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By Nancy Khedouri

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New York was covered in a blanket of snow the Friday morning of March 4, 2016, when I arrived at the United Nations to participate in a Conference about Religious Tolerance and Pluralism and to share important facts about my precious homeland, The Kingdom of Bahrain. It was delightful to have met with many leading religious figures and to be enlightened by what each of them had to share.

In The Kingdom of Bahrain we are blessed to enjoy freedom of religion and freedom of worship. I personally prefer to use the words *religious freedom*, rather than *religious tolerance,* because when I participate at events whose titles carry with it the word *tolerance*, I anticipate that some will abuse that word. They will suggest that it represents a danger; they will suggest that it means “bearing or putting up with someone or something undesirable.”

Thankfully however, to most people, *tolerance*, has been redefined. We now understand it to mean “an attitude wherein all values, beliefs, lifestyles, claims to the message of truth, are treated respectfully.” Therefore, if taken within the context of this new definition of *tolerance*, i.e., if we are to promote a tolerance of all religious ways, beliefs, and doctrines and if we are to adopt a doctrine that will

stop us from being “intolerant” of other people's beliefs, we improve life in this world for everyone. We want to adopt such a way of life because we know and believe that a) everyone has a right to his or her own opinion in any subject; b) each one of us is permitted to arrive at a definite conclusion or truth; and c) we are all entitled to our religious views.

Pursuing truth in this context of “tolerance,” means teaching our children to embrace all people, without necessarily following their beliefs. It means showing them how to listen to and learn from all people, without necessarily agreeing with them. It means helping them to courageously but humbly speaking the truth, with gentleness and respect, even if their honesty makes them the object of scorn or hatred. Being “tolerant” of each other and respectful toward one another, brings about a true community and culture in the midst of any diversity and disagreement.

At the March 4th event at the United Nations in New York, much in the spirit of the typical Jewish Sephardic tradition where somehow everyone knows everyone, I met Rabbi Marc D. Angel, Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. I also knew of the Sephardic community members residing in New York, some of whom were related to my paternal family members—it is indeed a small world!

Rabbi Angel asked me to share an article for this issue of *Conversations*. I am thankful for this opportunity. I am a great believer as to how the power of the pen can have a great impact on thousands of readers throughout the world.

I would like to write about my favorite topic: Peace.

This wonderful topic of “Peace,” “Salam,” and “Shalom,” has no end. The topic is vast and it extends into many aspects of life. It relates to inner peace, while at the same time to peace in family. It relates to local societies, while at the same time to international peace. It is so sought after, yet so seldom achieved. It has so many definitions, some that we are already tired of because we despair that we many never achieve them.

But I wish to share with you another definition of Peace.

I wish to share with you the promise that it *is* achievable.

I want to give that hope that we can each achieve Peace.

The definition that I wish to share with you is the very name of my Country, Bahrain.

The Kingdom of Bahrain, has managed to maintain a tolerant and peaceful framework for life, with mutual respect for all its citizens, of whatever religious or ideological background.

For those of you who may not be aware, The Kingdom of Bahrain has for many generations warmly embraced and respected citizens of different religions. This is not a new phenomenon. For hundreds of years, every single individual in Bahrain has been treated equally without segregation or discrimination.

Bearing in mind my spirit of the Jewish heritage of more than 3,800 years, I am a Bahraini of the Jewish faith, who graduated from a Roman Catholic Convent School, “Sacred Heart School,” and studied Islam, scoring 100 percent for recitation from The Holy Quran. I take delight in sharing what my class teacher used to tell my Muslim classmates when they failed at recitation, “Shame on You! The Jewish student has scored 100 percent, and you have failed?!” Now that I have you confused as to my “international” identity, it is proof enough that we are all members of the universal civilization, which we recognize in each other’s faces, regardless of our color, race, religion, or geographical belonging.

I have always been and will continue to be very proud of my identity as a Bahraini, a Gulf National, and Arab. I am proud to be identified as an “Arab Jew.”

