

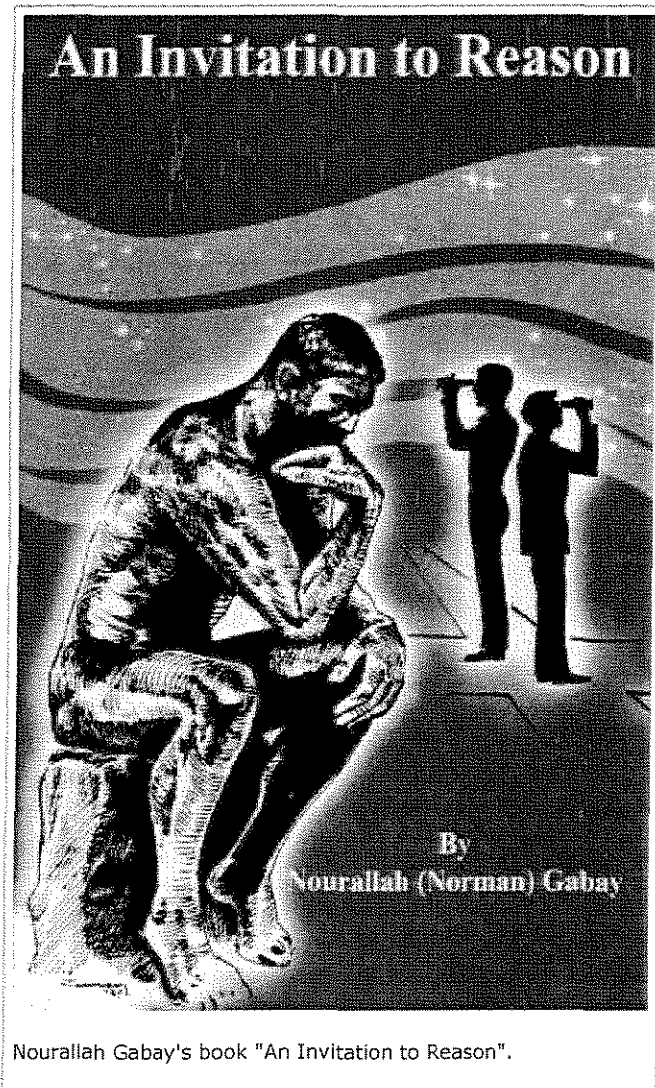
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Gabay's new book makes the case for moderate Judaism

BY KARMEL MELAMED

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Nourallah Gabay is perhaps one of only a dozen open minded and well rounded older individuals in the Southern California's Iranian Jewish community that I have come to know over the years. Aside from being a successful businessman, he has long been involved with countless community and Israel related philanthropic causes— an all around caring individual who has shown he genuinely cares about the continuity of our ancient community. Without any religious scholarly background, Gabay recently authored and personally financed the publication of a new book "An Invitation to Reason" to make the case for Judaism to steer away from religious fanaticism and to embrace a more moderate and modern approach. Gabay's book was originally published in the Persian language and more recently translated into English for younger Iranian Jews who cannot read Persian. "An Invitation to Reason" is not just Gabay's notions of what moderate Judaism but, uses hard facts from a collection of words of wisdom from Jewish scholars and others to make the argument that Jews today need to avoid following religious extremism.

While the book is not targeted toward Iranian Jews specifically, but rather to Jews of all backgrounds— the book comes out at an interesting period for Iranian Jews living in the U.S. who over the past three decades have been attracted to the various different movements of Judaism in America. During this time many Iranian Jewish families in Southern California and New York have in recent years been torn apart after their children have joined the Hasidic or ultra-orthodox sects of Judaism and nearly abandoned their own families who have not been as religious. This trend has been particularly heartbreaking for countless Iranian Jewish families who in Iran historically did not follow any specific movement of Judaism (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox) but rather embraced a traditional form of Judaism which could best be described as "conservadox".

Proceeds from the sale of the book will go directly to the "Bikur Cholim Hospital" in Jerusalem and with the publication of his book in English, I recently sat down with Gabay to discuss his motivations in authoring this new book. The following is a portion of our conversation...

You are not a religious scholar nor a rabbi but rather a successful businessman in the community. So what motivated you to write this book about moderate Jewish theology?

