. There's a fraternal link to them, but they also have autonomy, they also have difference, which is respected in the structure. And I think that was a wise decision on their side. I'll quickly just show you what the individual buildings look like. So this is a mosque with a kind of stone motif and those beautiful arches.

The synagogue has a motif of metal, and I think my reading of the structures that it's a tallit hanging down, and the roof is meant to signify a sukkah with the palm branches on the top. And

finally, the church has the prevalent material is wood, and it's an absolutely gorgeous design. And if you see these amazing designs, the concept here is something completely monumental and symbolic, very much focused on religion and focused on the realm of ideas. If you come to Dubai, Dubai is going to be a very different concept. The community centre that we're going to establish is going to be a multifunctional hub of Jewish life that will include hopefully places of worship for the different denominations, but will also include a business hub and a place for art exhibitions to be curated and a language school where Jews can learn Arabic and can learn Hebrew. And so really a kind of a JW3 concept for those listeners that are familiar with the beautiful JW3 structure in London.

So a very, very different kind of concept of how Jewish life will be given expression. And that makes sense to me. Abu Dhabi is the capital city and Dubai is a place of commerce and a place of mixing, and it's eclectic and multinational. And so we as Jews will also give expression to the difference between the various Emirates and the way that we come to life Jewishly.

- Thank you. So this has obviously been a very rosy picture that we've painted up until now, you know, and some of our listeners will of course be, you know, I guess wondering whether there are any risks to being Jewish in Dubai or whether you've come across any challenging moments.

- Look in the beginning, and you sort of conveyed the feeling of the early years, you know, where there was a sort of a double knock at the door and you sort of, you know, entered the secret synagogue with a special handshake, et cetera. We had those moments as well in the early years, Carly, I mean, we started in my living room. There was a wonderful gentleman, Alex Pitifrun from Antwerp, who arrived in Dubai. And he phoned me one day and he said, Ross, you're dvequting on Shabbat right? And I said, sure, I am Alex. And he said, well, I'm doing the same thing. Why don't I just join you? Why don't we just dvequt together? Why don't we just pray together? And so he came to my living room on a Saturday morning and we decided that we were going to build up a minyan and as a prayer quorum.

And we also decided that we were going to always run on time as if we had a regular service with people joining, many people joining. And we were going to do the whole service from beginning to end as if we were praying with 500 other people and we weren't going to leave anything out. And in fact, that was a wonderful idea because people started joining and within about six to eight months, we actually had 10 people praying with us. But people would come into the house, to answer your question, and sort of lock the door and draw the curtains and make sure the windows were closed. And then there'd be those moments when there'd be a knock on the door and everybody wearing, you know, sort of prayer shawls and in the middle of prayer would sort of scuttle into the kitchen and disappear.

And I'd answer the door and there'd be the gardener. I'd just kind of, you know, asking me if I wanted to sort of, you know, water the roses or what have you. And so there was real, you know, you could call it paranoia or just at that point in time, not understanding the UAE, not

understanding the culture, not understanding the ecosystem, not understanding how we could fit into religious life in the UAE. And those early days, I called them the Robinson Crusoe, because we were still looking for Jews. We were sort of finding, you know, there were still moments in those early days when you sort of imagined that you could be completely alone and person by person the community grew. And as it grew, and as we became more confident, we started to understand and feel really comfortable within the context of the UAE, we started to really believe the notion of tolerance and the notion of religious pluralism. And I want to say as a community leader that's been here for 10 years, nothing has ever happened in the last 10 years that's ever disappointed or ever given us reason to pause in terms of that notion of tolerance and pluralism.

And that's both in terms of our encounters on the street. And in terms of my encounters as a religious leader dealing with senior Emirati leaders. I personally believe that we are one of the safest Jewish communities in the world, partly because Dubai itself is very safe, it's a very safe city, and the UAE is a very safe country. And also because there's a kind of a social contract here that relates to self-respect and mutual respect. And the idea of an anti-Semitic comment, a swear word, not to speak of any kind of an assault or the sort of things that unfortunately Jews have experienced in other cities. It's virtually unthinkable in the city.

