



We've baked matzah in many far-flung places, and for years had planned to organize a bake in the Persian Gulf's under-the-radar Jewish communities, yet now that the skies have opened again, who would have believed the change in the Gulf states vis-a-vis Israel? No longer undercover, as we fired up the ovens, our race against the clock made all those joining us proud to be connected to something timeless



18 MINUTES OR LESS

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan

It was

to be a first. In 2020 the Abraham Accords that would soon open diplomatic relations with numerous countries in the Persian Gulf were still a dream, but there were a handful of brave Jews living in the Muslim countries of the Persian Gulf — and they would be eating matzah for Pesach.

We’ve been baking matzah together for many decades, and over the years have visited a range of Jewish communities around the world where we’ve shared the experience and education of matzah baking. And so, we had the idea of doing an experiential, hands-on matzah baking with the communities of the Persian Gulf to produce handmade *shemurah matzos* that could be eaten at the Seder, while at the same time connecting these scattered Jews living in the Gulf states to community, *mesorah*, and Jewish education.

It had all the elements of a suspense novel. Some danger, a worthwhile cause, and heroes and heroines who despite great odds and difficulties remained strong in their Jewish identities. We had initially connected with Jews in the Gulf states two years ago, prior to the Abraham Accords, and planned this educational bake then; but once Covid arrived and closed down the world, we were forced to postpone those plans indefinitely.

Yet who could have imagined that by the time the world reopened, the Persian Gulf would become a changed place vis-

à-vis the Jewish world? Now, we realized, our matzah-baking adventure would be even more worthwhile.

We have traveled and returned home, the matzos are baked, and we can now share most of what happened, although some names and places will have to be changed to protect various individuals. And all in pursuit of the ancient mitzvah of matzah, a Jewish symbol that has connected Jews to their heritage throughout the generations.

When we reconnected in 2022, our Gulf contact suggested a “tour” of Gulf communities, all under the umbrella of the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities, founded in 2021. The AGJC was a great match for us as we partnered to bake matzah in several of the countries in which they operate.

Bahrain, which we visited and wrote about for *Mishpacha* back in 2009, is the oldest and most established of the Jewish communities. Kuwait, which does not have relations with Israel, has some Jews as well. They keep a very low profile and often even their neighbors and friends don’t know about their religion. And Oman, also a country with no official relationship with Israel despite Bibi Netanyahu having visited the king in 2018, also has a small group of Jews who, like the ones in Kuwait, make sure to remain below the radar. For various reasons the bake in Oman didn’t happen, but the other two did.



The Bahrain Fort (top), with its strata from the Persian and Greek periods, is a good indication that Jews were here in those times. They surely baked matzah then too, but not in this modern kitchen



White Powder

We’ve baked kosher matzah, often *shemurah matzah*, with communities in Europe, Africa, and Asia, and felt this

would be a great experience for the Jews in the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC). Our first stop was the country of Bahrain, which actually had a Jewish community on and off, dating back to the time of the Talmud. Arabic sources claim that the Jews of Hajar, the capital of Bahrain, refused to convert to Islam during the time of the Arab conquest in 630 CE. The 12th-century Jewish traveler, Benjamin of Tudela, mentioned 500 Jews living there, the majority being involved in the pearl industry. The presence of Jews during all these times made a lot of sense after we visited Qal’at al-Bahrain, the Bahrain Fort. In it are strata from all of the various periods we are used to seeing in excavations in Israel, including the Greek and Persian periods. And we know that those empires included both the Land of Israel and what’s now Bahrain, and that Jews were mobile within them.

The modern Bahraini Jewish community, part of the fabric of Bahraini society, traces its roots to the 1880s, when Iraqi Jewish traders came looking for opportunities. While the numbers are unclear, somewhere between 660 and 1,500 Jews lived there at the peak, but over the years most left for the US, Israel, or the UK. In 1950, records show 293 Jews. Decades back, there was a road in the market named Al-Mutanabi Road, where all the Jewish businesses were located. Most of the shops on this road, also known as *Suq al-yahoud* or “Jew’s Market,” were closed on Shabbos.

Our contact was Ambassador Houda Nonoo, who served as ambassador to the US and Canada from 2008 to 2013. She’s the first Jew to be appointed ambassador of Bahrain — and the first Jewish ambassador of any Arab country. Houda was born to a



When we were here in 2009, the shul was like an abandoned stepchild (top). It's now undergone an exterior facelift and an interior overhaul

family of Jewish business entrepreneurs, and her grandfather, who was elected into the municipality council in 1934, was one of those above mentioned Iraqi businessmen who found his way to Bahrain.

