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How to think big: Israeli entrepreneurs show how it's done

A delegation of more than 20 Israeli entrepreneurs participated in the first Startup Nation Conference at Miami Dade College

The startups discussed best practices in launching and growing companies with Miami entrepreneurs and investors

The conference was a first of its kind in Miami





Dr. Maurice R. Ferré runs an innovative Israeli medical technology company called Insightec from his office in Miami, and one of its research sites will be Miami Children's Health System.

EConcrete is an Israeli company aimed at making coastal concrete infrastructure reefs to help support and sustain healthy oceans. Its first U.S. project for one of its new products is at Nova Southeastern University.

Woosh, a water filtration company aimed at making plastic bottles obsolete, is working with Miami Beach to put 25 of its machines around the city.

Israel-Miami ties in the startup community are already happening, but last week, the entrepreneurship centers of Miami Dade College and Tel Aviv University held the first [Startup Nation Conference](#) to stoke more collaborations such as these and help one another succeed. "We need to be thinking of big ideas — and that is what Israel is all about," Ferré said.

The conference featured entrepreneurs from more than 20 Israeli startups, all of which are pursuing growth opportunities in the United States. Many seek investment as well. These included VoiceIt, bringing voice communication to the disabled, and EXO Technologies, which aims to drastically improve GPS accuracy.

Noting that this is the first time a delegation of startups has come to Miami, Revital Malca, Israel's deputy consul general for Florida and Puerto Rico, said the conference is part of a bigger story.

Some progress made so far on this front includes the signing of an R&D agreement between Israel and Space Florida, Enterprise Florida opening an office in Tel Aviv, Florida allocating \$1 million for a

Tampa accelerator for Israel startups, and Israel taking part in eMerge Americas, she said. “And I am sure this is only the beginning.”

The conference [grew out of a weeklong trip to Israel](#) last spring by 12 leaders in the Miami technology community and led by Brian Siegal, of AJC’s Project Interchange. From that, Leandro Finol, executive director of MDC’s Idea Center, and Oren Simanian, who directs the StarTau center at Tel Aviv University, began [forging a partnership](#) between the institutions. Startup Nation Conference, planned as an annual event, was the first big endeavor, but other educational, investment opportunities and possibly a fund are planned.

[\[Read more about Idea Center-StarTau partnership\]](#)

“There are amazing opportunities here,” Simanian told the crowd of several hundred entrepreneurs, business leaders and investors. “Our hope is that you will help one of these companies to succeed, to scale up, because it is a win-win.”

It’s a win-win because these companies want to bring some of the world’s top innovation to the U.S., and Miami could be a part of that. It’s also a win-win because Israel is considered one of the strongest tech ecosystems in the world and [Miami’s emerging tech industry](#) can learn from the country.

ISRAEL, THE SIZE OF NEW JERSEY, HAS THE SECOND-HIGHEST CONCENTRATION OF STARTUPS AFTER SILICON VALLEY.

Israel, the size of New Jersey, has the second-highest concentration of startups after Silicon Valley. Israeli startups also have a track record of success, particularly in fields such as fintech, water and agriculture technology, and machine learning. In 2015 alone, there were 105 exits

valued at more than \$9 billion, said Dan Forman of OurCrowd, a crowdfunding company.

On a per capita basis, Israel spends more on R&D than any other country in the world.

The one-day conference was an opportunity to sidle up to Israeli entrepreneurs at breaks and ask them how they launched their companies or found their first customers. Many of them participated in panels about ideation, launching, growing and exiting — and for some repeating the process. Isaac Litman, former CEO of Mobileye, one of Israel's success stories, is now building Neteera Technologies. Its novel technology can detect electromagnetic emissions from sweat ducts to enable improved biometric identification, perhaps in homeland security situations, in addition to monitoring stress, fatigue, drug abuse, etc., in the healthcare field, he said.

[Ferré, who co-founded, grew and sold MAKO Surgical for \\$1.65 billion](#), joined Insightec and [took the helm](#) to help take the company to commercialization. Believing the future is in totally noninvasive, incision-free surgery, he was impressed with the opportunities for Insightec's MRI-guided ultrasound for specific targeted drug therapy that has never been done before in treating debilitating diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. Insightec's technology has treated 2,000 patients in studies at 120 sites around the world, and now includes a site with Miami Children's Health System for an epilepsy study, he said.

He hopes [Miami's emerging healthcare ecosystem](#) will play a role in other commercialization efforts. "We are set up for seeing ideas from Israel be commercialized here. The infrastructure is being set up here. As my father [Maurice A. Ferré, a six-term mayor of Miami] would say, Miami has the grit."

Another big idea presented at the conference was a portable cancer-screening system, which has been field-tested in Haiti and other countries.

“There are 5 billion people around the world who can’t visit a doctor. We want to bring that expertise to them,” said Ariel Beery, CEO of MobileODT. The company is starting with cervical cancer, a disease that if caught early, can usually be fought off with a simple treatment, he said, adding that “260,000 women around the world die from the disease each year that could have been fought off for \$28.”

So far, more than 8,000 patients have been screened by nurses for cervical cancer with this device, Beery said.

Dr. Ido Sella, a marine biologist, and his company ECOoncrete developed a technology that turns ubiquitous concrete infrastructure along coastlines into natural reefs by encapsulating the concrete with biology, naturally filtering the water, creating coastal protection and countering coastal erosion — without affecting the structural integrity of the concrete. It has worked on large-scale projects with New York and other Eastern Seaboard states, and is now commercializing one of its products, a marine mattress that can be used to help prevent beach erosion or protect submerged pipes and cables. One of its first customers is Nova Southeastern University in Broward County; it will be installed at the university’s marine station, Sella said.

It was a confluence of connections that helped Woosh Water Systems win Miami Beach’s business, and its first project in the U.S., said CEO and social entrepreneur Itay Tayas Zamir. Miami Beach will get 25 smart water stations, which will provide stations for cleaning water bottles and refilling them with purified water for about 50 cents. “Our mission is to rid the world of the plastic disposable bottle,” he said.
