

OPINION

# Personal reflections on the definition of peace

By Michael J. Szanto  
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Michael J. Szanto (Courtesy photo)



Everyone has their own personal definition of what it means to achieve peace. I define peace based on the partnerships across government, business and faith that I witnessed firsthand on a delegation to the UAE, Bahrain and Israel with [Development Corporation for Israel](#)/Israel Bonds.

The delegation that I was privileged to join consisted of Israel Bonds lay leaders, primarily from the U.S., with participation from Canada and Germany. The Bahraini and Emirati governments wished to promote the growing friendship between their countries and Israel, as well as the Jewish people. The trip, led by Miami resident and Israel Bonds National and International Board Chairman Howard L. Goldstein and Bonds President & CEO Dani Naveh, represented the return to delegation travel since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and was among the largest groups of American Jewish leaders of all ages to travel to the UAE, Bahrain and Israel since the Abraham Accords were signed.

For many delegates, this was their first trip to an Arab country, adding even more meaning to the blossoming ties between Jews and Arabs that they witnessed throughout the journey. The different areas of the region that we visited had unique characteristics and cultural vibes, but what they shared in common was a warmly welcoming approach to us as Jews. The Abraham Accords, the normalization agreement between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, is the peace vehicle through which everything we witnessed was made possible. Generations of Israel Bonds leaders have viewed Israel’s economic progress and acceptance in the community of nations as a foremost priority.

In Abu Dhabi, government officials echoed the forward-thinking mindset of the Emirati people and the long-term potential for strengthening ties between Israel and the UAE. At the Presidential Palace in Abu Dhabi, we were treated to a surprise speech by the Israeli-American CEO of Oracle, Safra Catz, who was proudly introduced by our Emirati hosts as one of the most powerful women in the world. Her presence was a happy coincidence due to her previously scheduled meeting with government officials. She tearfully told us that as a little Israeli girl, she never could have imagined being so welcomed in an Arab country.

The positive outlook for the future of ties with Israel extended to Bahrain, where our delegation continued to be in awe of the support for Israel among the ordinary people and leaders with whom we interacted. Among the trip’s most impactful moments was our visit to the recently renovated synagogue in Manama, Bahrain. There we learned of the growth in Bahrain’s Jewish community, as attested to by Ambassador Houda Nonoo, a Jewish woman who served as Bahrain’s ambassador to the U.S. from 2008 to 2013. Ambassador Nonoo emphasized the importance of the Bonds delegation and the growing ties stemming from the Abraham Accords.

For me, the delegation not only strengthened my support for Israel; it also strengthened my support for Israel Bonds. The unique group of leaders that came together to travel halfway across the world represented a powerful expression of pro-Israel advocacy at its finest. As a young leader seeking to secure the future of the Jewish state, I’ve found the Israel Bonds New Leadership Division to be an unparalleled opportunity to express my values through action. The mentorship and support of Liron Ozery, who heads the New Leadership Division, has been deeply meaningful to me and served as the inspiration for my participation in this delegation.

The trip was far from my first experience with Israel Bonds, which was a local meet and greet with young Jewish professionals. My conversations with members of the diverse group in the UAE and Bahrain gave me hope for Israel’s future, along with the continued growth of Israel Bonds as an organization.

I reflect back to the moment when our flight from Bahrain arrived in Israel. Upon landing, the Bahraini pilot jubilantly announced, “Welcome to the State of Israel.” In a way, his statement reflected so much more than a simple greeting. His words demonstrated how Israel is at an historic moment, being welcomed into the region by two new friends in the Gulf. In the UAE and Bahrain, Jews are welcome as tourists, consumers, investors and even as residents. As part of this year’s Israel Bonds delegation, I experienced that welcoming environment firsthand.

*Michael J. Szanto is a voluntary board member of Israel Bonds Miami New Leadership.*

