

Be Awake & Sleep Soundly

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“The future isn’t somewhere we’re headed for, but it’s what we’ll make it to be.” – *Paraphrase of an Inscription at Oxford University*

It’s said of an Iranian and an Egyptian student who one day were arguing at an American university over the matter of cultural heritage. The Iranian said, “We have a 3000-year old civilization.” The Egyptian replied, “But our civilization dates back to 4000 years ago. We’ve even found wires at the Pyramids which show that back then, our ancestors used wires for communication!” The Iranian retorted, “Ha! We were so ahead of our time that 4000 years ago, **we were already communicating wirelessly!**”

Say, your father was a sage, but what does his knowledge have to do with you? Many an Egyptian today who wastes their time riding camels in the heat of the desert and burns in religious hatred. America, on the other hand, this young country without a thousand-year old history, is walking on the moon.

The Persian magazine *Rah-e Zendegi* had recently quoted from the Internet, and I summarize, that “palm is a strange tree; no wonder that Persian language counts it as *nafar*, as if it were a person. You chop off its “head”, and the tree will die, even though the roots may still be healthy. As Dr. Karim Mojtahedi, an Iranian professor of philosophy said, ‘culture is akin to a palm tree. It doesn’t matter if your roots have been there in the soil for thousands of years. What matters is that your head be healthy, too; that is, the cultural manifestation of your society today has to be healthy, as well. If a society’s culture falls ill today, that culture will die, despite its ancient roots. Once I look at other societies from this corner of the world, I think that they’ve chopped off the head of *this* palm tree.’”

Indeed, culture, and not empty claims, is what keeps societies including our Jewish communities alive. An Iranian journalist once asked Mohamed Hassanein Heikal (b. 1923), a famed Egyptian journalist, commentator, and a former editor of *Al-Ahram*, that “we Iranians were once invaded by the Arabs, just as you were, but we managed to keep our culture and the Persian language. So, why is that your language today is Arabic? You are not Arabs. What happened to your authentic culture?” Heikal answered, “**Because we didn’t have a poet like your Ferdowsi.**” Such geniuses as Ferdowsi or Reza Shah the Great managed to transform the fate of a nation and preserve its culture. Alas, some intellectual myopics did not allow Ferdowsi’s body to be buried among other Muslims on ground of his admiration for the Zoroastrians, and centuries later, they destroyed the mausoleum of Reza Shah on grounds of his “sin” of serving Iran. “*Spit be on you, the dome of heaven!*” Which item tastes sweeter to a sophisticated palate: a verse by Ferdowsi about his mythical hero Rostam, or the misplaced fame and fortune of the likes of Moshir-ol-Saltaneh¹, who said, “Moshir-ol-Saltaneh’s cow is the Moshir-ol-Saltaneh of the cows!”

¹ Moshir-ol-Saltaneh was possibly a given feudal title, meaning “the adviser to the monarchy”.

**My life be given for the rare men
Who didn't change by the less or the more.
Shame be on the covetous souls,
Who sell a world for the smell of a coin.**

A man among the crowd appeared exceptionally jubilant when a horse won in a race. They asked him if the horse belonged to him. He answered, **“No, but his bridle is mine!”** Those who own the reins of the Iranian, Egyptian, Greek, Chinese, etc. horses, they may make much fuss against the advocates of modern science, such as the United States. **Where does each side stand today, and to whom shall the future belong?**

True winners are proud of their own achievements, with no claims to the knowledge of their forefathers, to some historical background, or to miracles and prophecies. They create thousands of inventions each year, such as those ubiquitous small multitask devices that let us connect to the world at the touch of a finger – and to do so **wirelessly!** Alas, some ungrateful souls benefit from such unique gifts of modern American science, yet they act with **ingratitude** rooted in jealousy. **And jealousy has forever played a destructive role in politics, and in social and religious matters, for as they say, *the covetous shall see no rest.***

Our most dangerous enemies are our closest jealous friends. Crying out aloud when their mind is contaminated with religious and sectarian hatred, too.

**A loaf of bread could fill an empty stomach,
But all the gifts of the world can't quench jealous eyes.**

Jealousy is so dangerous that our 3300-year old *Ten Commandments* conclude by ordering us, **“Thou shall not covet!”** The jealous returns kindness with hatred, and makes claims to the “bridle of the horse”. He or she may be hostile even towards his teachers or supporters. We read in Saadi's *Golestan* of a master, who complains of the treacherous greed of his pupil,

**Either loyalty was alien to this world,
Or that no one practiced it in my time.
No one learned from me the art of arching,
Who at the end didn't train his arrow on me.**

We saw that Mohammad Atta, educated in America, along 18 students (sic!), using the unparalleled Boeing airplanes, some of the finest of American inventions, hit the office of their host, that is, the 102-story towers in New York, motivated by the provocative power of religious hatred; and we saw how they murdered about 3000 innocent people, all strangers to them, and sadly, changed the politics of the world. We also saw how Uncle Sam, devoid of jealousy and the baseless words of ungrateful people, has continued to shine like the sun and to give warmth, health, knowledge and comfort even to the children of those treacherous few, who had received their education in American universities but turned a cruel side on him.