I felt privileged to have been appointed by His Majesty to The Supreme Coordination Council, to supervise preparations for The Inter-Civilization Dialogue, “All Civilizations in the Service of Humanity,” which was under the gracious patronage of His Majesty during May 2014, aimed to promote dialogue among different civilizations and cultures, to help promote a civilized alliance that ensures a better future for all human beings to live in peace and security.

This event witnessed the participation of the United Nations and a distinguished group of thinkers, scholars, and opinion leaders. It issued the “Bahrain Declaration,” which has been circulated as an official document of the United Nations.

We all continue with a positive determination to heed His Majesty King Hamad’s call for peace, tolerance, and inter-civilization dialogue. As Bahrain has always set a leading example for religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence, where people of all faiths have lived side-by-side in family harmony, it made me feel very proud that my country was the platform to host such a landmark conference.

Regardless of our religious differences, we are all children of Adam and Eve, brothers and sisters who are to respect each other and stop the fighting. There is no doubt that we all stand united against all those who terrorize the innocent and attack them. Acts of terrorism are aggressive attacks on human life, freedom, and dignity, a dangerous threat to all countries and people, anywhere in the world.

This keynote speaker at The Inter-Civilization Dialogue shared that in his opinion, this bringing together of all civilizations was taking place in Bahrain because of God's will, as it is said in the Torah that, the Almighty does not come to the biggest mountain but to the smallest, as history proves, "God came to one of the smallest mountains called Mount Sinai and delivered his message to Moses."

As this fact could not have been structured more beautifully in a sentence, I obtained permission from the guest speaker to quote exactly as per what was delivered the day of that event, when he further expressed that, "The Kingdom of Bahrain is the land of a wise Leader who has never changed toward his people and has always stayed humble, forgiving and rich in doing charities, thanks to his deeply embedded heritage. His Majesty is a forward-looking King who opened the gates to his country, while his citizens opened their hearts to us in line with their ancestors, illustrated in the personality of their late father, His Highness Amir Shaikh Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa, God bless his soul."

For those of you who have never had an opportunity to visit my country, I am proud to share with you that Bahrain is known for its uniqueness. It is a peaceful country that practices true Islamic values and principles, according to "Sharia," where there exists respect for the Rule of Law, and where peaceful coexistence and religious tolerance prevail.

The People of Bahrain have always been broadminded for many generations and continue to respect each other, regardless of religious or cultural differences. Citizens of Bahrain, whether Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Bahai, Buddhist, Sikh, or Jewish, continue to live amicably and remain a "United Family," joined together by trust, respect, love, and genuine feelings of brotherhood. They all integrate well into the fabric of society. A Unity Quilt is displayed at Isa Cultural Centre for all to visit.

There is no discrimination in employment within any sectors; applications for employment, promotion, training, or loans do not stipulate that the candidates reveal their religion or sect. This has been possible due to the strength of our leadership and the stability of the Al Khalifa ruling family.

There has never been any segregation due to religious differences. The belief in freedom, in reform, in human rights and in the rule of law, are part of the core values of Bahrain.

In Judaism, one of the most beautiful topics to describe is Peace.

During the Six Days of Creation, God made many of the same group. He made lots of stars, many rivers, numerous lakes, various seas, and so on. When it came to plant-life, He made lots of varieties, and in those varieties He made many beings of the same variety. Even later on, when it came to living creatures, the fish and then the birds and the animals, He made many different kinds of living beings and in each of those species He made many.

When it came to making humans, God created only one being (Adam and Eve were conjoined).

Have you ever wondered why?

God knew that Man was the only Creature in existence that had the potential of being quarrelsome (or worse). This was so because Man was the only creature that was to be endowed with absolutely independent intelligence. Although intelligence is so truly wonderful, it can also be the seat of conflict. So, God gave us all a familial connection, because when we acknowledge that we all really one, we come from one Adam and one Eve, we should be able to rise above that which separates us and accept that we are all one family.

Furthermore, when after the flood, Noah left the Ark, God gave him the Seven Universal Laws for Humankind. These laws contained six prohibitions (murder, idolatry, adultery, eating flesh removed from a living being, blasphemy, and stealing) and one instruction. This law commanded that every civilization should have a code of laws by which its inhabitants can be governed to live together in harmony. Effectively, this law would be one that obligates us to create an environment in which peace can flourish.

