

One Doctor's Cruel Slap in the Face, Another's Answer of Building a Hospital

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"No responsibility is greater than being a human being."

— Attributed to Albert Schweitzer

At the height of WWII and the occupation of Iran by foreign forces, **Dr. Rouhollah Sapir**, may he rest in peace, the president of The Center for Iranian Jewish Youth, witnessed a fatal scene that took place in a government-run hospital. As she was giving birth, a young Jewish woman cried out of pain and asked for help. A brutish doctor insulted the young woman and said, "Stop acting out like a Jew!", then slapped her so hard in the face that the woman, in pain and as she was delivering the baby, fell off of the hospital bed. In the meantime, one of the nurses further insulted her and said, "You are screaming, as if it wasn't bad enough already that you the Jew contaminated the place?!" At the end, due to the neglect of the doctor and the nurses, both the mother and her baby died.



Dr. Rouhollah Sapir
(1911-1943)

The poet **Fereydoun Moshiri** was right, when he wrote,

No beast does to its kind / What these non-humans do to another's life. / I don't speak of the shriveling of a leaf, / among a people patient with calamities. / I speak of the death of kindness, the death of love, / I speak of the death of humanity.

A great man once said, "In their childhood, feed them the dog's milk, so that they may learn loyalty as they grow."

Sometimes, I wonder how the human species, especially the minorities, have survived to this date, despite the abundance of the mad men and women who've deemed it a "rewarding good

deed” to carry out cruelties. Don’t be deluded to think that humanoids such as the cruel physician in that Iranian hospital can’t be found in other ranks and professions. Alas, they do exist; and as long as religious commands and seditious writings, stamped with the seal of holiness, are taught and sanctified, anti-humanism will persist.

The racist predisposition around the world did not begin, nor will it end, with anti-Semitism. Rather, **it’s been an acquired trait that pertains to the hatred of one human being toward another**. It manifests itself everyday at some corner of the world, in the despicable form of a psychopath such as that brutal doctor, the kind of people who once they’ve seized power, they just hate with baseless prejudice, one day targeting the Jews, and at other times the Christians, Muslims, or Hindus. Even as now, we observe the cruelties carried out against the Izadys, Kurds, Christians, Coptics, and Muslims, by the incompetent politicians, undeserving religious figures, and other power-wielding psychopathic figures of the Middle East, under the blessed eyes of the United Nations. For crying out aloud, “How patient is God!” In the 1950’s, Arab countries expelled nearly 850,000 of their Jewish citizens and confiscated their properties, and yet, the world remained silent! Today, we may take solace in an old Persian proverb, “If God wishes so, even the enemy could bring you goodness.” We may feel grateful that at the end, things have worked out well for the Jewish people. Otherwise, it’s clear “what things he would do to the others, the man who harmed his mother!”

Mark Twain once said, and I paraphrase, “The hardest thing to do is to argue with someone who’s promised himself not to understand the truth.” Woe the day when the problem involves religious, racial or sectarian hatred. Take a look around: Should all of these be ruined for things to flourish? The Nature would say, Yes! Even science, by the law of evolution, continues to destroy and improve things. But Judaism, with its humane, constructive and kind eyes, instead of the destruction, speaks of *tikkun olam*, that is, “to repair the world”, to wish and change the world for better.

As for Dr. Sapir’s reaction to the despicable behavior of the doctor and the nurses, we may say: **“What comes to people’s minds, it shows their understanding of things, whereas what they do, it shows their wishes. Man’s body is like a garden, and his Will the gardener.”**

Dr. Rouhollah Sapir, this pure and righteous man, can’t reach for the law. Neither is he thinking of revenge. He’s an educated young man born in 1911 C.E., the son of Nosrat Khanom

