

Friend

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برای مطالعه نسخه فارسی این مقاله به فایل همراه مراجعه کنید.

**The good friend, like a mirror,
He chides me to my face.
Unlike the comb, behind my back,
Speaking out every fault, describing every hair.**

“I never wanted to know my enemies, for I knew that I’d lose many friends.”

— Oscar Wilde (Attribution)

A wise man was asked, “Which is better, a brother or a friend?” He replied, “A friend who’s like a brother.” Hanging around with friends is a characteristic of the Iranian culture, even as friendship for pretense is an aspect of common place behavior. Friendly behavior was the norm at the Grand Bazaar of Tehran, where to be sure, all of your friends could suddenly turn strangers if you found it hard to fulfill your obligations!

One merchant who boasted three bankruptcies to his credit (sic!) used to say, “At the times of success, all friends would seek my advice with respect; but when I failed, yesterday’s flattering friends would tell the others, ‘This guy was crazy ever since he was a child!’” Indeed, people become friends and share in their success and prosperity, not in their miseries. Even the men of power and wealth try to make friends with who is yet stronger and richer than them. Still, the world gradually comes to see that **knowledge is power**, and everyone from small families to the collection of governments realizes that we can succeed in our path and dodge discrimination when **the world needs our knowledge**. The little country of Israel in particular is destined for such an achievement, as fortunately, it ranks from the 3rd to the 5th place on the global scientific and technological charts for invention and innovation. As a living example, **Warren Buffett**, the second wealthiest man in the world, invested 5 billion dollars at once in an Israeli factory, before

stepping on its soil. As he explained, “If you’re going to the Middle East to look for oil, you can skip Israel. If you’re looking for brains, look no further.”

According to the latest statistics by *Forbes Magazine*, of its annual list of 400 wealthiest Americans, 42 have been immigrants; and six of these billionaires are Israeli citizens. Interestingly, like most of the other super-rich today, their fortunes were earned through high-tech and modern sciences, rather than coming from oil, mines, or weapon sales. The civilized people and states around the world have come to understand clearer than ever that whereas the global sources of wealth are finite, **knowledge and science remain infinite**, and thus, instead of hoarding weapons, they’re after expanding their universities, acquiring modern science and technology, and protecting their exclusive discoveries and inventions, so that the world would need them, not the other way around. This very scientific method, this jumping board of the Jewish people, has made it impossible for the anti-Semites to repeat the past nonsense about the Jew; the same Jew who was always subjected to discrimination, say, in Iran before 1925 C.E. and the ascent of Reza Shah Pahlavi to power, where he didn’t have even the right to own a store in the Bazaar of Tehran; the same Jew who was often so confined that he merely thought of survival instead of living. But we shall move on.

The Bazaar of Tehran was a blend of trade, politics and religion. Sometimes, better than any university, it could teach you the techniques of the trade, while at other times, that same Bazaar would turn into a school of trickery. In that environment, he would succeed who knew the rules of the game. The Bazaar was a huge mix which included intelligent, righteous and trustworthy people, on the one hand, and a large number of pretentious hypocrites, on the other; and there was little surprise that the former were afraid of the latter! Notwithstanding the existing friendship and cooperation between Jews and the Muslims at the time, critical religious issues on occasion would uncover the inciters who tore and sewed the conflict, and the hypocrites who fueled the fight. On one such occasion, a day in Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, a 14-year old Jewish child walked over to the pump next to the large pool at the Dalan Hashemi hall of the Bazaar in front of our little store, and he drank from its water. Loud cries of “disaster” rose, that “a Jewish child had both broken the fast in the public, and had ritually contaminated the water pump! The poor Jewish child, accused of such “crimes” (!), was shaking in the hands of the hypocrites like a dove in the claws of an eagle. Other people were badly worried that the quarrel may spread. The crowd and their slogans grew by the second. After all, according to the

custom, those who didn't fast would respect those who did, and they would avoid eating or drinking in the public. The religion commanded on the appearance, and we Jews too, out of respect for the Muslim month of Ramadan, had our meals privately in the back room of the store.

