

The Corona Virus Goes Global!¹

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لطفاً نسخه فارسی این نوشتار را در فایل همراه ملاحظه فرمایید.

A collective problem demands a collective solution.

Don't boast about your wealth, for it could vanish overnight!

Don't take pride in your beauty, for a fever could wither its sight!

At dinner, a wealthy Hadji Agha noticed that his favorite drink was missing from the table. In protest, he shouted at his household, “Where’s my Corona?!” One of his children said, “Hadji Agha! The Corona’s in China! Be patient. They’ll send everyone their share.”²

By coincidence, about six-hundred young Chinese *talabeh-s*, i.e. Muslim clerical students, were traveling to the religious city of Qom, Iran. Their expenses were paid for by the well-known Islamic seminary, the Houzeh-ye Elmieh of Qom, and they were coming for guidance (*sic!*) and to remedy a shortage of such clerical students. And they brought with them the gift of Corona. Thus, the seminary became the first place in Iran to be contaminated by the disastrous virus. Sadly, what we do to ourselves has no cure. That was not fate, but a self-afflicted wound. As the poet said,

The fire that burned bright early in the night,

Lay in sorrow by the dawn in a bed of ashes.

I asked, “O thou, the veiled fire!

What’s which that has thee covered?”

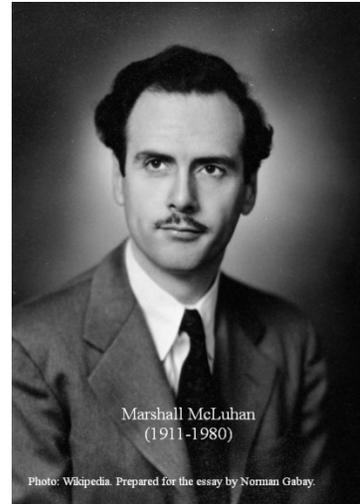
He sighed, “It’s the soil of the grave

Deep in which I buried myself.”

¹ The original version of this essay in Persian was largely completed by about the middle of April, 2020. (Tr.)

² This translation aims to approximate a satirical pun used in the original Persian. (Tr.)

Observing how distances were growing shorter, considering the shared interests of governments across the world, and taking into account the globalization of economic and scientific exchange, around 1960, the contemporary thinker **Marshall McLuhan**³ fittingly referred to the modern world as “the global village”. Afterwards, the internet, with its magical entrance and incredibly rapid expansion, made this village yet increasingly smaller. Naturally, like it or not, the inhabitants of this village would each receive their own share of the consequences of what took place in this village, whether good or unpleasant. Humankind fast grew



arrogant and unruly, drunk on pleasure, and carried away by the illusions of financial, militaristic, even scientific and religious power. Until suddenly, the Covid-19 broke out into a pandemic,⁴ and those very shared interests, sadly at a colossal and indefinite cost, shattered the hubris and made people understand what the poet **Saadi** once put in so few words, **“People are the limbs of but one body, / Who were all created of one essence. / When a limb’s in pain, / The others can’t rest in comfort. / If you don’t care for others’ suffering, / Then you deserve not be called Human.”**

To be honest, humanity was moving rather too fast: One threatened the others by his missiles, the other bullied everybody by her wealth, and yet another terrified people by their religion. That went on till, as **Hafez** would put it, everybody realized that **“once the curtain parts, neither you’ll remain, nor shall I!”** The scene was unveiled, and the truth revealed! One wealthy man said, “Suddenly, I realized that I owned nothing but the \$300 I had in my pocket!” Alas, the wet and the dry wood, the good and the bad, burn together in the proverbial wildfire. Still, we could ask when things might change for better.

The presently unfortunate state will persist as long as humankind hasn’t understood that **everybody ought to enjoy health and peace, or nobody will**. This disease will be eradicated eventually when it’s been uprooted everywhere, because despite the childish imaginary lines that we draw as “borders” between us, the world isn’t really made of 194 countries. Rather, our planet of dust will someday merge into a single large village run by one government and a

³ Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), Canadian philosopher. See more at Wikipedia.

⁴ CoViD-19, short for the 2019 novel Corona Virus Disease.

unique law, that is, “the law of humanity.” People everywhere should know that New York today suffers a shortage of medicine and treatment as does the poorest country in the world. We should understand that as long as this disease hasn’t been eradicated or at least contained across the world, people everywhere may be at worse risk than they already are. This disease is particularly dangerous because its rapid transmission rate, which so far does not promise a good future!