Houda, who lived for a time in the UK where she attended Carmel College, a Jewish boarding school, is an unpretentious person who was excited by the idea of baking matzah in Bahrain, and we were quite surprised when she told us, “My mother still bakes matzah every year.” Her mom, born in Bahrain to a family of Iraqi descent, still holds on to her family’s traditions, and it was in her house the event took place.

Around 40 people participated, including members of the local community, the diplomatic corps, and the US Navy base. The newly appointed captain of a US Navy destroyer stationed in Bahrain had to remain on ship, but his wife and youngest child joined. They said they will make sure some of the matzah they made will get to him for Pesach.

White Powder

Before the trip, we made extensive preparations, including a Zoom meeting with all of the different country representatives to explain the process, including how to *kasher* an oven and what materials to prepare ahead of time. In order to simplify the oven issue, Ambassador Nonoo simply bought a brand-new small pizza oven to be used just for matzah baking. She also prepared the “*mayim shelanu*” — water that “rests” overnight and is used for mixing the dough — bought butcher paper to line the tables, and took care of other technicalities. We were all set to bake.

But there was more. We had to bring the unique matzah tools with us from Israel, such as stainless rolling pins, the hole roller, and the special *shemurah* flour bought in Meah Shearim to be used for these matzos. We bought 20 kilos of *shemurah* flour and spent two hours

measuring it out into half-kilo bags. A concern was that if our luggage was searched, the half-kilo bags of white “powder” might be confused with an illegal substance. So we split the flour between us, hoping that even if some was confiscated, a part of it would get through. But we needn’t have worried, as all the flour passed customs without a hitch.

Before we began the baking, we took a few hours to see the Jewish sites. When we visited Bahrain in 2009, the synagogue was a ghost of a building — four walls, a concrete floor, a few Middle-Eastern style benches pushed in a corner, and an old Iraqi Torah reading table in the center. A nondescript outside with no windows and some graffiti.

That was then. But in 2020, shortly before the Abraham Accords, the community renovated the building, and since the Accords it has received further attention. The outside has windows,



decorations, and signs, and the interior was fully redone, today usable as a proper shul. Ebrahim D. Nonoo, the president of the community and a cousin of Houda, explained that the deed for the shul’s land — an enlarged version of which hangs in the back of the shul — was not issued to an individual but to “the People of Moses.” That’s why the shul is called “The House of the Ten Commandments” with a sign in English, Hebrew, and Arabic welcoming community members and visitors. The Ten Commandments appear on either side of the *aron kodesh*, one version in Hebrew and one in Arabic.

Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, the king of Bahrain, is very supportive of the Jewish community and its customs. When we were here in 2009, we were told by Nancy Khedouri, Houda’s cousin who is now serving in the Shura Council, that at one point the community wanted to sell the building, but the king would not let them. Following the announcement of the Abraham Accords, which opened up direct relations with the State of Israel, Jared Kushner, senior advisor and son-in-law of then president Trump, commissioned a sefer Torah that now resides in the shul’s *aron kodesh*. The dedication reads: “This sefer Torah is donated in honor of His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa for his vision, courage and leadership in bringing peace, respect and religious tolerance to the Middle East.”

We heard a moving story about the king of Bahrain. While in New York over a decade ago, a rabbi met the king as part of a delegation. In an unintentional breach of etiquette, the rabbi took the king’s hand (something that is not done) and made the blessing one makes when meeting a king: “Blessed are You Hashem Who has shared His glory with humans of flesh and blood.” The king was taken aback and asked what was said. When it was translated, he was flabbergasted. He said this is the first time in his life that he was not asked to give something to a visitor but rather received something very unique.

Flour and Water in Oil Country

[Editor's Note: This section has been heavily redacted in order to protect the identity and safety of the person discussed.]

Kuwait, an oil-rich country bordering Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran, does not have diplomatic relations with Israel. That's not to say there are no Jews there, though. There is a very large US Army base in Kuwait where Jewish soldiers are sometimes stationed. Our Jewish contact and head of the tiny two-member Jewish "community" is a fellow we'll call David. We can't use his real name out of concern about the possible repercussions to him and his family. His neighbors do not know that he's Jewish.

Some claim Jews made their way to Kuwait after Nevuchadnetzar destroyed the First Beis Hamikdash. Whether or not that's true, we do know that, due to changing political winds in Iraq, Jews started coming to Kuwait — which was generally considered part of Iraq until it gained official independence in 1961 — in the late 1700s. The Jewish population peaked at around 200 in the early 20th century, and the kehillah had a shul and a cemetery. When King Faisal came to power in the 1920s, most of the Jews left, and by 1948, virtually no Jews remained. A few months ago there was a bit of a scandal when the US ambassador to Iraq wished a Happy Chanukah to the Jews in Kuwait. All sorts of local articles came out censoring him for even mentioning it, although one local blogger was brave enough to ask, "Why are we afraid of having some Jews?"