A few minutes before the quarrel began, two familiar Muslim dealers had come to our store. They walked straight into our back room, found a watermelon, sliced it open, ate it right there, and left the store while playing with their prayer beads. Now, in the hubbub of the quarrel, I looked closer only to realize that the men who seized upon the poor child's hand, chanted wild slogans and provoked the people, were the same two people who barely a few minutes earlier had been enjoying the slices of the watermelon in our back room! I willed myself to call them out by name and shout, "Abol-Ghasem! You just broke the fast before my eyes!" But I didn't dare, for I wasn't as blunt and brave as the Isfahanis! Anyhow, amid the badly agitated atmosphere of that jam-packed scene at the Sara-ye Amir chamber, a well-respected merchant and a friend of ours at Dalan Hashemi, Mr. Hadji Agha Karbas-Foroushan, elbowed his way through the crowd, grabbed away the child by the hand, and dispersed the crowd. In the meantime, the cops arrived too, and the quarrel was safely past and behind.

An English proverb says, and I paraphrase, "As long as there's one heart left in the world that beats for you, you are fortunate. Pity the day when even that heart is no more." Long time ago in Iran, by the order of Agha, i.e. some man of power or a cleric, they brutally flogged an old Jewish man. As he was being whipped on his bare soles, the old man screamed, "Ah! My back! My back!" The beater asked him, "We're hitting on the sole, so why complain of the back?!" The old man answered, "If I had some back support, my feet wouldn't be flogged."

But sometimes, even during the dark ages of anti-Semitism everywhere, there could be found a heart to beat for Jews. A historic point in case was the late Mullah Mohsen Feyz-e Kashani, whose story offers many lessons.

In the year 1654 C.E., by the order of King Abbas of Iran, a man named Mohammad Beyk Etemadod-doleh was appointed governor over 14 Jewish cities. Muhammad Beyk ordered "all Jews to convert to Islam, or be killed if they refused to do so!" Thus, within a single day, this blood-thirsty ruler beheaded 150 Kashani Jews who would not convert to Islam! (See *A Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran*, by the late Habib Levy (Lavi), ed. Dr. Hooshang Ebrami, tr. George W. Maschke.)

To sacrifice one's life for the sake of one's religion, this has been the second mistake of the victims of oppression, and it isn't understandable to this author why anyone should give their life for their beliefs. The Holy Torah repeatedly commands us to put our life first, *ve-tishmor et nafshe-kha*, "**Protect your life.**" The Jewish religion commands that "to save one life is to save the world." — not just the life of a Jew, but that of any human being. After all, what did happen when the very proud Jews of Mash-had, originally from Kashan, followed the orders of their wise religious leaders, and on that cursed day of the Allah-Dadi saga, to save their lives, they converted to another religion?

**At the time of need, with nowhere to escape,
The hand grabs the sharp edge of the sword.**

Some of those proud Mash-hadi Jews, though forced to change name and title, they maintained their faith and authentic self for the next 139 years, between 1839 and 1978; until they were liberated from the cage, and today, they can fly freely in the air. Human brain and beliefs are not transferrable. Your mouth won't taste sweet by uttering "sugar", and the truth of a man won't change whether he utters some changing words. Religion was meant for the people, and not the other way around. Think about it: There won't be any religion if there are no people.

**Who said that "I died for you," he lied.
I told the truth that I'd live on for you.**

You can't change the nature of a person's beliefs by baptism, by pouring the ritual water on their head, say, seven times, as much as you can't change the meat and turn it into a fish by chanting spells and showering a bird! Crying out aloud of bigotry, one-sided view of things, and petrified minds! I wonder when human beings will stop fooling themselves, for indeed, one is tricked the worst by oneself.