And anecdotally, and based on all the research I've done, there's very little, if any, evidence of the kinds of difficulties that Jews experience all around the world and increasing, unfortunately, in Europe as well. And our members that come from Paris and Antwerp and Brussels constantly tell me that they feel much safer in Dubai than they do in the cities that they come from. And you mentioned yourself that when you came into our villa, a precious villa, the doors open, there was no security guard there, it wasn't what you encounter in India or in Germany or France, which is that there are soldiers with weapons and all sorts of barriers in front of the shore entrance. It's just an open door. And we've lived like that now for 10 years. So the simple answers that we feel very safe here, which is one of the reasons why I think our community will grow over time.

- And how knowledgeable would you say the Emiratis are about Judaism? Because one of the things we see in other parts of the world is how important the education system is and how that generally shapes people's, you know, views of Jews, be it in school textbooks or in, you know, in religious classes. So, you know, do the Emiratis teach about Judaism and what do they really know?

- Look, it's a good question. I mean, the first point to make is that I keep speaking about tolerance, but it's very relevant. The Emiratis have been working for a long time, decades, on instilling an ethos of tolerance into the broad community. When you listen to academic talk about, and when you read articles about the Middle East, people speak about the Arabic Street. And generally the point that they're making is that there's a gap between what the elite thinks and generally the elite is willing to be more open towards Israel and more tolerant to pluralism, et cetera. But the street is somewhere else.

And there's a kind of a problem in bridging the two. I think in the UAE it's not the case. There's a high level of legitimacy and trust in rulers and leaders. And I think the educational system over time and the introduction of the Ministry of Tolerance, et cetera, has been designed to deeply inculcate the notion of tolerance in the broader populace. And going along with that is an understanding of different religions. So I think there is a reasonably good understanding of Judaism. And the other thing to mention is that Muslims generally, I think have a reasonably good understanding of Judaism and Christianity just from their own text and practise. So I think in broad terms, there's a sense, there is an understanding of Judaism and there's understanding of Jews as being people of the book and being the original monotheists and having practises that are broadly aligned with Muslim practise.

One of two things that I think do need work is the Holocaust, first of all. I think that what we've seeing recently is very, very courageous open statements by Islamic leaders about the Holocaust. And of course in the beginning of this year, the AJC and David Harris as it's president and David Rosen as its Rabbi, took Muhammad Al-Issa to visit Auschwitz. And that event was widely publicised in the local media, the local UAE media in very positive terms, I mean a full spread on the sort of inside of all the local newspapers.

And Muhammad Al-Issa made very, very strong statements about the dangers of Holocaust denial. And he's a very influential figure. He's the Secretary General of the Muslim World League, which is a bit like the World Jewish Congress. I mean, it's a very, very important organisation. But the reason I mentioned all of this is that it's still necessary for those ideas to work their way into school curricula. And I think that's something still in progress. So I do, you mentioned a rosy picture, I also want to give a balanced picture, which is that obviously this recent introduction of a Jewish community and convergence with Israel serves to find its way fully into the public discourse, the educational system, et cetera.

- So we're going to come to the topic of Israel in a minute, but I just wanted to ask, you know, travelling between the two, Abu Dhabi and Dubai is, you know, is a road and there's no formal challenges. Is it really necessary to have, you know, Jewish community centres or buildings in both? Or do you think this is more about a symbol, you know, for the region and for the rulers to show publicly to the world how they want to position themselves?

- Well, I mean, the two cities are one and a half hours apart from each other. So they are close. But definitely I think you do need Jewish communities and synagogues in both cities. Abu Dhabi has NYU, our chief Rabbi, Rabbi Sauna is the chaplain Rabbi of NYU. There's Jewish faculty and staff there. And I think once the Abrahamic Family House is built, which will be in 2022, the summer of '22, I think Jews will come to live there.

