

The Greatest of All Tragedies Is Obliviousness to the Cause of Such Tragedies

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The wonderful Persian author, Mr. Nourollah Kharazi, *nom de plume* “Nouri”, is a dear friend, relative, and teacher of mine, who is spending his ripened years in the Californian city of Santa Barbara. Nouri has recently penned a most interesting article in Persian, titled *For a Week, I Was a Jew*, about an old friend of his named Mohammad. Mohammad was a recipient of three Homayoun Medallions¹ – the Persian Order of the Lion & the Sun, akin to a “commander’s cross” – from the Shah of Iran, before his life was turned upside down in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution. Readers would likely read his beautifully written article more than once, as you may agree after reading the short excerpt below:

“Today, Mohammad, the man once honored by receiving the Homayoun Medallions, lives as if still being chased. He tells his friend, Nouri, “You wrote of your grandfather, who was forbidden to walk through a mosque, because he was a Jew, and hence deemed “contaminated” in the eyes of many people! My name was *Mohammad*, and my mother was a *Seyyedeh*, that is, [considered] a female descendant of the prophet; and yet, this past week I was afraid of stepping into a mosque, because I too had become temporarily a “contaminated Jew”; and thence I would experience the painful and shattering experience of the “Wandering Jew”, always on the run. For a week, I found myself a man without a shelter, without a refuge, wrongfully accused, a constant fugitive. Then and there I realized for the first time what it meant to be discriminated against, what it felt like to be Jewish, and what you people have suffered for centuries.”

Mohammad says that he has no fear of death, and yet, an insulting death, an unfair death combined with false accusations, humiliation, and torture, is a death which takes away from the person the grace of being human. The death of such an innocent man, wrongfully accused, with no chance of defending his esteem and honor, is the most difficult of all deaths; and the poison of a baseless blame or wrongful accusation would remain in his soul, well into and through the afterlife.

“I suddenly found myself fearful of my own shadow, even in my birthplace, my homeland, – just as *you* would – viewed as “contaminated” with no known cause or expressed charges. I was on the run, and I felt it in my soul, skin, and blood, what it meant to be a minority, and I got shivers from the thought. Such memories feel as if they’re engraved in stone; they remain with us, even after we’ve lain silent under a tombstone. For a week, I carried the yoke of a minority, the collar of the Wandering Jew, around my neck, a man on the run, hiding my true identity; and

Alice Munro, Canadian author and the 2013 Nobel laureate in literature, once said – and I paraphrase – that “an author can make up for the unfairness of fate in the best of ways. We may no more speak of a given author’s powerful imagination, but of his or her strong sense of realism. An author can be an eloquent voice for those who can’t speak for themselves.”

¹ The Homayoun Medallions, Levels 1, 2, and 3, a.k.a. “The Persian Order of the Lion and the Sun”, were among the highest honors bestowed by the late Shah of Iran for exceptional achievements. Following the 1979 Revolution, however, the recipients of such royal recognitions were often harassed and persecuted, for they were deemed among the associates and beneficiaries of then recently toppled royal government.

everything changed its meaning for me. **But bravo to you!** Bravo to you the Jewish people for your forgiveness, strength, and tolerance; for your centuries of patience, endurance, faith, and persistence. I understand now that to endure so much discrimination, insult, and false accusation, is above the limits of human tolerance. For two thousand years, the world has forced you to keep looking behind you, in fear that a dagger might stab you in the back.

“**Tell me, Nouri, how you’ve survived?** Is there a secret hidden in the *mezuzah*, the prayer which you place in a little box and mount on your door frames? I was a wandering Jew for a week, a fugitive, and as such, I’m entitled to claim a reward from you.” Nouri replies, “We have no spells, no talismans, no secrets. **We are protected by our righteous faith**, and also because we much resemble eggs! Unlike other foods, an egg does not soften as it is boiled longer. It becomes harder and more sturdy. Our very tenacity and faith have guaranteed our survival.”

Mohammad, with a lump in the throat, bursts into sudden tears; so does Nouri, who cries with him in apparent sympathy.

Mohammad says, “Nouri, I’m crying because these days I’m feeling bad for myself. But why should *you* cry?!” Nouri answers, “I’m crying for the pain of being a Jew. I’m crying for myself, my ancestors, and the six million innocent Jews who perished in the Holocaust.”

Mohammad passed away in 1994, in Paris, France.

