During the ride back to my hotel, I struck up a conversation with the Uber driver, who was from Pakistan, where his family remained. He asked where I was from. “Israel,” I replied. He briefly turned around and smiled.

“You’re the first person I’ve met from there!”

“I won’t be the last,” I promised him, as I imagined how this highly civilized society will react when the Chanukah vacation brings Israeli tourists by the throngs.

As he dropped me off, I said, “Do me a favor. Tell your family in Pakistan they should be next to make peace with us.” He held up his hand for me to halt my exit from the car. After a moment of apprehension, I saw he had brought up the video app on his phone. “Here, please tell them yourself!” And so I did.

Of all the unexpected twists of 2020, nothing would have been harder for me to imagine than someone telling me that my next business trip would be to Dubai... direct from Tel Aviv! At the time, I already held tickets for two March visits to the US (trips both canceled by COVID), and the United Arab Emirates showed no signs of abandoning its fidelity to the decades-old Arab boycott of Israel.

Less than two months ago, it was announced that the UAE had agreed to normalize relations with Israel, and since then, through Linkedin requests and various introductions, I’ve had several worthwhile exchanges with Emiratis over video chat. A few weeks ago, an opportunity to travel to Dubai came about, and I leaped at it.

Never have I returned from two days abroad with a greater sense of optimism or potential. The purpose of the trip was to establish relationships as a basis for future business, and on that count, mission accomplished. But that was the least of it.

What I found was not just a hunger for commerce, but a genuine yearning for friendship between peoples. Each meeting evinced curiosity about Israel, and about Jewish practice, culture and history. That curiosity seemed to be colored by respect, and even affection at times. At moments, a strange sense of déjà vu set in — I guess, after all, we are indeed cousins. The tenor of my interaction with Emiratis was as unexpected as it was uplifting.

As with all life right now, this trip took place against the backdrop of the global COVID crisis. To gain entry into UAE, my Israeli passport was fine, but I also had to bring proof of a recent negative COVID test. In what appeared to be a highly disciplined society, the wearing of masks in closed spaces was virtually universal, and the case rate is low. This is in stark contrast to the situation in Israel, which at the time of my trip had the highest per-capita infection rate in the world. I saw many things Israel can learn from our new friends — management of the virus is certainly one of them.

My short trip was taken up mostly with meetings, but I had time for one brief excursion. With the temperature too high to make anything outdoors manageable, I took an Uber to the Dubai Mall – the world’s second-largest with over half a million square meters of retail space. Even in a world in which retail is in a tailspin and COVID remains a threat, the mall – which seemed larger than all of Tel Aviv – had a sense of vibrancy and safety. The architecture was eye-catching, the space immaculate, and it featured seemingly every major global brand under the sun. Incongruously, it also has an indoor ski slope.
Of course, as impressive as my trip was, UAE lacks some critical features that are taken for granted in Israel and America. Only a minority of residents are Emirati nationals. When one of my interlocutors pointed out a policy change that opened up an opportunity, I probed as to how policy got changed. He seemed almost puzzled by the question, then smiled and just indicated that it’s all up to the leaders. When an Israeli journalist asked his guide last week how the people felt about peace with Israel, she responded: “We follow our leaders. Whatever they decide we support, blindly.”

Accustomed as so many of us are to enduring the cynicism and hypocrisy with which much of the world treats Israel, I am more reluctant to pass judgment on these bases than I might have been years ago. Bright-eyed idealism has a place, but to condition all relations on a Jeffersonian ideal would be impractical and counterproductive. My instinct, instead, was to build relationships with individuals based on mutual respect, and hope that over time all parties can learn lessons from one another.

The business potential of Israel-UAE relations has staggering ramifications which will become apparent very quickly. Today, commercial tickets for direct flights just weeks from now became available. However, even as I followed the enthusiasm in the press and social media in recent weeks, nothing could have prepared me for the depth and genuineness that repeated across the conversations I had. Or the gutra-clad property owner who enthused about the kosher kitchen they’d installed to accommodate future guests. (In fact, we landed back in Israel to the news that UAE is insisting its hotels make kosher food available.)

Another meeting, scheduled for an hour, extended to more than twice that length, with deep discussions on history, religion, philosophy and politics. At one point, my new friend squinted at me and sought assurance that if Joe Biden became President, he would not race to reenter the JCPOA, the so-called Iran nuclear deal which, quite clearly, looks no less dangerous to Emiratis than it does to most Israelis.

Yes, dealing with the mutual urgent threat of Iran undoubtedly helped bring us together, and is an issue on which we are compelled to cooperate. But less than 48-hours on the ground made clear to me that relations between our countries are going to be about more than shared security interests and even more than mutual economic exchange.

Leaders in Abu Dhabi, in Jerusalem and Washington who were courageous enough to pursue the Abraham Accords are worthy of universal commendation, and profound gratitude. The word ‘historic’ is loosely tossed around – this accomplishment will stand the test of time and prove to be one of the most impactful regional events of the era. One hopes it will pave the way for fruitful relations between Israel and many other countries.

The evening before I departed, I was part of a large group that gathered at a restaurant attached to a luxury hotel. Even though I did not get the full culinary experience (because I keep kosher), it would not surprise me to find the establishment on a list of the world’s best restaurants, even based solely on the level of service.

Shortly after came the most memorable moment of the visit when Ahmad with whom I was in conversation, checked his phone and I checked mine. We had both received news alerts from outlets in our respective countries. My alert read “Israel, UAE to sign deal at White House on September 15 — US officials.” We raised our mojitos (mine alcoholic, his not) to toast the moment. And history did indeed seem to be in the air.

As we approach the final quarter of 2020, the year itself has already become a punchline of infamy. But life is nothing if not paradoxical. And this week gave me hope that 2020 may also be recalled as the year the promise of peace in the Middle East at long last became a reality. Inshallah.

Michael Granoff emigrated to Israel in 2013 with his wife and four children.