But even if the few Jews are undercover, Kuwait has its perks. This wealthy oil-rich state uses its money to build beautiful large public buildings. All mosques are built at the expense of the government. Natural gas for heating and electricity is free, and gasoline is 30 cents a liter. A



Our friend Ethan Shuman, who loves to join us on our halachic adventures, joins Ari G. in David's kitchen

young couple gets interest-free loans for housing, and of course education is free.

For David, life is good, and baking matzos for Pesach made it even better. We explained to him what was needed in terms of preparing and *kashering* his oven. He pretty much knew the rules, as he'd done it before when he lived in another country years earlier. Coming from a traditional family, he was happy to adhere to the stringencies. It was quite something to meet this sincere Jew living as mindfully as he could as one of the few Jews in Kuwait. He has mezuzahs on his inside doors, keeps Shabbos, *toivels* his *keilim* in the sea, and even built a succah.

In preparing for the trip, we discovered that there was a Jewish cemetery in the center of Kuwait City. On the way from the airport to David's home to bake matzah, we stopped there, but all we found were gravestones of Christians (including a man born in Beit Lechem who was buried 100 years ago). We did not see any Jewish graves though, leading us to suspect that the Jews were buried in the large empty area in the center that was topped with broken stones.

We arrived at David's house to find everything ready for this significant occasion — the first matzah bake in Kuwait in modern times. The flour was poured into a brand-new bowl, the water added and the dough rolled — the same process that Jews around the world have been doing forever. The table was covered, the oven was heated and we all said *l'sheim matzot mitzvah*, that these matzos are made with the expressed intent of the mitzvah of matzah. As we placed those matzos in his oven, David, his wife, and we were thinking the same thing: Matzah had been baked in Iraq for over 2,500 years and here we were again, doing the same mitzvah as our fathers' fathers' fathers did, links in a huge generational chain. Isn't that part of what Pesach is all about?



The restored tombstones in the old cemetery tell their own sad story of Rabbi Cohen's family: his first wife died in 1935, and his second wife died in childbirth, together with her baby, in 1947

Who Did You Vote For?

It was special for us to come back over a dozen years later and see a beautifully restored shul. Once again we visited the Jewish cemetery with its unique style of graves and peeked into the cemetery's little *taharah* room, which had been cleaned and organized. We also noticed that next to several graves there were Israeli-made yahrtzeit candles and newly inscribed Hebrew plaques. Not long ago, about 50 relatives of the last rabbi of the community, Iranian-born Rabbi Shimon Cohen, who helped establish the shul in 1935, traveled from around the globe to reunite and visit their community of origin, and they of course visited the cemetery. Rabbi Cohen is still recognized by the community as the architect of setting up the Jewish life in the country.

One encounter in Bahrain in 2009 gets filed with some of the more surprising experiences we've had in all our interesting travels to communities around the world. In those days we were uncertain of our safety, and were careful to keep our identity as Israeli Jews quiet. Walking around the *shuk* in the old town near the shul, we went into a traditional pharmacy. We enjoyed seeing the old-fashioned medicines, incense, and spices, some of which can be read about in the Talmud and *Shulchan Aruch*. The salesman, a short stocky olive-skinned man with a thick Saddam Hussein-like mustache and a unique beret was very helpful and friendly. Our heads were covered — one with a baseball cap and the other with a Muslim-style head covering so as not to be conspicuous — but after half an hour, as we turned to leave, he asked us: "*Yahud?* Israeli?" We really didn't know what to say, but after a long hesitation, we turned around and quietly said, "Yes, we are." A big smile spread across his face and what he said next



We didn't think we'd ever see our friend Muhammed again, since our mysterious encounter in 2009. Now, we joined together like old buddies (and how much older do we all look?)

completely threw us for a loop. In perfect Hebrew, he asked “Who did you vote for? The Ichud Leumi party or the Likud?” Totally shocked, we asked him how he knew Hebrew and why he followed Israel politics. He explained that he was an Egyptian who lived in Gaza in the 1970s and learned Hebrew. He was excited to show us that he could even write his name, Muhammed, in Hebrew. For us it was a watershed moment of understanding that the relationship between Jews and the Muslim world is complex and often surprising and friendly.