and Aghajan, and the grandson of Hakim Shlomo, the Qajar court's doctor. He thinks in human terms, and he thinks up a humane solution. Thus, with quivering voice and tearful eyes, he cries out aloud, "I shall build a Birth Center in the poor Jewish neighborhood, so that its people shall no more need such humanoids without a conscience at such hospitals!" He puts forward his proposal before The Center for Iranian Jewish Youth, where everyone welcomes the idea. On the tragic day of the funeral of the mother and her baby, everyone is deeply moved. A team begins search for a suitable property to found the hospital, but they're faced with a shortage of useful land or the budget to purchase it. For awhile, they treat patients at the synagogue, until they remember the *Talmud* and how it gives priority to the acquiring of knowledge, **this secret of Jewish survival**, where it says, "When necessary, sell the synagogue to build a school." Thus, they decide to demolish the Mullah Haninah synagogue at the heart of the Jewish neighborhood to build a hospital in its place! The caretakers of the synagogue, the enlightened nephews of Mullah Haninah, namely the late Monsieur Haninah and Mr. Morteza Melammed, agree with the plan. As the stone-laying ceremony begins, with the considerable assistance of the late Frank Eyni, an Iraqi Jew who lived in Iran, and by the efforts of the late Abdollah Nayeb Shem-Toub, two adjacent houses are bought and attached to the property. Finally, with the help of all the philanthropists of the community, 50 of whose names are available to me, the first section of the hospital is built. Over time, as new facilities and urgent necessities emerge, the hospital building is expanded, until it grows into a respectable hospital, equipped with a full range of facilities, what today proudly carries the sign of "**Dr. Sapir Hospital**" above its entrance.



1942, Tehran. Hadji Yeshou'a, middle, holding a pick mattock, leads the stone-laying ceremony of the building.

From Right to Left, to the extent we could recognize:
 Rouhollah Rokh-sar, Khan-Baba Shaoul-pour, Asher Rastegar, Habib Mikaeel, Shokrollah Imreh, Mousa Shaban Mash-hadi (Seated), Habib Darvish-pour, Dayee Yaghoub Massa-band (holding a shovel), Khalil Dardashti, Dr. Yousef Pirouzban (then president of the Kanoon), Elyas Es-haghian, Shokrollah Aghae-pour, Hadji Yeshou'a (holding a pick mattock), Abdollah Nayeb Matloub, Dr. Shokrollah Matloubian, Aghdas Khanom.

Much can be said about the establishment and expansion of this hospital. **Dr. Sapir Hospital** was built about 75 years ago, almost empty-handed, to offer free care, based on the mottos, “**Love your kind as you would love yourself,**” and “**I don’t ask for your religion; I ask where you are hurting.**” Since then, the foundation has been through many ups and downs, has seen many incidents and events, and has had some admirable supporters, whose detailed story in their historical order can’t be written without access to relevant documents. As such, I ask the forgiveness of all who’ve been involved in this humanitarian endeavor, and for the purposes of this article, I’ll remain content to recalling few corners of its history. It’s the **aim** of this short article to inform the next generation and help them gather experience, even as we remember the good names of some of the Jewish community’s dear philanthropists, as well as international humanitarian Jewish organizations. Those would include the honorable directors of the American Jewish Joint, a.k.a. the Joint or JDC, whose Iranian branch was supervised by the late Dr. Nassim Touba and Dr. Morteza Mo’alem. Similar to Alliance Israélite Universelle, though in a different manner and at a different time, the American Joint came to the help of Iranian Jews, bringing to mind the Hebrew saying, *kol yisra’el arevim zeh la-zeh*. No doubt, our community will be indebted forever to the kindness of these two organizations, and we shall continue to appreciate their efforts. For we know that, “everyone remembers me in my happiness, but the true friend remembers me in my sadness.” Beyond appreciation,



Board of Directors of the Hospital

From right to left, Misters Ebrahim Kahen (tax issues), Shokrollah Imreh, Hagh-Nazar Taban, Abdollah Zahabian, Dr. Delijani, Yousef Oheb, Dr. Kamkar, Sofer Forouzan, Mousa Yadid-Zion, Agha-jan Yadid-Zion Omid, Samad Kashfi, Dr. Darvish, Daghighian, Rahimian (accountant).

(*) Misters Morteza Sene’i and Elyas Ghodsian do not appear in this photo.

we Iranian Jews ought to be inspired by the American Joint and Alliance Israélite and do our share in paying forward the good and help the others.