So, just imagine if Adam and Eve awaken from their deep sleep in their burial place in the Cave of Machpelah, and start touring the world to see what their offspring have done. Sure, they would be well surprised with all the technological advances that we enjoy. Then they have a look at their children and become horrified; “Children, Children!” they would exclaim. “What are you doing? Why are you fighting one another?”

In all religions, the gift of life is so important and must be honored, and whoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of a whole

world.

About 2,000 years ago, there lived a Sage by the name of Hillel. He had a motto: “Be of the disciples of the High Priest, Aharon; he loved peace, he pursued peace, He loved all creatures, and He drew them close to the Torah.” A non-Jewish person once approached Hillel with a strange request. “Convert me to Judaism while I stand on one foot!” Hillel answered, “That which you despise do not do to others.” Hillel added: “That is the entirety of the Torah, the rest is its commentary. Now go and study.”

With Bahrain enjoying freedom of the press, I authored a book entitled *From Our Beginning to Present Day,* about the history of the Jewish people of Bahrain. Words cannot express my gratitude toward the motivation, information, and photos I received from members of the Muslim and Christian communities, alongside my own, which enabled the book to be appreciated and valued as an important historical document.

We live in a world that is becoming more connected all the time. We have unparalleled opportunities to experience different cultures and get to know people of all kinds. I once read that “variety is spice for the life of the soul.” One is able to cultivate deeper appreciation by seeking to understand another’s spice, and by paying attention to the qualities of each variety.

During November 2008, I was privileged to join the Official Delegation of His Majesty and attended the Inter-Faith Conference at the United Nations in New York. The importance of interfaith dialogue was discussed, and personally, I felt Bahrain had so many important lessons and examples to show the world. Bahrain has set an example of showing tolerance toward religious communities and promoting peaceful coexistence, freedom, and understanding. It is the *only* Gulf country to have a synagogue, which has been established since the 1930s.

His Majesty was so kind to enquire about the well-being of all the Bahraini Jewish people who decided to leave of their own free-will after 1948 and during the 1960s. One meeting took place in London and another in New York during 2008. Words cannot express how touched they were by His Majesty’s humbleness and warmth.

In Bahrain, there also exist Hindu Temples and Sikh Temples. Sikhism has been practiced for over half a century on the island, and Hinduism has been practiced for over 150 years. From the words of Mr. Shastri VijayKumar Mukhiya, head of the Hindu community, I quote, “We have complete cooperation from the Government of Bahrain and from the local community and are allowed to

celebrate our festivals without any difficulty."

In Bahrain, there also exist a large number of registered Christian churches and congregations. The largest Christian community is the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, headed by the Apostolic Vicariate of Arabia. Furthermore, just to name a few of our churches, the Anglican Church is over half a century old while the National Evangelical Church dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, when medical missionaries from the Reformed Church of America came to Bahrain. Their legacy remains in both the Church and the American Mission Hospital, located in the same compound.

From the words of Rev. Hani Aziz, Chairman of the National Evangelical Church (NEC), Pastor for the Arab-Christian Congregation of the NEC and Founder of The Bahrain National Council for Tolerance and Coexistence, I quote, "We experience no restrictions. Bahrainis are open-minded and respect everyone's opinions, interested to understand about various religions while maintaining their own faith. When we visited H.R.H. Prince Khalifa Bin Salman Al-Khalifa, the Prime Minister of Bahrain, all Governors and the Minister of Social Development, we were welcomed and supported. In fact, we were encouraged to establish the existing Council into a Society, as that would be one of the first in the Arab world. Recently, we had a festival entitled, "Pray for Bahrain" in which many participated and the prayers were in over 30 languages."

When His Majesty King Hamad met Pope Benedict XVI at The Vatican in July 2008, he also had the opportunity to meet with Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for Relations with States, and The Vatican praised Bahrain's tolerance. Its information services reported the following: "In the course of the discussions, which took place in a cordial atmosphere, the Vatican authorities had the opportunity to thank the King for the welcome he has shown to many Christian immigrants in the Kingdom of Bahrain."