And certainly for Jews in Dubai that are religious, the idea of sort of busing up and down between Dubai and Abu Dhabi isn't really realistic at all. So I think you do need a Jewish expression of both Emirates, and I think as I said earlier, they'll be different, which I think will also be quite nice. It'll allow us to explore in different ways what it means to be a Jew Dubai or a

Jew in Abu Dhabi. And soon I think there'll be the sort of normal banter, you know, that you have between sort of Jews in New York and Jews and sort of Los Angeles or Jews in Johannesburg and Jews in Cape Town. And there will be differences. And I think those differences will be quite nice.

- So now turning to the topic of Israel, you know, as we've all seen in the last couple of years, there has been a warming of relations between, you know, the UAE and Israel. And even as recently with COVID we know there was shared medical research and actually looking at working together to develop solutions. So how has the relationship grown between the UAE and Israel and does that have a direct effect on the Jewish community?

- Well, it's grown, it has grown and I think the impact on the Jewish community will be very positive. I mean it goes without saying that for Jews to live in a country that doesn't have diplomatic ties with Israel is uncomfortable, I think that's a truism. And I think as there's more convergence between the Gulf countries and Israel, I think Jews will be more comfortable living here. But I do want to, the corollary is not necessarily the case. In other words, even in the absence of diplomatic recognition, we already feel comfortable living here.

And I do want to emphasise that the embrace of our community, in my view, and I feel strongly about this, is not a strategic play in order to sort of boost convergence with Israel or achieve any other strategic objective. I see it as an organic impulse. So regardless of how that goes, I think our community will flourish and will grow. But of course, as the Gulf countries move closer towards recognition or some version of that with Israel, that's very positive for us. To give your listeners an idea of what's going on. So you mentioned a little bit earlier that there's cooperation on COVID. So what happened, which was quite electrifying, is that there were direct flights between Abu Dhabi and Ben-Gurion by Etihad, and they were providing COVID supplies for Palestinians.

And the UAE has been providing COVID supplies, by the way, for many countries, but a direct flight, well-publicized direct flight in fact between Abu Dhabi and Ben-Gurion is a first, a real historical development. And the second flight, the Abu Dhabi plane, the ATI plane had its full delivery, it flew its flag and it was not hiding its origin. So that was very exciting. And then soon after that it was announced that there was going to be high level cooperation between an Abu Dhabi Technology and Research Institute and Rafael Aerospace in Israel dealing with COVID and other forms of technology. And that announcement was made on the UAE and on the Israeli side. So that's obviously staggering, a huge exciting development.

Other developments are of course, that Israel will have its own pavilion at the World Expo, which has been postponed for a year, will now be in October, 2021. But the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is developing that as a priority project, and that's going to be tremendously exciting. And it's rumoured and I think highly likely that Israeli citizens on their blue passports will be able to enter the UAE for the first time. And so that represents very, very substantial progress.

There's also other developments, ambassador Tyga of course spoke directly to the Israeli public on the issue of annexation and spoke about all the advantages of the status quo, as he put it. He sort of dangled the carrot, so to speak, in fronted the Israeli public in terms of all the benefits of the status quo and where it was going. And so you had very, very strong statement. And then you had the Minister of State dealing with Foreign affairs, Minister Garash, speaking to Jason Isaacson of the AJC, and also speaking in a very pragmatic way about how the Emiratis are considering moving forward with Israel, which is to say that there might be political differences, but that doesn't mean that there shouldn't be recognition. In other words, you could recognise Israel and still differ politically on key issues of policy.