Within a few years, the newly founded hospital received so much attention that it was visited by **the First Lady of the United States, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt**, who signed the visitors’ book

of the hospital with the following line, which I paraphrase, **“I was infinitely happy to see that you do not discriminate between white and black, or between people of different religions.”** Such achievements, including saving thousands of Iranian lives, would not have been possible without the efforts of the meritorious Board of Directors of Kanoon Kheyr-khah, “The Philanthropy Center”, and the contributions of every benevolent member of our community. Those would include our educated doctors and nurses, who as they went on treating patients, managed to reduce the death rate of mothers at giving birth to zero. **That was their version of a revenge!** By public support and encouragement — I for one followed the advice of the late Mirza Abdollah Zahabian Arbab, and began at the age of 14 to donate every month 4 *toumans* of the time to the fund! — the Board of Directors managed to buy a building in the Pol-e Choubi area, on Gorgan Street, to establish a Nursing Facility, besides training skilled nurses and carrying on scientific research. Moreover, the foundation managed to send qualified students to study in the United States and Europe, the cost of which was paid for by the American Joint, while patients who could not be treated in Iran would be sent to Israel. Gradually, the hospital acquired such skilled medical team that it was recognized as the best hospital around. The purchase and establishment of the educational center was made possible, with the cooperation of The Iranian Jewish Women’s Organization, when the foundation inherited the late Aziz Yermian’s wealth according to his will, and furthermore, a generous check from our Jewish brothers in England at Central British Fund was provided to the Board of Directors.

Meanwhile, the surgical section of the hospital was expanded when the late Isaac Deylamani Mash-hadi purchased an adjacent house for the foundation. With the help of other Mash-hadi Jews, and with the persistent efforts of the late Davoud Abdollah-Zadeh Levyim, a friend of this author, the new section was beautifully established; and with help from the American Joint, it was so equipped that it was opened officially by no less than Shahbanou Farah Pahlavi, the Queen of Iran. Afterwards, during the war between Iran and Iraq, the countless services of this hospital were recognized and appreciated by the official figures of the country. More recently, it was visited by Mr. Fereydoun, President Rohani’s brother and his Vice President, and it received a significant contribution from him. It should be noted that this center has continued its services for years, under the directorship of Dr. Davoud Bar-Kohana and his colleagues, including Dr. Kamran Beroukhim.

The original hospital opened in the early 1940's, which coincided with WWII, the occupation of Iran, and the arrival of war-beaten Polish refugees. Sadly, an outbreak of the deadly disease of typhus spread throughout Tehran. A large number of people, especially children of the impoverished and unhygienic neighborhoods, including the Oudlajan Jewish neighborhood on the Sirrus Street, were infected by this disease. Every day, the catastrophe made many families lose their loved ones. Although the majority of the country suffered wartime shortages and a severe lack of basic necessities, the Tehran Jewish Association, with the help of our educated physicians of the 1920's, led by Dr. Rouhollah Sapir, stepped forward fearlessly to treat the patients, an ordeal that was undertaken despite an utter shortage of needed medical facilities and other necessities.

Alas, due to his close and extended contact with the patients, Dr. Sapir himself contracted typhus, and before long, he gave his life in the service of his fellow humans. The society mourned his loss, though his colleagues, including Dr. Shokrollah Matloubian, Dr. Nasser Akhtar-zad, Dr. Rahim Kohan, Dr. Nejatollah Darvish, Dr. Golban, Dr. Toubia, Dr. Moghtader, Dr. Delijani, Dr. Aghayi-pour, Dr. Morteza Mo'alem, Dr. Hekmati, Dr. Ben-Mousa, as well as the American Jewish Joint and our community's philanthropists, did not pause and continued with their efforts.

No doubt, the shameful act of that physician without a conscience will never be wiped off of our collective memory. Sadder still, despite such bitter experiences, the hatred that stems from religious and sectarian discrimination will persist until an awakening of the public. However, as weaker animals are captured first, less strong people or those with a psychological handicap are targeted before the others, a process that not only reveals the weak points, but also in the long run, improves future generations through gradual change. If only the world would realize that an evident cause of the perseverance of oppression and cruelty throughout societies across the globe is **silence: the misplaced silence of the majority**. For a more general example, if religious authorities in particular, including the Vatican, had not chosen to remain silent in the face of the Armenian genocide, still greater catastrophes such as the Holocaust, or the genocides of Cambodia, Rwanda and others, would not have taken place.

To remain silent in the face of oppression, it is to cooperate with the oppressor. And no nation has suffered more from such neglect than the Jewish people. Whereas the poet **Esma'il Khouyi** said,

The world can't be happy, as long as one heart's sad.