The Corona catastrophe will show its enormous scale once the disease arrives in the poor and populous countries, the refugee camps, the military bases, and the like. If the powerful European and American countries have been so far frustrated by it, then pity the desperate people! There was a gentleman who instead of saying “it’s a grisly situation,” would say, “it’s a *greasy* situation”! Well, these are some quite “greasy” days, and we’re in some rich trouble!⁵ We may wonder where and how this plague came from to land on humanity. Is it Nature seeking to control the population? Was the disease a result of some Chinese person eating a bowl of bat soup — an unusual new trend which nevertheless follows their ancestral philosophy, one that more or less approves of “eating anything that moves?” Or was this virus man-made, and thus, human beings will adhere to their old and bitter worldview until they’ve brought about their own doom? Indeed, no mistake is too far-fetched for humankind, this unpredictable creation, who can as well be the most dangerous of all living forms. It’s been for good reason that scarecrows or “strawmen” are made in the likeness of people to scare away the birds and the beasts!

Could it even be that absent good conscience, the virus was spread on purpose as a drill for potentially far worse viruses that could be used in possible future wars, before the appraising eyes of the Devil? Only God knows! Crying out aloud for a world that is not governed by conscience!

The question of the origins of the virus reminds me of a sweet anecdote. One night long ago, in my birth-city of Kashan, that “city of the brave”⁶ (!), a wolf attacked the local flocks and tore apart a number of the sheep. A young and strong townsman seized his club and was setting out to search for the wolf, when his guest, a friend from out of town, offered to go along with him. In the outskirts of the city, our Kashani hero found the footprints of the wolf, paused for a moment, then told his friend in a quivering voice, “It’s the beast’s footprint! You go on and follow the

⁵ The translation attempts to approximate a humorous wordplay devised in the original Persian. (Tr.)

⁶ In the Persian Jewish lore, the people of Kashan, Iran, were claimed to be easy to scare. (Tr.)

trace, while I go back to see where it came from!” In a way, people in the West have discovered the trace of the “wolf” in the city of Wuhan, China, but for the time being, they’re politely negotiating over its origin and destination! Altogether, so far nobody seems to know for sure where this virus came from.

This much I know, however, that politicizing the global tragedy of this pandemic, taking advantage of it to scold the others, fishing in the mud, and ignoring people’s health and well-being, these are unforgivable wrongs. Eluding our duty to fight this problem won’t do us any good. Such a collective issue demands our mutual sympathy, concord and collaboration. The partisan games played in America, Israel and Europe today are not in the interest of people and won’t serve any issues. Why, the wrong conduct of the politicians today is a problem in itself on top of the jumble that we already have; and unbridled, they seem to tarnish the beautiful and fragile scion of freedom through mismanagement.

Let me share a personal experience. In 1982, on the last day of our trip to China together with my son, I told the hotel guide that instead of the buildings and museums, I was interested in seeing for myself a glimpse of the true life of the Chinese masses, a people who boast of a 5000-year old culture. He smiled and paused to think.

The guide asked me, “Are you willing to rise at 4 in the morning to visit the local ‘wet market’?” I took the address eagerly. Early next day, my son and I took a cab to the said market. Yet this was no market, but a full-fledged zoo! The one difference between this and a traditional zoo was that in this “zoo”, all animals, whether large or small, alive or dead, terrestrial, marine or airborne, from wolves to bears and snakes, cockroaches and worms, mice and eagles, even dogs and cats, etc., they were all on sale for food!

The scene was as interesting to any tourist as it was nauseating and quite sad, so far as it would remind the faithful and the faithless alike of the contrasting Jewish tradition. In comparison, one found himself admiring the millennia-old Jewish dietary law, which in particular pertains to what animals are *kosher*, that is, legitimate to consume. As we know, about 3300 years ago, Judaism implemented certain codes based on sound nutritional and hygienic practices, which are referred to as *kashrut*⁷ i.e. the topic of being “*kosher*” or “pure”, similar to the notion of *halal* in the later Islamic culture. To underscore my point, let me relate that about

⁷ כְּשֵׁרוּת.

fifty years ago, I used to do business with a successful Iranian merchant from the Azerbaijan Province. Once he was about to travel to America, when he told me, “Today, the Agha [Mr. Shari’atmadari, an Islamic cleric], who’s a friend of mine, solved two of my dilemmas.” I asked, “What problems?” A faithful Muslim, he explained, “I had doubts about the journey. The Agha prayed for an answer,⁸ and it came positive. Second, I told the Agha that the *halal* meat wouldn’t be available everywhere on the trip. He responded, ‘The Jewish slaughter is permitted!’” The Jewish tradition’s guidelines for the permissible types and quality of the animal meat are absolutely a matter of health and hygienics, and as such, they couldn’t apply to just one particular group of people. That also explains the statistics for the sale of kosher products in America, which are several times over the Jewish consumption, because the majority of their customers are not Jewish.

