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Israeli chief rabbi gives his blessing to institutions in UAE, marking new era of religious Jewish life in Dubai and beyond

By Asma Ali Zain

Jewish telegraphic agency – (21.12.20) - <https://cutt.ly/XhMYX81> — As part of a historic trip through the United Arab Emirates, the chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel gave his Orthodox certification to the Jewish community center here, a fledgling synagogue in Abu Dhabi and other Jewish institutions, helping to mark a new era of religious Jewish life in the country that recently struck a normalization agreement with Israel.

In a symbolic gesture, Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef helped the Dubai center start writing a Torah scroll on Saturday night following the Sabbath and invested Rabbi Levi Duchman as the community's leader.

"The survival of a Jewish community depends on its adherence to Torah values and Torah learning," Yosef told the approximately 80 community members in attendance. Referring to Duchman, he said, "The Jewish community in the Emirates is fortunate to have a rabbi that not only teaches Torah, but is working to grow the community and its institutions."

The ceremony included special prayers in Hebrew, English and Arabic, while Yosef also expressed his appreciation for the UAE government. The Emirates, a collection of seven oil-rich cities in the Persian Gulf, had not diplomatically recognized Israel as a state before August, when the two nations signed an accord opening up formal relations, trade and tourism. Since then, over 50,000 Israelis have traveled to the country.

Before the accords with the UAE and other Arab countries that followed suit, including Sudan and Morocco, Israel had formal relations in the region only with Egypt and Jordan. "Dubai has already seen a wave of Israelis visiting since the Abraham Accords, and this is just the beginning of the potential for tourism and cooperation between Israel and the Emirates," said Solly Wolf, the president of the Dubai center.

At the ceremony on Saturday, Yosef also gave his certification to the Beit Tefillah Synagogue in the capital city of Abu Dhabi, which had its license approved in September and is searching for a suitable location to open.

"We are now entering a new stage of planning and growth, not only for the resident community, but also for the many Israelis who come to visit," said Daniel Seal, a spokesman for the Abu Dhabi community and Beit Tefillah board member. "It's an exciting time for the community, and I look forward to working with Rabbi Duchman on the many projects we have planned."

Duchman, who has been in the UAE for six years, said, "We have been waiting for this occasion for years to be able to sit as a community and get recognition." Addressing the

gathering, the rabbi said that he and others were working on building the Jewish community in all seven Emirates.

Seal estimated that about 2,000 Jews live in the UAE.

"We do not have an exact number because they have never been counted," he said. For Andreas Gulya, a German Jew who has been living in the UAE for 10 years, it's time to come out of the shadows.

"The entire turn of events has left me speechless," he told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

Attending the ceremony with his three children, Gulya, an investment banker, said he learned of the Abraham Accords through the media.

"Until a few months ago I dared not tell anyone here that I am a Jew," he said, "but things have changed for the good now."

The UAE has been more than home for Gulya since he met his Ethiopian wife here. "She is ready to convert to the Jewish faith, and I've already had a word with Rabbi Duchman in this regard," Gulya said.

During his four-day visit to the UAE, the chief rabbi also approved the nation's first Jewish school, which is being called "Mini Miracles," and viewed the plans and proposed site for the community's new mikvah in Dubai.

"We have 20 students waiting to be enrolled in the kindergarten, which will open for registrations from Jan. 3," Seal said.

Concluding his visit on Sunday, Yosef traveled to Abu Dhabi to meet with senior UAE government officials to discuss ways to continue to promote mutual understanding between Jews and Muslims across the region.

For Seal and others, it was a hopeful trip that could lead to more.

"While geographically speaking, the Middle East, and historic Arabia, was home to the Sephardic Jewish community, today there is much greater integration between the two communities around the world," Seal said. "As such, it was perhaps logical Chief Rabbi Yosef was first to visit, but of course, we look forward to welcoming the Ashkenazi chief rabbi, too."

Dubai to welcome Middle East's first Mormon temple

By Shireena Al Nowais

UAE (06.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2VQmq9T> - The Middle East's first Mormon temple will be built in Dubai.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will have a place of worship on the legacy site of Expo 2020.

The church, which has 16 million members worldwide, will join the UAE's rich diversity of religions and denominations. The decision was made public at its annual general conference in Salt Lake City, Utah, this weekend.

"The plan for a temple in Dubai comes in response to their gracious invitation, which we gratefully acknowledge," Russell Nelson, president of the church, said of the Emirati authorities.

The LDS Church, as it is known, has largely dropped the use of the term "Mormon", though its sacred text remains the Book of Mormon.

It claims a growing membership with more than 250,000 members worldwide baptised last year. Dubai and Shanghai are among the eight cities where new temples will be built.

"We are grateful to the leaders and people of the United Arab Emirates," said Elder Anthony D Perkins, president of the church's Middle East and North Africa operations.

"They have been kind, gracious and welcoming to us and to people of all faith traditions.

"The United Arab Emirates is a crossroads of commerce, education and innovation. The UAE resident population consists of more than 200 nationalities, where people of many different faiths worship, work and live together peacefully."

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints considers itself to be the restoration of the original church founded by Jesus Christ.

Adherents are "Latter-day Saints" or, less formally, "Mormons".

There are 168 dedicated temples worldwide, though none in the Middle East. The church estimated there are five "wards" and more than 1,500 to 2,000 Mormons in the Emirates.

Members are encouraged to give 10 per cent of their annual income as tithes. That has given the church tens of billions of dollars in capital, which it uses for charitable interests.

The UAE Embassy in the United States described the decision as a "very important milestone".

"This new house of worship will join the diverse gathering of other religions in the UAE, where we welcome multi-national congregations and have built houses of worship throughout our country," a post on its Twitter account read.

Hend Al Otaiba, director of strategic communications at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation, said the "UAE is proud to welcome the Latter-day Saints community to worship together with the future construction of a temple in Dubai.

"The temple will be the Church's first in Middle East, symbolising the spirit of interfaith tolerance and unity upon which the UAE was founded."

Speaking to *The National* on Monday, members of the LDS Church in the UAE described their delight at the decision.

"In this part of the world there is so much respect for religion," said Gary Roberts, 79, a political and financial adviser who previously worked with the administrations of former US presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton.

"For us to be given this kind of respect and the opportunity to practise is very heartwarming."

Janet Roberts, 67, from Utah, said: "I'm positive that there will be a great deal of interest.

"We have lived in this country for 17 years and we are grateful for the vision of the late Sheikh Zayed.

"It is easier to talk about our beliefs in God here than even in our home countries. That is because of him," said Ms Roberts, who works as an English content writer for Alef Education.

Last year, after Pope Francis's visit to the Gulf, the UAE announced the construction of the Abrahamic Family House.

It was named after the Prophet Abraham and will be built in recognition of the ties that bind Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

The three main buildings – a mosque, a church and a synagogue – will each lead to a central garden, under which will sit a museum and centre for education.