

UAE interfaith compound featuring new synagogue set to open Thursday

Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi will host its first Shabbat services this weekend; Emirati president to donate Torah scroll

By [LAZAR BERMAN](#)



An artistic rendering of the future Abrahamic Family House complex in Abu Dhabi. (Abu Dhabi Government Media Office)

A landmark interfaith compound in the United Arab Emirates housing a new synagogue is set to open Thursday afternoon in a ceremony kicking off a series of events over the weekend.

The Abrahamic Family House, located on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, also contains a mosque and church. It was initially slated to open in 2022.

The opening ceremony will be followed by a conference on Friday morning on relations between the faiths. The local Jewish community will hold Shabbat prayers in the synagogue, led by Chief Rabbi Yehuda Sarna.

On Sunday, a Torah scroll donated by UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan will be brought to the synagogue in a dedication ceremony.

The Abrahamic Family House project was announced after Pope Francis's visit to the UAE in 2019, the first by a pontiff to the Arabian Peninsula. During the trip, the pope signed a joint declaration with the grand imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, that called for religious tolerance and dialogue.

An interfaith council to oversee projects advancing tolerance was formed as a result of the declaration, and named the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity. The Abrahamic Family House was its first initiative.



A Jewish minyan organized at the hotel of the Israeli delegation to Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, September 1, 2020. (Raphael Ahren/Times of Israel)

“This is an important opportunity for all who believe in the power of faith and humanity. It will help build bridges between religious leaders and communities as well as foster peace and harmony in an era that is too often defined by difference,” said Rabbi M. Bruce Lustig, senior rabbi at Washington Hebrew Congregation, and a Jewish representative of the committee.

The UAE normalized relations with Israel in 2020 as part of the Abraham Accords brokered by the administration of former US president Donald Trump.

The design for the Abrahamic Family House, by the renowned architect David Adjaye, was unveiled during a meeting in New York in 2019, the second for the committee.

The UAE is already home to a synagogue in Dubai, formed in 2008. The new state-sanctioned synagogue would mark a significant step forward for public worship of Judaism in the Gulf state.



An Emirati embraces Rabbi Elie Abadie, senior rabbi of the Jewish Council of the Emirates, November 29, 2021 (Sharaka)

In January, the UAE embassy in Washington announced that the country would begin teaching about the Holocaust in history classes in primary and secondary schools across the country.

Last September, on the second anniversary of the Abraham Accords, 1,500 people gathered for the wedding of UAE Chabad Rabbi Levi Duchman, the largest Jewish wedding in the county's history.

Over the past eight years, Duchman has overseen the opening of a Jewish school, Hebrew supplemental school, ritual bath and the government-licensed kosher agency of the UAE, which has a community of a few thousand Jews.

Duchman is one of several Orthodox rabbis working to cultivate Jewish life in the UAE, including Elie Abadie and Sarna, who are not affiliated with Chabad.

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