As you know, unity is an essential element for the very existence of any community. Without some degree of unity ruling over any given social formation and by extension, over the society at large, the word community would be rendered meaningless. Throughout the mass immigration of the Iranian Jewish community to America, a process which began roughly in and around 1979, I became involved in assisting the relocation many immigrants in their new country. During this period I came to realize that a small group of extremist so-called religious individuals, acting under the guise of "promoting our religion", were encouraging the children of these wandering families to follow a path radically different from that of their parents. In effect, these small group of preachers were tearing apart these families at a particularly vulnerable stage in their lives; and by extension, they were destroying the unity of our community, rather brutally. That's how I ended up writing this book, after having already published more than 100 articles in various Persian publications in the United States. I wrote this book to better inform our community and our society of the neglected dangers of the status quo, and to help prevent the further spread of such irrational divisiveness, or even sectarianism. I did so, because I believe that the mistakes of this small circle, even if motivated by good intentions, are in effect no different than if they had been spurred by ill intentions; and as such, they ought to be confronted.

The book has repeated warnings for the reader about religious fanaticism and extremism in Judaism that has often pulled families apart. Have you found that is an issue among Iranian American Jewish families today? If so, please explain.

The Iranian Jewish community is the oldest, and possibly the most intact, of all Jewish communities of the Diaspora. Unfortunately, exactly when the parents of this rather uniform community had lost control over their own lives due to the sudden shocks of an unwanted emigration, this so-called religious group, just like a businessman having found a fresh new market, albeit wishing well to prevent the youth from becoming "corrupted", drew our youngsters into a path of divisiveness and factionalism. But these young men and women were not being simply relocated, but they were also moving from one time, one era, to another. As such, they justly needed to keep step with modern sciences and civilization, instead of following, as it happened, in the footsteps of the ghetto culture. I should emphasize that to preserve the culture of the ghettos is not the same as preserving our Jewish identity: It rather means preserving slavery. Those who promote this culture of slavery do not realize that all of us human beings, before presuming a religious, traditional, tribal or ethnic identity, we're all endowed with a human identity, which is common to all members of human-kind. And yet, given all the accidental, superficial differences between us, humanity will never be able to achieve world peace without having first reconciled world's religions.

Over the years there has been some controversy in New York and Southern California's Iranian Jewish community about many Iranian Jews who have joined the ultra-orthodox sect of Judaism and followed that movement's religious teachings. Is your book a response to those who have increasingly been drawn to that movement among Iranian Jews? If so, what are your feelings about this trend in the community?

In my opinion, the best way to fight a wrong idea, or a mistaken lifestyle, it's to offer and maintain a better idea, a better lifestyle, a better model. My goal has been to prevent the further spread of this present form of regression by the way of informing people of some paramount yet neglected truths, and warning them of our surrounding realities. Otherwise, considering the bitter experience, which I once had to endure during a 100-day stay among a religious settlement of Jerusalem, I can't see any hopes for changing the ways of those already plagued with such indoctrinations. You see, historically speaking, within our rich Iranian Jewish culture, there had never grown such classifications as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or even Ashkenazi, Sephardic or Mizrahi. In the eyes of an Iranian Jew, to be a Jew and to remain a Jew, it simply meant one thing; and it also meant to get married to a Jewish spouse. Hence, it was not until these so-called religious groups intervened that this priceless, ages-long unity was disrupted and diverted. They turned our youth into some confused, rootless wanderers, to the point that today, some of them are facing major troubles when they wish to get married; or that in such no basic issues as food and clothing styles, or even in their relationships with parents and siblings, they find themselves in serious conflicts.

Your book makes many references to examples of "moderate" Judaism and how Jews over the centuries have kept their traditions but adapted the Jewish faith according to the environment and times that they lived in. In light of your book's message, how do you respond to rabbis and other religious figures in the U.S. today who may argue that your approach, that is not a strict adherence to Jewish laws, may be resulting in high levels of Jewish assimilation and religious intermarriage among younger generation?