One of the consequences of the socio-political transformations which took place in Iran was that millions of Iranians, both inside and outside the borders, turned into minorities, making them taste how it felt to be a smaller group, prone to unfair and arbitrary discrimination. The silver lining here was that they realized the flaws of their own thinking on discrimination. They felt what the Jewish people had endured for centuries, until in the 1940’s – alongside a range of newly independent countries which branched out of the Ottoman or British empires, such as India, Pakistan, etc. – we Jews too regained our long lost independence. Alas, however, those afflicted with the ills of discrimination, though they’ve recognized the independence of other countries by the votes of the United Nations, cannot tolerate the independence of Israel, as obvious and documented as it is, even though it was also ratified by a U.N. vote.

The despicable seed of religious hatred grows like a hereditary chronic disease. One day, it targets your local grocer’s son; another day, it may fall upon the prime minister’s child. Today, it could target Jews, Zoroastrians, or Christians; but tomorrow, it might befall the likes of Mohammad, Mr. Nouri’s friend. All of a sudden, they call him “contaminated”, for no reason, and that offers him a chance to experience, if only for a week, what we’ve been through during more than 2000 years of discrimination. Thence, he would understand, as he may reflect upon a Persian poem:

Like the ocean waves, our peace would be our ruin;

We’re alive and restless, for we know no calm.

Mohammad tastes the bitter poison of discrimination once he has been discriminated against, because,

It’s of no use to speak of the bumble bee,

To one who has not been stung once before.

For as it has been said,

You can't *feel* the burn by *watching* the flames:

Catch fire to fathom what I endure!

My friends: No generation will achieve its ideals unless the preceding generation has fulfilled its own mission - to try to eradicate its weaknesses. **Even though tragedy may be an effective teacher, the greatest tragedy of all is to be unaware of the causes of the tragedies we experience.** Let's study the obvious and concealed causes behind both the disappointments and the achievements of the Jewish people, even as we take into account the vast conveniences which are at our disposal today; and let us get rid of our evident shortcomings, one of which is **regression**: a point made repeatedly by this author for the past many years, because he is convinced of the validity of his concern.

A goal-oriented and responsible author can write about the specific topic of his choice without resorting to lies or insults. He can approach his subject from various contrasting points of view, and he can persist in his approach until he's managed to direct the attention of his readers toward the society's ruinous shortcomings, which have caused far too many disappointments over them centuries. (The expert author also aims to achieve this goal with succinctness. As Voltaire said, "If I had more time, I would have written you a shorter letter!")

This author believes that if a writer does not respect those whom he criticizes, his criticism will not bring about much more than bitter feelings and grievances. **Let us seek to uncover the causes behind disappointments, instead of merely offering our approval or disapproval of this or that.** Let us remember that in this context, a loss by one group would not result in a victory for another, but result in a failure for us all. My address is to the promulgators of religion, who preach to our youth and encourage them to take the religious path, in attempts to preserve our religion and to prevent our youngsters from losing their way. **If this task is being carried out in a responsible manner, we are sincerely grateful.** But please don't do so by beguiling them, by imposing on them, or by importing the *ghetto* culture of the past. The Iranian Jewish culture is more pragmatic than the culture of the oppressed Jews of the ghettos of Eastern Europe.

For 2700 years, we upheld our religion, even in the worst of conditions, without having had to resort to promoting the empty ritual that you emphasize today - without the ubiquitous *kippa* (*yarmulke*), *tefillin* (*phylacteries*), the *yeshivah*, etc. In the 16th century, in my city of Kashan, they slaughtered in the worst of manners 150 of us, the Jews, because we refused to convert to Islam; nevertheless, we endured.

For nearly 85 years, the proud Jews of the eastern Iranian city of Mash-had were forced to refrain from practicing many of our laws and rituals; so they upheld their religion wholeheartedly in secret. They too persevered, endured the ordeal, and survived to arrive at their destination. The adherents of such a special culture are too rich and too deep to join your path in order to "preserve the religion."

To achieve your aims, even as you claim to promote our religion, you should not first have told my child to respect his parents according to the *Torah's* commandments, only to then contradict yourselves by also telling him that parents don't understand our religion, and that only you, the preachers, do; that what you preach is *the* religion, and that what these children's parents and their ancestors have been telling them is invalid! You've gone as far as nullifying

their *ketubahs*, the Jewish prenuptial agreements, as *non-kosher*, because the rabbi who had ministered their weddings was not an Orthodox rabbi!

As long as you continue doing this, for every person that you bring into the religion, you'll disgust ten others enough to turn them away from it.