Another point also related to the commands of the *Holy Torah* is the extremely crucial subject of isolating the patients from the healthy people. Today, and especially since the discovery of the role of germs by Louis Pasteur, the practice known as “quarantine” has come to be routinely implemented when necessary. Interestingly enough, however, thousands of years before Pasteur, the *Holy Torah* had spoken of the matter of isolation in the *Leviticus*, the third book of the *Pentateuch*. For example, we read (*Leviticus*, 13:46) that as long as the symptoms of a contagious disease are seen in a person, “he (or she) should settle alone by himself (or herself) outside the camp.”⁹ Furthermore, after a careful inspection of the suspicious clothes has confirmed that the signs of pollution belong to the disease, all contaminated clothing items must be burnt. (Ibid, 13:52)

As for the legitimacy of “eating anything that moves” in China, the phenomenon is clearly a heritage of the long era of poverty and overpopulation in that country. Such a notion cannot be the fruit of the mind of today’s educated and successful Chinese person, who is bound to implement better regulations in this matter, especially in the aftermath of the Corona disaster. Never mind that as the wise man said, “**many an old good name that was shattered by a wrong.**” Still, we can’t judge about all the reasons for a phenomenon on the basis of one mere flaw or by considering just one effect. The author believes that the Corona virus catastrophe will

⁸ استخاره, *estekhāreh*.

⁹ See:

”כל ימי אשר הנגע בו, יטמא טמא הוא; בדרך ישב, מחוץ למחנה מושבו.” (ויקרא, י”ג:מ”ו).

have consequences far greater than its early deaths. Such dangerous consequences as an outburst of frustrated wants and complexes, the insecurity born out of hunger and unemployment, the possibility of violent domestic conflicts and the numerous ways by which the crisis could be taken advantage of, and the baseless exaggeration and worsening of tensions and pressures, these are not as far-fetched as they might seem to be.¹⁰ To prevent the disaster, such possible consequences and the like should be foreseen. And even as they fight the diseases, governments should also cooperate and coordinate the efforts to prevent potential future insecurities; and the sooner they do so, the better it will be. Because not even the generous aid of the American government will cover every unemployed person; besides that such assistance won't be possible in all other countries. As such, everyone is duty-bound to stop waiting for help from their governments, and instead, step forward to help one another. The wise people know that preventing the spread of physical ailments and insecurity is no less important than curing the illness.

In any case, the world after the Covid-19 will no more be the same, and the pandemic will be considered a historic milestone in the contemporary era. Most all flights suspended, and planes, trains and many other means of transportation grounded; schools, universities, companies and small businesses, sport arenas, movie theaters, concert halls, factories, etc. on lockdown; and altogether, most all gatherings even those for saying prayers prohibited — no one could have imagined this to happen. It's worth noting that sadly, some fanatics did not heed the risks, ignored the warnings, and gathered together; and unfortunately, from what I heard, some have been hurt because of it.

Such people don't notice that "religious observance" doesn't mean to accept the commands and traditions unwittingly, or to practice them without understanding their true meaning. **We ought to** be firm in our faith, but flexible in practice; and we need to perform the commands according to the time and place, that is, the needs and the best interest of our present situation. These days, the most obvious case in point is the prohibition imposed on public gatherings. Those who wish to practice the commands literally, without proper knowledge and understanding, they are not "religious people" but "imitators". Unfortunately, they also happen

¹⁰ As noted, the original Persian of this essay was largely completed by about the middle of April, 2020. (Tr.)

to form the majority of the adherents of religions around the world, who often follow books which they've never read or understood in their mother tongue.

At any rate, such people, governments and religions must all be prepared to adapt themselves to a different world, even after every large and small financial, scientific, religious and social institution has been brought under control. Those in our own community who so far deemed it forbidden to use electrical devices on the Shabbat, they'll be compelled to admit to their own mistakes, so that at least they could stay in touch with each other through the window of modern technology — as schools and many American synagogues have already done. Who could have ever imagined that every house of worship of every religion would be closed for the time being?

Our religions told us in so many ways that **“No one but God himself knows / What tricks the future holds.”** But the ears weren't ready to listen and prepare. When something needs to be done, we better stop waiting for help, but instead trust ourselves and rely on our own arms.

Experts in air navigation speak of the phenomenon of “spatial disorientation”, which could happen particularly during certain weather conditions, but also while performing dangerous aerobatic feats. And they emphasize the need to receive special training to prevent and manage this condition. Diving experts also tell us how below a certain depth, at about 100 meters, divers could think by mistake that they're going upwards toward the surface; and as a result, unwittingly, they may swim yet deeper till they drown. Could it be that humankind was going too far, against the will of Nature, until the red light turned on and warned us to “Stop!”? It's been more like Nature telling us humans, “You complacent beings, the self-proclaimed Crowns of Creation! You proved that against Nature, why, facing a mere tiny virus, you'd be even beneath the smallest of all creation! You who see “power” in how large your deadly arsenal is, even if it costs poisoning your environment! You who are deluded to think that ‘man can do what he wants within his own walls’! You've been missing the point altogether, that the ‘environment’ means the ‘whole world’! How childish of you to think that your imaginary borders will stop the contamination before it can reach your side!”