We’ve told this story in many venues around the world, and we wanted to try

and find Muhammed. We didn’t remember the name or address of the store but started asking for natural pharmacies, and we even showed around a copy of the original *Mishpacha* article with his photo that we brought with us. We asked a woman clad in black from head to toe if she knew of such a place. She told us she was a lawyer, and happily agreed to get out of her car and walk us to a natural pharmacy she knew of. The man there had a tiny shop, not the one we were searching for, but we showed him the 2009 *Mishpacha* article with the picture of Muhammed. He smiled and pointed down the road to the store where he said Muhammed had once worked. We walked

in and asked the owner if Muhammed was there. Although Muhammed no longer worked there, he called him up and within a few minutes he drove up and greeted us with a big smile.

Sure he remembered us — he greeted us like we were old friends, although he had no idea that we’d mentioned him many times over the years. We reminisced about that encounter, he told us that he now works from home, and then told us he’d love to remain in touch. We exchanged WhatsApp numbers and for several days he continued to send us greetings, including Shabbat Shalom, in Hebrew.

The Perfect Mix

At last, the big event was upon us and we fired up the new pizza oven, got all the equipment ready, everyone washed their hands well, and we gave a short class on the laws of baking matzah. There was a tangible feel of excitement in the air as the crowd embarked on baking matzah — many of them for the first time. We asked Houda and her mother Layla to lead the shouting of “*l’sheim matzot mitzvah*,” the phrase repeated during the baking process as an affirmation that

these matzos are being baked for the expressed purpose of using them for the mitzvah of matzah at the Seder.

The water was then measured and mixed with the contents of a premeasured bag of flour and the race against the clock started. As we know, from the minute the water and flour mix, we had 18 minutes to get the dough into the oven. As the first matzos entered the oven, the muezzin at the nearest mosque started calling out. One woman looked at us and said with a smile, “Time for Maariv.” Everyone there — members of the original community, ex-pats who recently returned for business,

arrivals from the Israeli embassy and US troops — got into the Pesach spirit as we encouraged them to sing some of their traditional Seder melodies. This year, when they’ll eat the matzah they sweated over, they’ll definitely appreciate the mitzvah of eating matzah like never before.

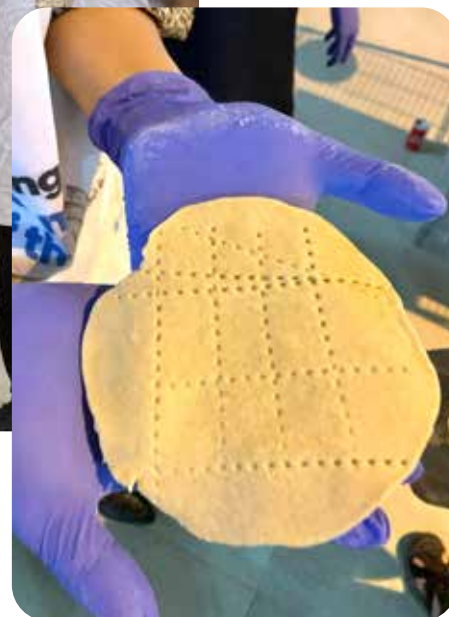
With several batches of fresh matzah giving the air an enticing aroma, we were ready for the final batch. We asked Mrs. Nonoo to show us the family tradition, passed down from mother to daughter for generations, of how she has been baking her own matzos for decades. She didn’t need measuring cups or scales.



Our race against the clock made everyone there proud to be connected to something timeless

Her hands knew exactly how to make the perfect mix as she gently separated the flour into piles of the correct size and then added the water based on her years of experience. She has a kosher-for-Pesach comb-like frosting spreader that she uses to make the holes in her matzos that leaves a repetitive design unique to her matzos. Her final product, baked in a regular oven, was similar in texture to the cracker-like matzah we know. We mentioned to Houda that in an Iraqi matzah bakery in Jerusalem that we visited, the matzah is stuck to the side of a *taboun*-like oven and is more like pita. She immediately took us around the corner to a traditional pita bakery that was producing its pitas in the same way they have been doing for generations,

Mrs. Nonoo's traditional Iraqi matzah (top). When we visited an Iraqi matzah bakery in Jerusalem, they were slapping dough onto the over, just like these traditional Iraqi pita bakers



similar to the matzah of the Yerushalmi Iraqis.

When our long day came to an end, we were pretty hungry ourselves, but as halachic adventurers, we came completely prepared. We had brought mozzarella cheese from Israel, asked Mrs. Nonoo to have some vegetables ready, and together made some spectacular fresh chometzdig pizzas in our erstwhile “matzah oven.” ●