The world can't flourish, as long as a village is in ruins.

There'll be no freedom the world over,

As long as a prison stands in the whole world.

How painful it is to understand, yet to be defenseless. It's said that "Victory has many parents, but defeat is an orphan," with many critics. Up until his renewed independence, a Jew was a failure by birth, and every psychopath who rose to power, be it the neighborhood bully or a man of rank, would first aim at the short and frail wall of the Jew to show off their powers. But the world is learning today, albeit slowly and at a high cost, that till the day individual safety is not observed everywhere, our collective security will not be achieved. As **Dostoevsky** said, and I paraphrase, "The civilized people everywhere are responsible for the blood shed anywhere in the world."

World security will be achieved when seditious writings are omitted from the religious books; otherwise, guns and cannons, politics and religion, these can't do any more than putting up with blind terror, tolerating the cruelties imposed on minorities, and continuing as such in their futile efforts. On that regretful day in the hospital, if everyone at the scene hadn't stood silent, the defenseless mother and her baby wouldn't have died at giving birth. If the right thing was done on that day, things wouldn't get worse, and the proverbial "egg thief" wouldn't turn into "a camel thief." Study history. On a different level, if in 1938, the British Prime Minister, Lord Chamberlain, had not let Hitler have a piece of Czechoslovakia as blackmail before a world gaping in silence, that psychopath wouldn't have risen so high as to shed the blood of a hundred million people.

Only if we could pre-screen at psychological institutions those who may run for office, or even couples ready to get married, before their rise to power, or their commitment to marriage, to prevent psychopaths from getting access to executive positions at the state or family levels.

Unfortunately, psychopaths can be found everywhere in the world.

However, those who suffer from religious and sectarian hatred rooted in seditious writings, as we may observe, are at first anti-human, before they turn against anyone who thinks differently. Today, they fight the stranger, and tomorrow, their own kind. The problem has nothing to do with a particular religion, but religion is an excuse for them to exercise oppression and quench their inherited psychological complexes. As the dead doesn't know that he's dead, so these people don't know how ignorant they are. Their color, race, religion, sect, or their time and place, these won't matter: whichever way you look at it, a stupid person is just stupid! Ironically, taking the helm of some social, security-related, political, or religious task, or forming a family, these don't seem to be carrying as much responsibility as receiving a certificate of hair-dressing! To cut and dress someone's hair, you would need to receive training and pass the exams, but when it comes to take up such critical positions, we somewhat act blindly. But we shouldn't wait and reach a dead-end to acknowledge that,

If the world ran on reason,

The wise men wouldn't be wounded.

May the day never come when a bride or groom learns of their spouse's mental illness; and may sensitive ranks never fall into the hands of psychopaths.

Today's world is plagued with a large number of psychopaths who are equipped with the power of religion, rely on some sanctified writings, and claim to represent some superior power. These blind-hearted captives of hatred don't realize that nature, whatever it takes, continues to change and evolve; and that humanity shall never die. It's said that God's day is a thousand years, and nature has a long patience. Watch the news and interviews in the media about religion and the catastrophes that have taken place in its name, then compare people's past and present interpretations of religion. You'll soon realize that perhaps within the next few seconds (sic!) religion may undergo an evolution! Even if we agree that to remodel and improve a building, it has to be demolished first, there's been enough of such demolition. The ground has already been prepared for evolution, for *tikkun olam*, for repair and improvement, for change and the march of progress toward the betterment of the world. And continued savagery only accelerates the said change. The poor myopic human being still can't see how, by nature's command, acres of farms and forests with decades-old dry plants, along with all the insects and animals, even people and their houses, could suddenly burn to ashes. They can't see how in the blink of an eye, people

could turn homeless and depressed, only to be told by science that “It was necessary!” Such painful ruin could apply also to the social and cultural fields, and that’s the more reason that humanity should exercise wisdom and creativity to prevent these from happening, and to find more peaceful, humane and constructive solutions to bring about desired change and improved conditions. And we should not continue to repeat past mistakes until we arrive at that conclusion.