His Majesty described his visit as a continuation of the dialogue initiated a few years ago with the late Pope John Paul II, and I quote, "We stressed the importance of promoting bilateral co-operation and building bridges of tolerance, moderation and peace." His Majesty also highlighted the crucial role of the Vatican in advocating peace, openness between religions and civilization saying, "Such lofty values would only preserve international security and stability and enable all nations to live in a peace-loving world." A visit to Bahrain by the Pope was warmly welcomed.

Bahrain remains a country in which people *can* succeed in establishing themselves, regardless of religious differences. Because of the constant influx of

various nationalities, which shapes its identity, the example it gives to the world is that *coexistence can occur successfully, because it has done, and always will, continue to exist in Bahrain.*

One of many examples that shows the importance His Majesty gives to religious tolerance can be seen on a National Monument erected in Bahrain, known as the National Charter Monument (NCM), in section of *Multi-faith Religious Photography – Islam and Tolerance*. The Kingdom, under the directives of His Majesty, has been able to overcome all obstacles that *shook* the Middle East, by *maintaining* its “One-Family” philosophy, which has bolstered solidarity, stability and security, and we all pledge our continued and undivided loyalty to Bahrain.

In 2001, a National Referendum had 98.4 percent of the nation vote in favor of our Constitution, in which the system of government was declared a Constitutional Hereditary Monarchy, with Sovereign being given title of “King.” Bahrain, which was formerly known as “State of Bahrain,” was then officially declared as “Kingdom of Bahrain.”

My country had its parliamentary system restored after a gap of 27 years. Previously, it was a unicameral system. However, it was deemed best for Bahrain to enjoy a bicameral system of parliament, one chamber being appointed by His Majesty and the other chamber by direct free elections. This would enable all citizens of various faiths to enjoy equal participation.

It was indeed a great privilege to have been appointed by His Majesty King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa, during 2010 and re-appointed during 2014, to The Shura (Consultative) Council, to serve as a law-maker, together with my Muslim and non-Muslim colleagues, passing Bills (Draft Laws), for the benefit of our country and the Bahraini citizens, regardless of our religious differences. We all enjoy immunity and can debate about any subject-matter freely.

What happened in my country during 2011 was that a peaceful call for reform was hijacked by political extremists. Many who were unaware of the “essence” of my country, started misrepresenting facts. What happened in other brotherly countries was very different to what was occurring in Bahrain. Sadly, it has taken a few years for the truth to be finally understood; yet, one continues to come across articles that tend to repeat incorrect notions. When 18 of our colleagues from the Elected Chamber decided to resign during 2011, it was sad because they let down their constituencies, who needed their presence in parliament to debate about important subject matters, propose Draft Laws for the benefit of our country and for the nation.

A secret to Bahrain's uniqueness lies in its "National Unity." There is no doubt that during the temporary period of disruption that occurred in the Kingdom during 2011, the binding chord that kept Bahraini citizens as a united family may have loosened slightly but by God's grace and because of the wise directives of our leadership, this cord was not severed. In fact, the tie of National Unity started pulling everyone closer together in a stronger way as soon as they began to realize what they had taken for granted all these years. That was the blessing of national peace and security, which our country has always offered and the profit of a peaceful coexistence that always prevailed among its citizens, regardless of religious differences.

Furthermore, the call for National Unity to show support for a national dialogue attracted a crowd of over 350,000 people from all the religious groups. It was the strength of our nation that helped unravel the truth to the world, when opposition tried to unfairly tarnish Bahrain's shining image. Note that the word, *opposition*, does not seem the most suitable word to use because two or more individuals could disagree on a subject and this is classified as a healthy way of coexisting. However, when individuals incite hatred and sow seeds of sectarian division and aim to overthrow the existing System of Government, they can only be described as "destroyers."

Then, there was and still seems to be huge fuss made about human rights violations, but please beware of those who try to twist perception by the fabrication of lies, to unfairly condemn a country and inhibit its path toward reform, to try to make it lose the respect that it has gained globally through its strong diplomatic relations. Bahrain should instead be known for its continuous positive pace toward further reform, for the benefit of its entire nation.

