

Two Chilling Memories

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Almost one hundred years of studies, inquiries, and exchange of ideas, have made me conclude that for the past thousands of years, and even as today, the greatest and most dangerous enemy of humanity have been but the inciteful writings of the religious books. I ask, whence did anti-Semitism begin, and why it doesn't come to an end? Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or killing the Christians, all of which essentially amount to “murdering people”, have their seeds lurking in the bloodied pages of religious books. With all due respect, I say to the political and religious figures, Please open your hearts, and see with clear eyes: there can be no peace and security without peace between the religions. In what follows, I've offered several examples that will help elucidate that point.

When I was a child, on two separate occasions, some significant and extremely dangerous incidents happened to me. The first took place in my hometown of Kashan, when I was 7 or 8 years old; and the second happened in Tehran, when I was about 15. On both occasions, I was taken to be murdered.

I was a happy little child growing up in the city of Kashan, Iran. One day, I went after school to the “silk experts” who worked for my father. These were

several ladies from the Jewish community of Kashan, whose job was to prepare the hanks of silk. I collected all the hanks that were ready for that day, and took them to my father's store. My father took a look at me, and said, "Dear, do you know Asghar Agha the tailor?" I said, "Yes, daddy." He said, "Go over to his shop, and tell him to make you a two-piece suit. I'll come by later to pay for it." I ran, nay, I flew all the way to the tailor shop! Asghar was busy sewing up some clothes. I said, "Asghar Agha! My dad says you make me a new two-piece suit. He'll come by later to pay you." Asghar said, "I should take you to my home!" He started toward his house, and I followed behind him. We left through the back end of the Bazaar, put two or three alleys behind, and arrived at a house that was a couple of steps lower than the street level. We entered the house. On our left, there was a dark and dusty basement, with a low ceiling, which looked as if no human being had ever set foot in there. He took me to that basement, left me there alone, and closed the door on me.

I took a look around me. The basement had a tall narrow window to the courtyard, which stood at the ground level, and let in some light and sound. I sat next to the window, without the slightest sense of danger. I was a little child, and I thought of Asghar the Tailor as one of us. From where I sat, I saw a tall man, who stood on the roof across the yard. I could also hear Asghar, who turned toward him, and started talking. Although I could hear them both, I didn't understand everything they said. What I can tell for sure, with near certainty, was as follows: The tall man said, "Asghar! Why are you back home so early?" Asghar said, "I've brought in a Jewish kid. I want to kill him. I'm going to fetch the butcher's knife from the kitchen." The tall man shouted from the opposite roof, "Don't do that! Never! Ever! The Jewish blood is especially blessed! If you shed his blood, you'll bring misfortune to yourself! You'll be ruined and destroyed! Never do that! Let

go of this thought! Let him go! Things won't change with one or two people. Let go of this, and move on!"

The man's words made Asghar change his mind, and the tailor walked back toward the basement. I was standing behind the door, when Asghar opened it. I just realized that the whole time he had locked me in. He opened the door, pointed at me, and said, "Get lost!" I skipped every other step, and hopped into the alley. I remember vividly that a few steps down the path, I stopped, turned around, and as if filming the scene, took in a good look of all that was around me. Then I resumed to run, until I was at my father's store.

As much as I'm trying to, I can't remember whether I told my parents anything about the incident; and if I did, what their reaction was. But I don't think I gave much thought to all that had happened, as grave and significant as it was, for I was just a little boy.

Years later, that chilling and painful incident remains in my view as an evident proof for my statement, that humankind's greatest enemy is the inciteful and hate-mongering religious mentality, which can even drive its adherents to murdering the followers of another religion. In one such book we read, "The tree will say, 'Someone's hiding in my shade! Come and kill this Jew!'" I didn't exaggerate; it's been stated there quite openly. You see, it's natural for people to die, but such books, with their horrible and often inciteful and troublesome content, they do stay. Alas, there's no power in today's world to step forward and fix these issues. The sole remaining force is your individual power and mine. There's no other power to eradicate such content, and bury them in the forgotten pages of the past. Meanwhile, sadly, major governments have only been adding to these problems, intensifying the complications, and killing more and more people. Regrettably, instead of aiming for the roots of the problem, i.e. trying to eliminate

the inciteful content of the religious writings, they keep making bombs heavier than ever, and increase the means of destroying human beings. I ask, however, whether killing hundreds of thousands of the extremists has changed the extremist societies and their ideas in the slightest. Let's hope that someday everyone will wake up to see the reality.

That aside, on a more personal note, I always keep in mind that I was once saved by a messenger of God, who on that particular day stood there on the edge of the roof, and saved my life.

Speaking of "guardian angels", it's rather fitting to cite an amusing story. Once delivering his *darash* or sermon, a Chacham said, "A guardian angel is perching on everyone's shoulder to protect them." Upon hearing those words, a bridegroom sitting in the congregation turned his head toward his own shoulder, and whined, "Oh dear! My guardian angel! You who're supposed to be protecting me! Where were you when I was signing the *ketubah* (marriage contract)?"

The second time they took me to be slaughtered...