**Learn kindness and fidelity from the tree,
Who never holds back its shade even from the lumberjack.**

They asked **Michelangelo (1475-1564)**, that most renowned sculptor in history, “As many talents as you have, how did you become the best sculptor without a teacher?” He answered, **“With a kiss of my mother.”** Be assured that Mohammad Atta and his like-minded pals became terrorists by a single kiss of hatred from their ignorant mothers or some advocates of religious hatred. Meanwhile, the world deludes itself that such people will gradually wake up to

see the truth. We tolerate them and treat them kindly, ignoring that **to love the undeserving person is to waste love and kindness**. If so, people will keep losing in this game, while the preachers of hatred continue to live in comfort. As a Kashani chef named Touti Khanom said, **“The cook takes in the smoke, but the good fat goes to the bride!”**

The famed Iranian author **Sadegh Hedayat** said, “In fact we were all humans until *race* severed our communication, *religion* separated us, *politics* built walls between us, and *wealth* divided us into classes. Today, everyone is asking for Freedom, without knowing *captivity*. *Captivity* isn’t about the bars around you: It’s about **the hedges that surround your thinking.**”

Today, at city squares around the world, including the **Al-Tahrir Square** of Cairo and other countries involved in the “Arab Spring”, people ask for freedom and have been ready to give their lives for it. But little they know that freedom-fighters ought to first break down the invisible bars of captivity that put their minds and those of their children under siege: The bars of religious, ethnic, sectarian and racial hatred. Because the future isn’t somewhere we’re headed for, but it’s what we’ll make it to be. Religious schools have a strong role in building the future. Governments instead of war should make them stop preaching hatred, so that the world may achieve its beautiful dreams. Otherwise, as long as such books and teachers are around, the problems will persist, though they may pass from one stage to another. They continue to teach their nonsense and superstitions and **“catch the proverbial live fish by using the dead fish!”** By preaching their empty words, they’ll keep throwing an ignorant bunch from one pot-hole into another well, all in the guise of religious advocacy, using the latest technologies. They’ll continue to contaminate young minds hundreds of times the number of those who’ve already been taken out of the game. Sadly, the world has yet to realize that **to enjoy a sound sleep, we should first be awake**. Vigilance entails learning from the past and to avoid repeating past miseries.

The world ignores the horrendous power of religious and racial hatred, and it doesn’t pay attention to the chronic roots of bigotry and discrimination. No doubt, the roots of religious hatred and racism are not new to our times. For example, the French author **Émile Zola (1840-1902)** was so hurt by what he saw around him that he wrote, and I paraphrase, “Until the last temple has not collapsed upon resentful religious bigots and racists, humanity will not see calm and peace.” Just recently, on June 17th 2015, a 21-year old man, a wealthy white Christian American, went to an old African American church at Charleston, South Carolina, listened to the sermon for an hour, then shot and murdered nine innocent black worshipers, including the priest. He then left his car in the parking lot of the church and fled the scene, before he was arrested shortly afterwards. It turned out that he hated badly the black people. He was a racist, and as racists are everywhere, he was blind to the truth. Indeed, not only the murderer, but also his parents and teachers should be tried.

Self-deception is the key to backwardness. We can never change whereto the wind blows, but we can align our life’s sail to suit the winds of modern civilization. Today, humanity suffers the pain of religion and racism as punishment for the oppression and cruelty that for long it dealt its neighboring minorities. Water can reflect beauty only when it’s calm and clean. We have failed to adopt a proper and transparent behavior toward religion. Instead, we have used it as a means to seek superiority, to treat whatever minority at hand with discrimination and oppression. The chaos that has afflicted our world reflects this poor trend.

I'm reminded of **Ousta Abbas the Mason**, a man much trusted by the Tehran Jewish community. The late **Dr. Habib Levy**, the famed Jewish historian, dentist, and ranking military officer, commissioned Ousta Abbas to build five houses in the Velenjak district of Shemiran, in northern Tehran. Once the project was completed, the architect confided in Dr. Levy, "I have a problem. For years, I have been building houses for the Jews, all of whom, God bless them, were kind to me and paid my due fees. But I don't know why I feel uncomfortable every time I have to take money from a non-Muslim!" Dr. Levy replied, "Sit down and let me tell you why."

Dr. Levy explained, "Do you remember when you were a child and your mother threatened to call a Jew – or an Armenian, a Zoroastrian, or a Black guy – to come over and eat you alive?! What would she tell you if she found you unkempt or poorly dressed? What did people say at family or school gatherings? Do you remember that they made it seem as if they were liked more by humiliating the non-Muslims; or that they believed their own prosperity depended on destroying others?"