Science says that sometimes such colossal changes benefit the environment, help the natural resources of our planet to survive and grow, and should be seen as certain steps in the path of evolution. About the human society, as well, we read that although over the past few centuries in this very country, the United States, the worst acts of cruelty were carried out against the American Indians, the original owners of the American continent, and against the African Americans and countless other slaves, many Indians are now among the rich owners of casinos, and African Americans have made it to high offices, even to the office of the President. Let’s keep in mind that religion used to approve of slavery and had set forth some codes to regulate its practice; but as time went by, and by the basic law that no responsibility is greater than being a human, this painful phenomenon was abolished. It’s evident that in the long run, humanity shall win over all laws and regulations. But should such change and correction take place slowly and by enduring much cruelty, or rather, could it be expedited by understanding the realities?

Some may argue that for nature to flourish, or for humanity to make progress, we should tolerate such painful fires or the horrible discrimination among people. Accordingly, these are some means to reveal the weaknesses, and to point out a solution that would free us from the vicious cycle of recurring change, so that one day humanity’s true worth will be recognized. After all, Time is the absolute ruler, and Time’s aim is to achieve perfection, whatever the cost! But exactly for that reason, human being has the duty to step beyond a state of determinism, exercise the kind of creativity so unique to him, and guide such necessary changes through peaceful and more humane methods, so that he can manifest his values as far as possible in both the means and the ends.

To confirm this theory, let’s consider human life for the past hundred years; and as an example of astonishing change, merely compare the methods and scale of harvest at farms and plantations, then and now. Yet, despite all that external change, we shall find that the essence of authentic people has been akin to water, that even if divided into a hundred parts, each part has

remained a human being, and they would all recognize one another. What remains are the values. A professor showed a hundred-dollar bill to the class, and asked, “Who wants to have this bill with no obligation in return, whatsoever?” All hands were raised. He then crumpled the bill, stomped on it with his shoes, then repeated the question. Again, every hand was raised. The students knew well that the dirty appearance of the bill had not stolen a tad from its true value; and that as long as the essence of the dollar (fundamental commandments and human nature) stood intact, the true worth of the bill (humanity) would not be diminished, even if it were crumpled (burned or massacred).

Time after time, the Jewish people and the reasonable parts of their Holy Book have been stomped on, yet their prejudiced enemies, small and large, have never managed to diminish the spiritual value of the humane laws of this people, or of the culture that they approve of. And time after time, the Jewish people have relied on their own culture to rise from the ashes, like the Phoenix, and triumph.

The spiritual value of any book depends on its content and concepts; and every person benefits from it, and acts on it, as far as they can understand. Such wise followers as Dr. Sapir know very well the meaning of the Talmudic expression, *tikkun olam*, “repairing the world.” They understand clearly that instead of burning things down, murder, pillage, and vengeance, we should build an edifice and repair the world. Dr. Sapir’s righteous position is manifest today, when more than 90% of the patients at the hospital, according to its constitution and without a trace of discrimination, consist of non-Jewish people.

At the end, the darkness of shame fell on that callous brute of a physician!

I hope that humanity will understand the meaning of this poem by **Khayyam**:

**One people reflects upon religion,
Another wonders about doubt and certainty.
Suddenly, the messenger arrives and cries,
“Oh, you the ignorant bunch!
Neither this nor that is the way!”**

I wish that as the poet **Saadi** put it, “**human beings arrive at a point where they won’t see anyone but God,**” and that everyone understands that savage people are like termites that

devour everything, even their own books and houses, while the acts of compassionate human beings prove that Humanity shall never die. Dr. Sapir knew that “by killing the proverbial ant, the scorpion won’t learn a lesson;” that to fight darkness one had to light a candle; for a house of hatred could never turn into the center of humanity. Sapir planted a seed of kindness whose tree continues to cast its protective shade to our time.

The name of Dr. Rouhollah Sapir shall shine forever. “Better leave a good name behind rather than a castle of gold.”

May he rest in peace, and may he be remembered with the love he gave and so deserved.

Norman “Nourollah” Gabay

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To download copies of Norman Gabay’s essays and other writings in English and Persian, including his book *An Invitation to Reason*, as well as *The Glossary of the Kashani Jewish Dialect* (similar to the dialects of the Jews of Hamedan, Isfahan and Shiraz), please visit the following website: www.BabaNouri.com.

Translator’s Website: www.ComposerPA.com