I was about 15, working in the Amir Chamber of the Grand Bazaar of Tehran, at a company that imported goods from Europe. Everyday at lunchtime, we sat together on the bales of fabrics and rugs in the Amir Chamber, and enjoyed our bites of bread and cheese with grapes and yogurt. One of us, Mahmoud, was a teenager, maybe 2 or 3 years older than me. He was Muslim, and the son of a merchant there. He used to sit by my side, and talk to me. One day, he said, "My friend and I are going tomorrow to Sefid-Khak. North of the Tehran-Pars district, on the Khorasan Road, there's a vast piece of land, which they're selling in chunks. Each parcel goes for just 500 toumans. We want to go there and buy a few parcels

for ourselves.” “I’ll buy, too,” I said. “Then come with us,” he said. “We’ll go together.” We decided to meet at 3 p.m. on the next day, unaware of the words of the poet, who wrote, “You can’t tell an enemy in disguise from a true friend. / The wick rests at the heart of the candle, yet it’s his worst enemy.”

The next day, Mahmoud showed up with his friend, who was behind the wheel. I got into his friend’s car, and we drove away. We were on the road for quite awhile. We kept on driving, until we were past Tehran-Pars. The sun had already set. His friend pulled over, and parked the car on the roadside. Mahmoud said, “The location I told you about, it’s over there, behind that hill.” We got off the car, and I followed the two of them, as we walked farther off the road. We were getting nearer the hill, when all of a sudden, as if someone had warned me, I felt a jolt of fear. It dawned on me that it wouldn’t make any sense to go and see a parcel of land at nightfall. They must have something else in mind. I turned back quietly without them noticing, I got on a bus without them seeing me, and I returned home safely.

Come tomorrow, Mahmoud asked me, “Why did you turn back early?” I said, “I had some problem. I had to leave.” He shrugged in indifference.

Few days later, we were sitting as usual on the bales of fabric, when this very person said, “If Jewish blood falls into my hands, then I’ll certainly shed their blood.” Yes, it’s what that very young man said. Indeed, God had had mercy upon me. I think of the countless people who must have been murdered, but we never knew about them. In fact, just during my time, several Jews of Iran vanished forever without a trace. God knows what happened to them.

My friends; both the good and the evil people can be found in every society. Thanks God, in the Iranian society, the good people are in the majority. However, the said inciteful content of the religious writings, they make things worse, and

drive the mad people more crazy. I for one lived for many years in Iran, and was in contact with thousands of people; yet I never saw anything but kindness and humanity from the genuine human beings, and I still don't. Fortunately, once the younger generations of Iranians — not only the Jewish Iranians outside Iran, but also our other compatriots in the Iranian diaspora — had reached the waters (i.e. freedom) they grew so remarkably that everyone understood why they couldn't swim before: because there had been no proverbial water in their old country to swim in. And as we can see, swimming in a dry pool has produced no result but the fall of sciences and economy in Iran, and a worthless national currency. I hope by organizing “The Iranian Jewish International Congress” via the internet (Zoom) per the author's initiative, we'll all get to better know our scientists, inventors, innovators, and other outstanding scientific, cultural and artistic figures; and help them better connect to one another, and enhance their networking.

I'd like to say a few words on the subject of the Jewish population growth in Iran, as well as those of the Zoroastrian and other ethnic minorities of that country — even though I abhor the word “minority”, for the true minority is but who is the less educated. As I read in the papers, according to the statistics, the Zoroastrian population of Iran before the Safavid era exceeded 3 million; but thereafter and during the Qajar period, this number fell down to 8,000 (eight thousand). It's true that a number of Zoroastrians emigrated to India, but the remainder of them either converted to Islam, or they were murdered. The phenomenon has also applied to the Jewish people. Jews today must have numbered in the millions, yet the number of Jews of Iran never exceeded 100,000. Fortunately, as my investigations indicate, today the Jewish Iranian population around the world has reached north of 500,000; and they continue to grow, not only in numbers, but also in terms of

knowledge and their level of education. (For instance, take a look at the growth of your own family over the past 40 years. You'll find out that these numbers are accurate.) We may dare say that more than 90% of the youngsters in this community have received some college or university education. On a broader note, we can be proud that according to the statistics offered by the United States of America, today's Iranian immigrants, including Muslims, Zoroastrian, Christians etc., are considered to be the best of immigrants among 67 immigrant groups.

During a television program, one Pakistani political figure stated, "I am Muslim. My Book is the human rights law, ratified in 1945." Let's hope for the day when the religious books will be deposited respectfully to the bygone pages of history, and instead, human rights and their charter, as accepted by every person in the world, will have replaced all of the inciteful religious books. I'll soon bring together and email the Charter of Human Rights, which was ratified in 1945 in the city of San Francisco, in its English rendition and Persian translation, together with several articles about it, to better inform my friends. I hope you'll study them yourself, and distribute them at your will.

It seems fitting to revisit, after a long while, an excerpt from a beautiful and meaningful poem by a poet who was evidently hurt by the religion.

With every new religion we introduced,
The disagreements increased.
Contempt and hostilities multiplied,
And religious wars took place.
I'm not Muslim, nor Christian, nor Jewish:
I bow only to the dictates of reason.
I have no religion or ideology,

So that I wouldn't shed my fellow humans' blood.

Be friends with everyone on the earth:

It's the best of all religions.

My friends, I'm aware that the world today isn't ready yet to bury these books in history, or even to revise and correct them; but we can take the beginning steps, and pave the ground for that wish to be realized. Let us not forget that to remove colossal mountains, we start by removing but the tiny pebbles at the base of the mountain.

I'd like to conclude this essay by reminding us once more:

Let's be awake, so that we shall sleep better.

Thank you.

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For free copies of this and other writings by Norman "Nourollah" Gabay, please visit his website at www.BabaNouri.com . The website is home to an archive of the author's articles, essays, notes, and books in Persian and English, including *An Invitation to Reason*, *A Dictionary of the Kashani Jewish Dialect*, and soon, *Be Up to Date* (in progress).