And the point that he was trying to emphasise is that the strategy of not recognising Israel, which had been tried for decades, had not really lost the cause of Palestinian rights, et cetera. And that something different was required as a strategy. So these are all very, very exciting developments. The timing for how they move forward is something very uncertain and certainly I'm not aware of it. And also to say that our community, our presidency, I think is helpful and hopeful in terms of regional convergence, but we are observers of that. It's not our mandate in any way to get involved in those kinds of endeavours. We are focusing squarely on the needs of our own communities and helping them to develop further.

- So you mentioned, you know, just now the regional dynamic. Obviously there are other Jewish communities not so far away from you. You touched on Iran being 50 kilometres away from the beach, and of course Bahrain, as you could argue, has led the way in some of these original developments. What's your relationships like with other Jewish communities nearby?

- So we have what hopefully in the future will become a fraternal link with the Jews of Bahrain. Ambassador Houda Nonoo belongs to a very distinguished Jewish family that moved from Iraq to Bahrain about 150 years ago. And her family, going back to her grandfather, were involved in Bahraini politics. And she had the distinction of being the first, and to my knowledge, the only Jewish diplomat of Gulf country.

So she was made the Bahraini ambassador to the USA in 2003, and I think she was also one of the first female diplomats of Bahrain. So she's really very, very distinguished and we are very close to her. So Ambassador Nonoo is somebody asked me to very often, she's got a deep understanding of the region and the context, and there's a sense in a that we have a lot to learn from her and we want to do exactly what she has done, which is respond to her context. And I think partly what our community indicates is the strength of Jewish communities to be agile and responsive to the context they find themselves in. So that linkage with Bahrain indeed is very strong. In terms of other communities around us, there is a strong and large Iranian-Jewish community of 15 to 20,000 people, but our linkages with them are very limited.

And even though there are 400,000 Iranians in Dubai, and notwithstanding the regional complexity, quite a lot of closeness, at least in terms of trade between Dubai and Iran, it's not easy for us to have linkages with that Iranian community. They don't have the confidence and

the sort of publicity and the linkages to global jury that we have. So unfortunately those linkages have not been further established. There's a few Jews left in Alexander and Cairo, which are supported by the Joint Distribution Committee, the JDC.

And we also have linkages to the JDC and they've also been wonderfully supportive of us, and I hope that they'll be sending a fellow here as soon as the COVID situation allows. It was intended for September. But I'm hoping that we can support those initiatives in Egypt and those are really quite old people, quite poor people. And we feel some obligation and sense that we should be supporting them. And that's something that I think we as a community should be doing. And then in terms of other communities, we don't have formal linkages to them, but our members come from communities in the region as well. So we had many Jews in the UAE and in Dubai that come originally from Morocco and had strong linkages to Morocco.

And the connections between the UAE and Morocco, quite important and strong. Mohamed the VI who's the the King of Morocco, convened a conference, the Marrakesh conference in 2016, which produced a very important document in terms of protection of minorities, which was a platform for work that the UAE was involved in. So I feel that the linkage to Morocco could deepen further and that's something that we should certainly, should certainly be involved in in working on. Saudi Arabia has a smattering of Jews, but no organised Jewish communities, certainly outside of the American bases. And the same applies to Qatar.

But these are all potential areas of growth in the future, especially if the model of tolerance that's being developed in the UAE is exported to other Sunni countries.

- And in terms of Jewish life, I know you've got kids, do they go to local schools and where do they get their Jewish education?

- So my children go to one of the many international schools in Dubai. They go to British International School. They have friends from all over the world, but including Palestinian, Lebanese, Emirati, friends, which is something very exciting for us. They study Arabic, they're taught Arabic, whether they learn it is another matter, but they're certainly taught to Arabic. And they have that life, which we want them to have, a very cosmopolitan life where they're exposed to people from all over the world. But these are children that are kosher, that are fully observant of their Judaism. And how is that possible?