**Alas, the remedy for our pain and agitation was left to a crowd
Who imagined their prosperity at the cost of our destruction.**

"Dear Ousta, you are not to blame: The blame is on the ignorant advocates of hatred, who thought belittling others would lift themselves. The blame is on those who raised you, taught you those books, or preached hatred. Children's greatest enemies are their ignorant parents and teachers. Remember that under the age of 10, the characteristics of the environment will take roots in the child, to the point that it's said, **'It entered the body with the milk, and it'll leave the body with life.'**

"Now, your job is to cleanse your mind and those of your children of all hatred. Bear in mind that *you*, that is, your seditious beliefs, are the greatest enemy against you and your children. It's up to you to avoid repeating toward your children the wrong words and deeds of your parents, friends and teachers. **People aren't born good or bad; rather, a good education renders a person good, while a bad education may turn a person into something worse than the beasts.**"

As **Hafez** said,

**Don't blame me for growing on the lawn:
I grow as the gardener will nurture me.**

Crying out aloud for misplaced self-grandeur! We've even gone as far as calling our species "the crown jewel of creation," even though this could have applied only to the days of childhood. For sadly, once we grow up, we lose three sources of happiness that belonged to our childhood: *Happiness* without a reason, *Love* without reservations, and *Curiosity* without limits.

My friends: It's wrong to judge others, and especially, to write about them out of anger. Instead, we can proudly transform societies when we speak and write politely, devoid of lies and hatred, based on logic and sound reasoning. The pens that write for happiness and for the good of society do much more than the lips which merely pray.

**Better have my head buried under a stone,
Than to see my name called out in shame.**

Baseless fear and inherited self-censor, these plagues of the days of suppression, must not hold us from publishing the truth. It'll be then up to the readers to judge what's been said, and not up to the regressive or ultra-cautious editor of a publication. Such differences as between the Conservative and the Orthodox, etc., reflect differences in interpretation, rather than our approval or disapproval of some individuals. This author believes that an accurate knowledge of religion is more important than believing in the religion. It isn't enough to ask "Who's right?" Let's see what's good for us today. Let's make sure that future generations won't call us "the dwellers inside the cocoons!" Religion isn't a cause for happiness, but depending on *how* it's been put to use it may lead to happiness or misery. Well-placed criticism helps talents grow and reveals the shortages. As the poet **Saadi** said,

**If I penned the truth, then why fear
The words of the fault-seekers.**

Writers write not only for the editors, but for people to read. The censor and self-censor of the days of the Diaspora are behind us. Statistics show that people will increasingly gravitate toward the Internet, leaving behind the traditional paper-based press. Curiously, the highest number of issues or subscribers for the dwindling Persian magazines in the States is no more than 1500. In the meantime, according to the webmaster, a little-known website by this humble, **www.BabaNouri.com**, has been visited perhaps millions of times by Persian and English speaking users. The world's greatest newspapers and magazines, such as *Reader's Digest*, have been publishing of late on the Internet; and soon enough, our small publications will join the trend, as well. The press is crossing from the age of Gutenberg to the age of Electronics. The greatest bookstore in the world, Amazon.com, doesn't own books, and instead, often only prints and mails the books according to the demands received electronically. And recently, the greatest digital library in the world was opened in the United States, one which doesn't have a single hard copy of the books.

The Internet is making progress fast, and soon enough "illiterate" will be applied to someone who can't use its immense resources. Fortunately, the youngsters of the immigrant Iranian families – a people who escaped a difficult past, like the last generation of a dynasty, akin to a migrant tribe, some on foot and others driving their Rolls Royce – as the first generation residing and growing up in this "land of opportunities", have been shining brightly and without precedence in many scientific areas, including the digital technology. Because they have understood that victory means the ability to skip from one failure to another **without giving up hope**. The children of this generation will build Iran and form the new Iranian. It's a generation that with an unwitting leap worth a hundred-years has exchanged censor and discrimination for the freedom of expression, and has provided an opportunity for their future generation to learn sciences and to lead better lives. It's a generation that while preserving its best of traditions, tries to make agree the famous Deezy dish with Sushi, the Baba Karam dance with Tango, the custom of Hana-bandan with Bachelor Party, and the public bath pools named Khazaneh with Jacuzzi. It's a generation that abandons lawlessness to abide by the law, for the environment has taught them that even for a driving violation, Uncle Sam may treat them like murderers! Alas, today is nothing like yesterday, and tomorrow won't be anything like today.

**There's left no more news of us!
The glass is broken, the wine's spilled,
And the cupbearer is nowhere in sight.**

To conclude, as the poet said,

**Oh, Saadi! To love one's homeland is an old story,
But one can't die in humiliation, for I was born here.**

Humanity has to realize that the world isn't bound to one city, country, continent, or race. We're all the children of this planet. Beliefs aren't limited to your beliefs and mine. Not everyone who thinks differently is our enemy. **The garden is beautiful for its colorful flowers.**

As the poet **Emad Khorasani** wrote,

**Battles and wars grow on short-sightedness.
Clean your lenses to see that the Kaaba and
The Winehouse are but one and the same.**

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