You who imagine that the more means you have to kill people, the more powerful you are! You who spend trillions of dollars on making and purchasing all sorts of weapons, instead of providing the means of comfort for the people! You who constantly seek to acquire more of the thousands of scientific, natural and economic resources of the world! Would you ever wake up to

see that the true power lies elsewhere, in being truly human? Let us all wake up! If we can't build the future, let's build our children for the future. Think again of what's happening today around the world. How come that all of a sudden, within two to three days, besides the trillions of dollars lost in the troubled global stock markets, all planes, trains, factories, companies, schools, universities, sport arenas, etc. were grounded?!

Within this short period, we saw how a world fallen to widespread confusion, indecision and anxiety, **took refuge in science**. Certainly, as always, adhering to science would bear positive fruit, and the vaccines and medications for this disease will be made available to the market. However, it's a long way until such remedies can reach everyone, and till people adapt to the post-Corona way of life.

This disease will be controlled only when it's been contained everywhere in the world and without exception. The **“either all, or nothing” approach** obviously applies to this case. Also, we can't avoid change. **The world won't ever go back to the way it was before the Corona**. Much change is ahead of us, and we hope that it will be all for the best, that our world won't become instead a case of the saying that **when the flock returns, those who limp become the leaders!** That would be a painful phenomenon, an example of which we saw firsthand unfold before us in Iran; and by God's will, may it never happen again anywhere in the world. Of course, accidents will befall as they always have, but the people should have the foresight to avoid falling along with them! **One positive aspect** (*sic!*) of the catastrophic Corona pandemic has been that it made people, especially the arrogant among us, realize as never before that **collective health, security and peace** depended on the **individual health, peace and security**, that the society will be afforded these benefits only once they've been provided to everyone. The author believes that the threat posed against individual security is no less significant than the illness itself. Today, humanity is bound by duty to cooperate, provide the basic necessities for the working class, and to appreciate in practice the selfless physicians and nurses who've been risking their lives to protect the health of the others.

Everyone remembers friends on the days of joy!

True friendship is to think of me in times of sorrow.

Alas, we ignored the repeated advice of the sages, who warned us, “Spread your **table** in the market so far / As you won't be **overwhelmed** when it's time to pack up!” Or, “Don't be

arrogant!” and “Don’t boast about your wealth, for it could vanish overnight! Don’t take pride in your beauty, for a fever could wither its sight!” They warned, but we did not heed. The **poet** wrote, “The world is nil, and its treasures are nothing! / O you Nothing! Don’t wrestle with nil for the sake of nothing!” But we just stood there, like the child of Newton’s metaphor, fascinated by a pebble that we found on the seashore, neglecting the vast ocean before us. Thinking that “the river would always bring us flowers”, we had become proud and drunk by victory, until at long last, the river of life carried to our town the plague of Corona, a complicated dilemma, whose true extent and regrettable impact are not yet known. Who knows. Maybe all that we can do is to gather outdoors, keep a safe distance between one another (*sic!*), take in the fresh air, sing along with the late **Hayedeh** in earnest, and hope for forgiveness:

**Tell me, O God! What wrong I said, what wrong I did,
That made me a monster, a beast, in your eyes?
If you don’t want me, O God, then the blame’s on you
If I curse at this wicked world.
Listen to me, O God! Hear you my pain, O God!
If I’m talking nonsense, silence me, O God!
Only when it came to Love, O God,
I mustered the courage, fell in love,
And asked for divine help.
You sent me the Hell fire,
But I made you a bouquet of tulips. [...] ¹¹**

We asked for your help. And yet still we plead, lend us a hand.

Here’s the link to this beautiful Persian song on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhUvvIx_vuM

Meanwhile, day and night, the Hadji Agha of our story craves for *his* Corona! Oh, well. May God fulfill everyone’s wishes...

*Norman “Nourollah” Gabay
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¹¹ An excerpt from the Persian song *Yā Rab!* i.e. “O God!” performed by the late Iranian singer Ms. Hayedeh. Lyrics by Leila “Hedyeh” Kasra. Composer: Farid Zoland. Arrangement: Manouchehr Cheshm-Azar.

To receive copies of this and other writings by Norman “Nourollah” Gabay in Persian and English, including his earlier essays, as well as his three books, *An Invitation to Reason*, *A Dictionary of the Jewish Dialect of Kashan*, and the upcoming *Be Up to Date*, please visit the following website: www.BabaNouri.com.