Well, Chabad has a wonderful school, a virtual school that they created for their , their representatives all around the world. And I enrolled my children in that school immediately, as soon as we arrived in Dubai, even before we had a house, I already wanted my children to have a Jewish school. And right from the beginning they've learned Torah. My son is 12 and he's going to have his bar mitzvah, please God in November if COVID allows it. And he'll be reading the Torah portion of Toldot, which tells the amazing story of Jacob and Esau.

And my daughter is going to have a bat mitzvah very soon afterwards, next year in February.

And she's already learning Megillah Esther, which she will read as well. So they've got a beautiful deep Jewish identity, which in fact has allowed them to mix in quite a self-confident way with people that are very different from them. And my conviction is that religious identity actually can go hand in hand with a sense of confidence about being with people that are different from you. And that in fact is a very Emirati idea. Their idea is in fact that as you dive into your own tradition, you find resources that help you connect with people that are different from you rather than alienate you from people that are different. And that's certainly what the Emiratis are exploring as an idea.

- So you've touched a few times on the fact that your family keep kosher and you know, I know you said you found some things in the supermarket, but has the opportunities to keep kosher or eat kosher food developed in the 10 years you've been there?

- It has. So one of the ways it's developed is that my wife Elli has developed a business, which I'm going to plug if you don't mind, called Elli's Kosher Kitchen. She's got a most amazing Instagram.

- Go ahead, the question wasn't an accident.

- Thank you, thank you Carly. No, she's doing actually amazing work. And how did that happen? I mean we left a very observant Jewish community in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg that your South African listeners will be very familiar with. And everybody there observed Shabbat and was kosher, it was sort of not particularly unusual. In fact, it would've been unusual for people not to. My wife and I arrived in Dubai and we were the only household not just in the suburb or the city, but in fact in the whole region that was fully kosher and observant of Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath. And we've just experienced people coming to our house as a bit of a sort of a place of emergency, you know, for emergency food rations. You know, people literally stumbled into the door hungry for food and my wife, you know, would make them a sort of a sandwich or something just to stay off hunger.

And at a certain point she realised that there was a market for this and developed this wonderful business called Elli's Kosher Kitchen. And she's in fact writing a book with other Emirati women called Kosherati, where she wants to explore the commonalities between Jewish and Emirati food and certainly Emirati Ashkenazi food, which she describes as having a lot of sugar which is a commonality with the Emirati cuisine. So that's developed in a very beautiful way. She's also brought in wine, which is something that for a long time we sort of schlepped into Dubai in our baggage, which was not a pleasant thing to have to do. So now she's bringing in South African wine, hundreds of bottles of it, and there's also some kosher chicken that is can be found in Dubai. And we've had people bringing in kosher meats as well. There's a Rabbi that's bringing kosher meats.

So we are developing our resources and you know, I took the view when I first came out here that if you're an observant Jew, you can be observant sort of anywhere in the world, you can be

observant on sort of Mars. And Elli and I demonstrated that that was possible and we're very proud of that. But it's certainly much easier now to be fully kosher and fully observant in Dubai than it was when we first arrived.

- So turning now a little bit more to Dubai in its government, you know, in the western media particularly, the rulers of Dubai can be portrayed in a number of ways, be it totalitarian, be it authoritarian, you know, and there are certain restrictions on freedom of expression. Have you found that the rulers of Dubai has, and and their political leanings have had any impact on the way the community speaks for itself or any of the actions it can take?

- So I mean, as I've been explaining, all I've experienced in the last 10 years that I've been, the seven years that I've been a Jewish community leader is the most, the deepest warmth and courage among the Emiratis in the way that we've been embraced. And I do want your listeners to hear that it's something that I think the Emiratis really can be very proud of. And it's something that I do want to say and assert very strongly. Because when I read the same newspapers that you read, I see a sort of a level of cynicism that I don't think is fair.