Mullah Mohsen Feyz Kashani, blessed be his soul, was among the sages of the day in Kashan. Outraged by the catastrophe and the cruelties of Muhammad Beyk, he rushed to King Abbas, obtained the order to depose Muhammad Beyk, and prevented further slaughter and pillage. We can measure the humanity of a civilized people by how they treat those below their rank, especially the minorities who live among them. No doubt, Mullah Mohsen was a civilized historic figure, one who managed to stop further tragedies.

Interestingly, in the Jewish neighborhood of Kashan, a road was named Koocheh Jadidha, or “The New-Converts Alley”, whose inhabitants concurred that they were the descendants of the Jews who had converted to Islam during the reign of Muhammad Beyk. This group was more anti-Semitic than the other Muslims (sic!), so far as when in 1940 one of them bought our house in Kashan, he had the bricks of the courtyard floor turned over, because as he said, “Jews have walked over them!”

We may observe religious converts and compare their behavior toward their former co-religions all around the world, including the Marranos of 1492 Spain. We can see that most converts profess or pretend fierce loyalty to their new religion, while they discriminate against the followers of their old religion and are even hostile toward them. Ironically, centuries later, the convert Muslims of our New-Converts Alley were still subjected to discrimination within the Muslim society, and even their cemetery was separate from the others! As it turns out, some germs like the virus of Religious Hatred can survive prolonged and extreme heat, and to this date, no better vaccine than our Humanity has been found to destroy it. In other words, history shows that even the new-converts were not easily freed from discrimination and lingering hostilities, because religion has been a tool of oppression and pretention in the oppressor’s hand.

The famed Iranian author **Sadegh Hedayat** said, “In fact, we were all Human Beings, until Race disjointed us, Religion separated us, Politics built a wall between us, and Wealth made us into classes. Many people want **freedom** without knowing **captivity**. They don’t know that to be captive it’s not about the bars that surround the person; it’s about the fence that surrounds the human thought.”

Religious and sectarian hatred has been one of the toughest chains of human captivity as we’ve seen around the world. Consider the series of uprisings known as the Arab Spring, which took place most prominently at the Al-Tahrir Square of Cairo, Egypt, but also in several other Arab countries, including Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Throughout, the people shouted for “Freedom!”, without realizing that the true chains of captivity were their own false beliefs, which until corrected, would continue to hold them imprisoned. Take a look around. Despite considerable freedoms that have been achieved, the chains of religious and sectarian captivity may have become even tighter and tougher than before. Recalling the Iranian poet, **Shafiei Kadkani**,

For long, we shed tears of joy expectant of the day after. / When the next day arrived, / We lived it in regret, missing the bygone days...

Let's speak a bit more of "friend" and of "religious hatred". In 1967, I was on my way from Geneva to Vancouver, Canada, to attend an international exhibition known as Expo-67. A dark-skinned man of about 55 sat next to me. Naturally, to have a conversation on that long trip, I asked, "Where are you from?" "Egypt," he said. "And you?" I answered, "I'm Nourollah Gabay, an Iranian." Suddenly, he embraced me, placed his head on my shoulder, and began to cry uncontrollably. I was stunned as to what had just happened — an Egyptian, an Iranian, but why the flood? He calmed down after a few minutes of shedding tears, shook hands with me, and in his heavy Arabian accent said, "I'm Foad Cohen, Egyptian Jew, yesterday's rich man, today's pauper."

Mr. Foad Cohen explained that, "Recently, Abdol-nasser confiscated my fortunes and those of other Jews, and he expelled us empty-handed from Egypt." Then falling back into tears, he said, "I was friends and partners for 37 years with a man named Abdol-majid. We were, as they say, like one soul in two bodies. Our wives were as if sisters to one another, and our children were as if siblings. The day Abdol-Nasser gave us a few hours deadline, I told my wife not to worry. 'Abdol-majid will protect our property,' I said, 'and he will secure our future. Put the jewelry and other valuables in this closet. I'll let him know to come later and pick them up. We grew up together. He once worked for me. I made him partner, and now he's a millionaire. So don't worry.' Then I picked up the phone and dialed his number. Before I could speak a word, Abdol-majid, aware of the government warning, showered me with some Arabic curses (!) and added that, 'Abdol-Nasser is wrong: he should kill you!' Then he hung up on me."