To respect all religious authorities and their opinions has always been an honored aspect of Jewish culture. But the question is, which leader which rabbi, and what knowledge?! Today, for every one of those handful of truly informed, realistic and sophisticated rabbis among us, there are scores of rabbis, whose every word is telling us that they do not deserve their given titles and that their teachings would cause stagnation and regression for our future generations. Therefore, neither a diploma, nor a given status, by and in itself, should be taken as the validation of the words of a speaker in any religion It's thus left to the perceptive mind of the audience to hopefully evaluate for themselves the words and arguments presented by these preachers; and then, accept or reject them according to their own fair judgment and reasonable convictions. As for the increasing number of regretfully inappropriate marriages, I might say that this has its roots in ignorance; in the easing of global interactions and in the indifference of oblivious parents.

Ultimately, it remains the duty of the parents to maintain a healthy balance from the outset and to raise their offspring, from the early stages of childhood, as informed, moderate and balanced individuals—so that as they grow up, they would not lose their own balance. And so that they wouldn't fall into the traps spread on the road by friend or foe—by "one of us" or by a stranger.

What responses have you received from the older generation of Iranian Jews in the community to your book that was first published in Farsi?

The response has been generally warm and encouraging. I think that besides the kind attention which the book received in our community's published media, the considerably large sum of voluntary donations to Bikur Cholim Hospital of Jerusalem, underwritten by those who had received a volume of the book, is enough evidence of the readers' appreciation of my humble sincere efforts. Moreover, I'm pleased that the book has been welcomed by both Jewish and non-Jewish readers.

Were you expecting any opposition to your ideas presented in the book from the community? How has the response differed or remained the same as your expectations?

If I were to write this book today, I wouldn't single out any specific religions. Instead, I would just write about extremist religion, as a whole. As for the pro and con opinions of my critics, I take solace in the axiom that no author could possibly write in a way which could satisfy every individual or group. But fortunately, the content of this book is relevant to the followers of all religions, and not only my fellow Jews. I think that each one of my readers can find certain points in my arguments, which would align along their own convictions and beliefs. However, as a matter of principle, the rigid-minded fanatical groups seldom read the voice of the dissent, if they do read such things at all! And this in itself speaks of their neglect towards the realities of their time, and their perpetual evasion from the truth.

Unlike many other older Iranian Jews who have written books in the community, you have decided to have your book translated into English for the younger generation of Iranian Jews who cannot read Farsi. What is your objective in doing this and how do you plan to outreach to the younger generation with your book?

The reason for translating this book to English—amid undertaking the entire burden of its considerable expenses—as you pointed out, was first and foremost, reaching out to the younger generation— particularly, the younger members of my own extended family. Yes, this book, in Persian and English, is being widely distributed via the Internet, either for free download at my own website, www.BabaNouri.com, or through purchase of copies at Amazon.com. But at the end, it's essentially a gift: a memorabilia left by a grandfather for his grandchildren and his great grandchildren.

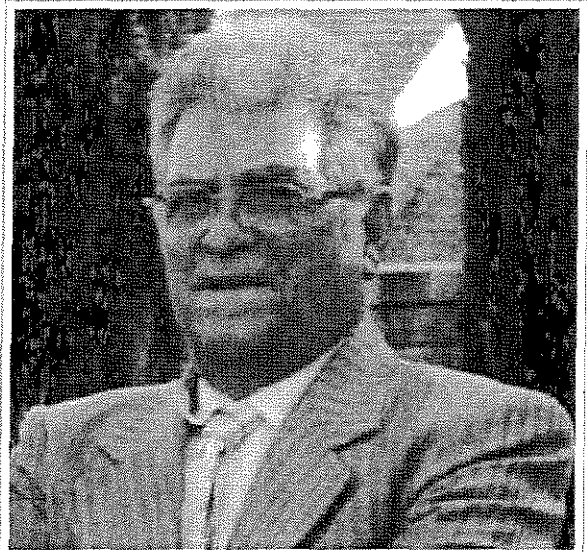
What dialogue if any are you hoping to start in the community with your book?

Fortunately, as far as I'm aware, people are already discussing the issues raised in the book, among themselves as adults, with their children, in their gatherings etc. As I've heard, they're evaluating the positions taken in the book, and the arguments presented therein, whether they agree with them or not. I think this alone is bound to help us reach at a better understanding of the issues put forward in this book.

You've lived a pretty full life and had any successes. What words of wisdom do you have for younger Iranian Jews living in the U.S. about achieving success in their lives?

The best advice which I could give to our youngsters would be this; be up-to-date and be well-rounded.

To learn more about Gabay's book, visit his [website](#).



Nourallah Gabay, photo by Karmel Melamed.

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