And I hear Dubai UAE described in a way that just don't gel at all with my own experience living here. And I think that's a very common phenomenon for people that live in Dubai and in the UAE. You read foreign media and it just doesn't gel with your own experience of the place. I mean, the structure of government itself is somewhat unique, in fact. It's, as you mentioned earlier, it's a federation of monarchies. It's quite a traditional structure that goes hand in hand with a very, very first world super smart administration. It's a young country, it's 50 years old, it's very, very dynamic. So even in the last 10 years you see the introduction of new ministries and new ideas. So I mean, it's quite exciting to be here because one has a sense that history's sort of being made kind of in real time.

So I feel quite protective, so to speak, of the reputation of Dubai and the UAE just because I feel they deserve it. And if I didn't think that I wouldn't live here, I would just simply leave. So, and that would be the same, you know, that would be true for all of us Jews living here. We live here because we enjoy living here and because we believe in the project.

- And returning to the kosher food discussion for a moment. So, you know, food and hospitality is obviously an important part of both Arab and Jewish culture. With your Emirati friends, have you been, you know, introducing each other to your foods and your way of life? And is it ever a problem when you go somewhere and have to explain, you know, actually I can't eat this without, you know, causing offence.

- So the first thing to mention, and I should have mentioned it earlier, Carly, is that most of my wife's customers are Emirati. When COVID happened, and obviously Jewish business people stopped travelling to Dubai and the conferences were cancelled and things of that kind. My wife was very worried that she wouldn't be able to continue with her business. And then there was a very wonderful article about her in Al Arabiya, Arabic newspaper based in Saudi Arabia, which

featured her cuisine.

And all of a sudden Elli started getting requests for kosher food or Jewish food, so to speak, from Emiratis. And they've now become her largest customer base. And why are they ordering kosher food? Because they have a fascination and a sort of a pent up interest in things Jewish. And it's kind of amusing for my wife to cater for Emiratis because Jews of course don't mix milk and meat. So if you serve brisket as a main course, you can't have cheesecake as a dessert, but those kinds of restrictions don't apply.

And so Elli will send a brisket and, you know, rugelach made with butter and then a cheesecake with cream cheese and so all of all of that goes together. And she's now got a very diverted sort of Emirati clientele, which is really exciting. And people are also coming to us for Friday night dinner and wanting to talk. And I mean, there's just an amazing sense of meeting, which is wonderful. Rabbi Sonar, Chief Rabbi, calls it a family reunion. And it sort of does feel a bit like that. It feels like something very familiar, but a little bit different coming together like a sort of a long last cousin. In terms of telling people about kosher.

I've never had an issue. In terms of my own identity, I'm very open, you know, openly Jewish, I feature in articles and publications as a Jewish leader, but I also sort of don't wear my religious identity on my a sleeve, I'm sort of sensitive about, sensible about it, and it's on a need to know basis. Which includes my company and the teachers of my children and all their friends parents and you know, all our friends, et cetera. But if I get an a taxi, I'm not going to tell somebody that I'm Jewish, it's not going to come up in conversation.

But if I am in a situation where I need kosher food and I need somebody to help me, wrap something in tin foil or what have you, and that is definitely a need to know situation. And what I've realised about chefs and smart hotels is that all of them know what kosher is. Most of them have catered at some time in their career in a kosher restaurant. And if you say to them, I'm kosher and I need you to help me produce a kosher meal in your kitchen, I need to turn on the stove and it has to be double wrapped in tinfoil, et cetera, they've done it a hundred times before.

They tell 'em, they ask me straight away, what should I do with cutlery and crockery and all sorts of things. And really there's just no problem with it at all. I've never had an issue when using common sense, but it's really always been fine.

- So you've touched on the relationship between the Jewish community and the Muslim community, but you also said that a church is being built in Abu Dhabi. What's the Christian population like of the Emirates? And you know, is this also a growing population?

- So I'm going to surprise you, but you will never guess how many Catholics there are in the UAE, the figure is over a million. It's actually one of the largest Catholic communities outside of Italy and the sort of main concentrations of Catholicism. And in fact, as you know very well, the

Pope visited here, there was an open air mass of a hundred thousand people.