Don't tell my child that he is not Jewish if he doesn't wear a rounded piece of cloth on his head – one which makes him stand out in a crowd; and don't make him repeat those words to his father. Never mind that any non-Jewish person too could wear such a piece of cloth on their head. There are no instructions, no official commandments, regarding these skullcaps. ***One must possess reason in the head; there's no shame in striding without a kippah.*** To divide people and to pit them against one another, however, is an irreparable betrayal.

I welcome you if you truly wish to serve our community, but please aim to enlighten in the language and perspectives of our time, and not to fool our people, or to bind them with superstition. If you wish to serve and promote the religion, then put on the garb of rational-minded people and free-thinkers, devoid of all pretensions. Think of Rabbi Pehr, a colleague of the late Manouchehr Ghodsian. I can attest to the fact that in 1980 Rabbi Pehr placed his modest house in Brooklyn up as collateral to buy 110 airplane tickets to fly our children out of Karachi, Pakistan. He saved them, without any of the children or their parents knowing of his involvement. Or think of another colleague of Mr. Ghodsian, Rabbi Needleman. I am witness that when Rabbi Needleman learned that a child had died in Pakistan, and another had fallen ill with the same disease, he took a plane to Pakistan, in panic, on a Friday night, i.e. on the eve of Shabbat. He embraced the child, took the child to the Agha-Khan Hospital of Karachi, and saved the child's life. When I inquired regarding the prohibition on flying on Shabbats and Holidays, he responded that, **"My religion tells me, 'To save a life is to save the world.'"**

Do come dressed in true kindness and congeniality, so that we may learn from the goodness of one another. Advance the common goal of unity, and not divisiveness. Sadly, however, your deeds do not align with your aims. The absolute majority of our community abhors pretension and patronization, and they run away from nonsense and superstition. The late Khakham Yedidyah Shofet, the chief rabbi of the Iranian Jewish community, was immensely loved by our community, not because of his large hat, facial hair, special religious diet, or daily rituals and genuflections. His unique stature was a result of his open-mindedness and intelligence, for he was in essence an intellectual. He never interfered in other people's lives; he never handicapped a businessman on the basis of some nonsense. That's why many members of our community today go to respected intellectual rabbis of American synagogues, in order to flee from the vacuous ideas of the regressors among us.

Mirrors are found everywhere; that's why they are not precious;

But pearls are hard to find; that explains their high price.

We are in a dire need of a purification of thought, in place of an intellectual ossification in the guise of preserving our religious identity. **Mental rigidity and inflexibility equal a slow and gradual death.** The philosophy of the very progressive Jewish religion is much more exalted than such nonsense as attributed to the dietary laws, the clothing, how to tie this item, or how *not* to wrap that other. The divisive and inciting writings of religious commentators, and the constant attempt at wrapping their words unidimensionally in a halo of holiness, these have been among the roots and causes of many miseries of today's humanity, especially among the Jewish

people. Until the day when such inherited writings are around, the world will remain unsafe and insecure. We may not be able to decide for others, but we can rectify our own weaknesses.

Please tell my child that according to the Jewish laws, *derech erez kadmAh la-torAh*, that “good manners and etiquette precede the Torah.”

Our reasonable beliefs and rational faith are no less than yours. **Teach my child the Torah and not some commentaries that contradict modern culture and thought**, so that they would seek the truth on their own; so that no other would read in their place, and think and decide for them. **Let’s remind ourselves that an incomplete truth coming from any tongue is a complete lie.** Tell my child that our religion commands us, *ve-AhaviAh le-re’achA kA-mochA*, which may be translated as, **“Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”** Do not discriminate between men and women. By humiliating women according to some ancient documents and nonsensical ideas rooted in the ages of slavery, you have undermined the foundations of family, the holy task of marriage, and the philosophy of our religion, in the name of promoting our religion.

Please quote Hillel to my child, and tell him that **God created mothers because he needed their help.** I’m distressed not only because you separated my child from me, but also because you destroyed the bond of trust between a parent and child, in the name of religion. “Divorce” is a word to describe the separation of a husband and a wife, and *not* the separation of parent from child in the name of religion. Alas, we cannot argue reasonably with such people who deem dismantling families as a “good deed”. They teach their own ideas unaware that to teach some shallow knowledge would never bring about a correct insight. A culture can make progress and succeed only by accepting higher cultures and scientific advances, not by assimilating failed superstitions. The secret to our survival is what Mr. Nouri told his friend Mohammad: We are protected only by our righteous faith.

Let’s spend our living days awake.

To receive free copies of Mr. Norman Gabay’s essays, as well as his book, *An Invitation to Reason*, in English or Persian, please visit the following site:

www.BabaNouri.com