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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: cst@tauex.tau.ac.il. We are glad to share with you the twenty-third issue of Perspectives.

Notes from the Emirates

Tolerance is the New Creed. What Does it Mean?

Uriya Shavit

The reading of the Megillah took place in a private villa, without any exterior Jewish symbols, in a quiet residential area of Dubai. Several dozen men and women were present, most French Jews of North African extraction who have made the United Arab Emirates their home for business.

When the reading ended, a generous and delicious catered meal followed, with jubilant music in the background. Then some dancing. The mood was festive but reserved.

The opening of an official synagogue, so I was told, is not allowed by the government for fear of Islamist terror. The demand is anyhow limited. As many as 2,000 Jews live in Dubai, but most are secular or traditionalist.

I have visited a great number of small Jewish communities across the world – if “communities” is indeed the correct word – and they all seem to face the same problem: the majority is not Orthodox, yet an Orthodox house of prayer is the main, and in some cases the only, public space that brings the local Jews together.

Some of those present did not command the Hebrew necessary to appreciate one of the most accessible and tricky biblical texts. Still, certain texts have the capacity to bring people together and enchant them even if they do not understand a word.

More than two years into the Abraham Accords, the mystery remains: Why did a small and vulnerable Arab state decide to lead a revolutionary approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict?

A week in the Emirates, including meetings with low-ranking officials, offered two explanations. The UAE made tolerance its national project, a guiding principle. Its strategic decision is to be on good terms with everybody. Everybody includes Israel, just as it includes Iran.

The other national project is defiance. Defiance of the desert, defiance of the climate, defiance of conventional wisdoms. They made peace with Israel for the same reason they built the gratuitous yet beautiful Burj Khalifa: because they can, and because they want the world to know that they can.

I asked one official whether the relations between our countries would withstand anything. For example, what if Israel annexed the West Bank? He responded that the agreement was signed between states, not between governments, and nothing can break it.

Perhaps he was overly-optimistic.

Ahmad Obaid Al Mansoori (as the spelling on his card reads) is an unusual person. He is a businessman, collector, and the founder of the Crossroads of Civilizations Museum in Dubai.

The small museum, a one-man project, includes a magnificent gallery rich with Islamic books and artifacts and an equally impressive gallery exhibiting pearls and how their trade shaped the region.

It also includes the first exhibition in the Arab world on the history of the Holocaust and antisemitism. Dr. Ofir Winter of the INSS published an early analysis of this milestone in our For a Righteous Cause Report for 2022.

Along with elaborate chronologies and moving documents, the exhibition gives special attention to Muslims who were Righteous among the Nations. Al Mansoori told me he believed the history of the Holocaust should be conveyed through the stories of heroes who fought evil.

In its almost two years of existence, some 6,000 people have visited the exhibition. According to Al Mansoori, the Arab ones, who were around half the visitors, were primarily schoolchildren. The visitor's book included almost only comments from Israelis: some emotional, some patronizing.

At noon, Al Mansoori drove to a research project competition at the local American international school. High school students prepared visual and audio displays on a range of genocides – from Bosnia and Rwanda to the Holocaust.

Al Mansoori served as one of three referees and took the job very seriously. I don't know who won, but I am happy to report there are still places where teenagers address grownups they meet for the first time as "Sir."

Is it right to teach the history of the Holocaust in the context of other genocides, as is often done in the West today? This depends on whether the differences, rather than just the similarities, are also highlighted. For Al Mansoori, the exceptionality of the crimes committed by the Nazis and their allies against the Jews is obvious.

The combination of his eclectic collection and his conformist yet audacious spirit makes Al Mansoori somewhat of a Victorian figure. He explained that all his life, he liked to follow his heart and break through walls, no matter what people said.

At my inefficient hotel in Dubai, the Arabian Courtyard, there is a pub dedicated to my hero, Sherlock Holmes, with posters and memorabilia. I launched an investigation. The pub was opened 18 years ago by the general manager of the hotel, a Pakistani and an admirer of the great detective. My private collection is now enriched by a glass engraving of Holmes with the mark, Fahidi Street, Dubai.

The Emiratis are at their best when they celebrate what their country is – a lively, generous, embracing, and benevolent despotic meeting point of traditions where money is not an issue.

I entered the Abu Dhabi Louvre galleries and was surprised to see how clever and fascinating the exhibitions that explore cultural exchanges and universal patterns are. On top of that, where else can a person stand almost alone for fifteen minutes in front of a Da Vinci?

Where the Emiratis try to exhibit something they are not, they fail. They are not a scientific powerhouse, let alone independent innovators, so the Dubai Future Museum – intended as a celebration of what science and technology are about to bring – feels embarrassingly outdated and fails to inspire.

The latest contribution to the local tolerance discourse is the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi. The complex hosts a mosque, church, synagogue, and an exhibition on the commonalities of the three monotheistic religions. It stands out as the clearest demonstration of the regime's commitment to preach and advance a moderate version of Islam.

Since it opened, the venue has been particularly popular with Israeli tourists. At least, so I overheard a guide tell William Hague, the former leader of the Conservative Party. If it wasn't Hague, then he must have a twin brother. If it was, then at 62, he finally looks his age.

It pains me to write this, but I was not impressed with the place. The concept of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as Abrahamic religions is theologically challenging. The exhibition deals with the challenge through simplistic slogans that will, at best, satisfy those who could not care less.

Unlike the mosque, packed to the brim on Friday noon, the synagogue and the church were lifeless and empty, artificial constructs designed to make a point rather than to serve a public.

Our guide, a Moroccan, parroted in modern standard Arabic facts and commitments to tolerance and pluralism. I appreciated the words but could not ignore the music. The parroting reminded me of young Muslims I met and interviewed in radical mosques in Europe.

I much prefer the parroting of peace slogans to the parroting of hostile slogans, but I could not avoid the feeling that if instructed otherwise, the guide would replace one for the other. Pluralism is only meaningful where people think for themselves.

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