So there's a very, very vibrant Christian life here. And it goes back centuries. I mentioned earlier that there's an island in Abu Dhabi, Sir Bani Yas Island where there's evidence of Christian life going back to the seventh century, something by the way that the Emiratis are very proud of. And the Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the UAE are bursting with Christian life. So I'm very close to Reverend Danny Thompson, who heads up the Anglican church in Abu Dhabi.

And I would really say one of my joys here as a Jewish leader is that having a Anglican priest as a mentor has been sort of surprising and wonderful. But St Andrew's Church hosts multiple services on a Friday, literally every hour they have a new service, from some far flank of the Christian world. And in a certain way the Christians and other religious leaders and communities here are really been quite inspiring. And the Sikh community, for example, has a community of 30,000 people and a very famous temple in Dubai, where they feed 10,000 people every Friday morning. And we have to really be inspired by their example. And as our community matures, we should be doing the same. I feel quite strongly about that.

But to answer your question, Christianity is one of the Abrahamic faiths and it's deeply established. The early Christian missionaries did very good work as doctors and established hospitals in Al Nahyan which is where the rooting family of Abu Dhabi comes from originally. And they just developed very, very deep linkages and relationships of trust, which were reciprocated with churches and a very well established Christian world here in the UAE.

- So as we look to wrap up, you know, what you've accomplished in the last 10 years, you know, I think is really quite something. And what do you hope for the next 10 years for the Jewish community, not just in Dubai but but in the region.

- So the next step is for us to be officially recognised. And I think that's going to be an extraordinarily exciting moment for us and for the UAE as well. At that point, certainly in Dubai I've sort of shared, you know, the vision with you, which is to create a hub of Jewish life, which will accommodate hopefully different Jewish denominations, different Jewish organisations, a kind of JW3 sort of structure. And it'll be our opportunity as Jews to showcase the full richness and diversity of Jewish life. And I think that's going to be terribly exciting.

As there's a convergence with Israel and it becomes easier for Israelis to come here as well. And that of course will then massively boost our community, both in terms of its numbers and in terms of its diversity as well. And I think that what we will demonstrate by our presence, by our flourishing, by our growth, is that there's an entirely new narrative of Jewish and Muslim coming together that is possible for us. And Jews in Israel and around the world will be invited to see the relationship between Jews and Muslims in a very different way. And that's the hope of our community. And I really want to extend an invitation to all your listeners to come to the UAE and Dubai and experience it for themselves. It's one thing to hear about it and another thing altogether to experience it.

And literally as you've experienced yourself, Carly, within minutes of being here, there's a sense of ease, a sense of naturalness to the idea of being around Muslims wearing abayas and kurta and what have you. And it all, it just feels like the most natural thing in the world. And as our community evolves and develops and flourishes, I'm excited about the prospect of more Jews internationally and in Israel experiencing that ease of being together.

- Thank you Ross. I'm now going to hand back over to Wendy.

- Thanks, thanks Carly, lovely speaking.

- Ross, thank you for truly fascinating hour. It is so heartwarming to learn about a growing Jewish community being embraced in an unexpected place. Antisemitism is unfortunately often what makes the news around the world for the Jewish community. This story gives us hope. Your leadership, I know has been integral as the community looks to formalise. I recommend everyone make a stop in the UAE when we are all allowed to travel again. I'm so looking forward to returning.

Ross as you know, as you mentioned, I am going to be spending time there on Guggenheim business and I'm looking forward to coming back to the community to that lovely home where, you know, where you have your services. I could not, as I said in my introduction, I could not believe no security, was so warm and welcoming. And yeah, I'm really, truly looking forward to seeing how you developed there. So thank you Carly, and thank you Ross for joining us this afternoon and I'd like to thank everybody for joining us. On that note I wish you all enjoy the rest of the day and goodnight.