The great courage of His Majesty inviting an Independent Commission of Inquiry to investigate into the 2011 happenings, was applauded. If mistakes were made, they were solely on an individual level and were punishable by law, as no one can interfere with the independence of the judiciary. As we all know, it is always important to obtain both sides of any story before rushing into believing what might be the fabrication, and thus be unfair towards the actual truth. With this in mind, it was rather unfortunate that respected foreign media were so quick to jump to their preferred, sensationalized version of the events in Bahrain, misrepresenting many of the facts about what actually took place; but once the actual truth was known, they still made no effort to correct misrepresented facts.

Furthermore, another word used by media was *regime*. Bahrain is not a regime, but rather, is a kingdom with humble and humane leadership who are

close to their people.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” One is filled with great pride to say that under Articles 18 and 22 of rhe Constitution of The Kingdom of Bahrain, it is clearly stipulated that “People are equal in human dignity and citizens shall be equal in public rights and duties before the law, without discrimination as to race, origin, language, religion, or belief” and that,“Freedom of conscience is absolute. The State shall guarantee the inviolability of places of worship and the freedom to perform religious rites and to hold religious processions and meetings in accordance with the customs observed in the country.”

I take the opportunity to quote from the wise words of H. E. Dominique Villepin, former President of France at The Bahrain Strategic Conference during October 2013: “The domestic situation has changed. It’s no more a conflict between persons, opinions, ideologies. It’s a question of identities, which is always the most dangerous kind of war, because it knows no limits and no rules and because the only outcome is radicalization and hate. Today, terror is the rule…. The truth of today’s crisis in the Middle East is that it is a political crisis, and a political crisis needs a political response. We need to have a broader look at the events in the Middle East to understand what is happening. It is a forty-year war that is, I hope, drawing to an end. The first conflict is between secularization and Islamism has been raging since the Iranian Revolution in 1979.” He also expressed that the “…. conflict between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims has also come out of control with the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and then with the Iraq war in 2003.”

The torrent of change that flooded large parts of the Middle East caused unjust reporting about Bahrain in the media, whose internal issue was totally different from other brotherly countries in the region. Kindly be reminded that human rights, religious freedom, peaceful coexistence, and diversity are positive cultural values attached to the Kingdom of Bahrain, which has *always* set the leading example by extending religious freedom to people of all denominations, respecting their right to exist without any discrimination.

One of the most urgent issues that needs to be addressed globally today, is the fostering of understanding between people of different faiths. Those who can develop such an understanding, tend to contribute towards the harmonious progress of our world. Bahrain sets an example for mutual respect and understanding among its citizens. For your further information, Bahrain is probably one of very few countries in which Muslim, Christian, and Jewish

cemeteries are next to each other.

Everyone is given a fair chance to play a role in the political life of Bahrain. For example, the Manama Municipal Council had Jewish members in the 1930s, and during recent years we have seen Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Bahais play an active role in the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society (BHRWS). We have even had a Bahraini female of the Jewish faith, serving Bahrain's Ambassador to The United States of America, to loyally serve our Kingdom in a diplomatic role there.

In conclusion, Bahrain is a very friendly and hospitable country and everyone who visits is really lost for words to describe their experience.

We all strongly believe that human rights are universal and apply to all people, of every religion, ethnicity or culture, in all places and at all times, so we should also have not a shred of doubt that Bahrain is at the fore-front in making this come true. For *we* are the people who live on its shores and who practice its ideology day after day.

I personally invite you all to visit Bahrain and witness for yourselves

"The Island of a Million Palm trees," that is dedicated to embracing all religions, setting a shining example of reverence for our fellow islanders' choice of faith, and continued tranquility in our lives alongside each other.

The Talmud concludes with a lesson taught by Rabbi Yehoshua, son of Levi: The Almighty did not find a suitable receptacle to contain the blessing for Jewish people other than Peace, as the verse says (Psalms 29:11): "The Almighty gives His people strength, the Almighty will bless His people with Peace." So, the closing word of the Talmud is *SHALOM*.

We pray for Shalom for our leadership and our country. We pray for the peace of all good people everywhere. We pray for peace among all humankind.