



# Approaching the Throne

**W**hat is it really like to approach the throne when you are not called?

I shudder to think about the terror which must have gripped Esther as she stepped outside the bounds of court protocol. I can imagine the times throughout Jewish history when our ancestors took similar risks, following in Esther's path, only to meet with a devastatingly different outcome. Protocol in a royal court is not about being rude or polite, but can be a matter of life or death.

Having lived most of my life in democratic countries, I have experienced only one comparable moment.

In February of 2019, I was invited to serve as the inaugural Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Council of the Emirates (JCE), the first new Jewish community to be established on the Arabian Peninsula in centuries. Families had been privately celebrating Jewish life together for over a decade before then, but the theme of 2019, "The Year of Tolerance", shone a spotlight on diverse religious communities in the country, including the Jews. It was for this reason that the growing number of Jewish individuals and families in the UAE decided to formalize a constitution, elect officers, and tell their own story.

The surreal nature of events in that year were not lost on us. We heard the announcement of the building of the Abrahamic Family House complex in Abu Dhabi, which would include a state-of-the-art synagogue. We saw the inclusion of a chapter on Judaism in a government-commissioned book entitled "Celebrating Tolerance." Leaders

of the local Jewish community were invited to participate as such in greeting Pope Francis during his historic visit to Abu Dhabi.

We felt intensely that we could not remain silent – אָם הַחֵרֶשׁ תִּהְרִישִׁי –. We advanced a unique proposal: to dedicate a *Sefer Torah* in memory of the Founder of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, and gift it to his son, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces. We suggested that the honor of writing the last letter with the *sofer* go to a member of the royal family. There have been *Sifrei Torah* presented to kings, czars and presidents, but never to an Arab ruler.



To our amazement, the proposal was accepted. As we began to prepare for the ceremony, we became aware of all of the protocols of the Court: what time to arrive, where to stand, and in which order. However, one overriding protocol principle was made clear to us: do not compromise on a single Jewish law or custom in order to accommodate the Court.

The Torah ceremony on November 25, 2019, was not large or public, but

intimate and modest. We sat in U format, as is the design of an Arabic *majlis* (court). I decided to open with the blessing on meeting a sovereign, שְׁנַתָּן מִכְבוֹדוֹ לְבִשְׁר וְדָם, a blessing to G-d for having imparted of His Honor to human beings. We completed the Torah scroll, and recited the Prayer for the Welfare of the United Arab Emirates, its Rulers and its Armed Forces.

For my remarks, I had been counseled in advance not to speak of gratitude alone, but of partnership and shared vision. Thus, the Torah represented not only a gift, but a symbol of mutual trust, kinship and respect. In fact, the agreement we made that day was that this Torah would come to the Jewish community annually for the High Holidays and Simchat Torah on loan, and then return to the authorities. And, on Simchat Torah of 2020/5781, we actually danced with the Sheikh Zayed Torah.

Esther lived through a time when if she would have remained silent and not approached the throne, the Jewish people may have been obliterated. Had we, the Jewish community in the Emirates, remained silent, no danger would have ensued. And yet the duty not to remain silent, rather to affirm and celebrate the good that others have done to us, is no less of an obligation. We must not let the values of gratitude, trust and partnership be engulfed by the silence of entitlement. We must not decline to say our lines simply because it is not in the script. We must embrace the firsts that come with our moment in history.

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