I heard a cry inside of me that "the touchstone of experience is wonderful," — but at what price? I knew then, **We can't tell the friendly enemy from the true friend. / The wick is at the candle's heart, yet its enemy.** Khalil Gibran was right, and I paraphrase, that "Desire is half of life, indifference is half of death."

Foad continued that, "So, a few hours later, my wife, our little and only daughter, and I flew alongside other Jews to Geneva on a Swiss Air plane. My wife and I cried hundred times worse in the airport when our daughter asked for a piece of bread (!), but we had no money to buy it for her."

To those who claim “money is nothing but some scrubbed dirt on the palm of the hand,” I recommend to save some of that “dirt” before making that claim! I’m reminded of the poems and parables of the primary school, one of which told us, **Don’t boast about your wealth, for it could disappear overnight. / Don’t boast about your beauty, for it may disappear by a fever.** Sadly, as we can see today, Foad will not be the last victim of hatred. Only if we knew that in such a chaotic world, **The words of the perfumed-breath elders / Will spoil from the front and stink from the back.**

Foad continued that, “Now I’m traveling to Canada with a ticket sent to me by a friend to help decide whether we should settle in Israel or in Canada.” And I repeated in the mind that today,

**We’ve tried our luck in this town.
Better pack and leave this whirlpool of a land.**

As we know,

**The seeds of loyalty or hatred in this old farm,
They shall emerge at the time of harvest.**

I better understood what they’d meant when they said, “A man of poor essence and bad foundation shan’t turn good.”

**You get to know your friend when you need them, otherwise,
Best to avoid whom gives you no comfort.
Better not to waste your life talking to him.
To be alone, it’s a thousand times better
Than a companion who hurts your heart.**

As Foad and I continued to talk, I learned clearer than ever before that through centuries of the Diaspora, the Jew was like a tree in a vase that gave its fruit and let everyone enjoy its shade, but it had no roots for itself in the soil. That explains why we feel so grateful today that after ages of wandering around the world, the Jew has found root in his own soil. There is also cause for hope when the world learns from the current tragedies and grows to realize that, **If one limb suffers the pain, / The other limbs cannot easy remain.**

A bit more about Friend. This humble believes that the tell-sign of a good friend is his or her Humanity. Once you see a friend who gossips behind the back of another friend, try and avoid the gossip-person and don't let him to get to know you. Choosing the right friend is especially crucial for children, as it helps determine our destiny, although there can be nothing absolute about it: as it's impossible to find a perfect human, it's quite rare to find the perfect friend. Still, by having a variety of friends, we could benefit from the totality of their virtues. I also believe that my best friend is who warns me of my faults.

**If I meet two kinds of people,
I'd revolve around them as in sacrifice.
The first, who tells me my vice, and
The second, who speaks of his own vice.**

On the other hand, who seeks the perfect friend, they shall remain without friends. Better heed **Rumi's** advice with the heart's ear,

**O my heart!
Friends are of three kinds:
Friend by the tongue,
Friend for the bread,
And friend of the soul.
Give a bite to the friend of bread,
And send them out through the door,
Be kind to the friend of the tongue,
But keep the friend of the soul, and
Refresh his soul so far as you can.**

O, Friend! The world won't always stay the same, or as a Persian saying goes, "The world won't revolve always on the same hinge!" Let's appreciate the true worth of each passing moment.

**The day's share of the bread,
It comes not free from God.
He gives the bread, but in return,
He takes a day of your life.**

Let's appreciate the true worth of one another, for,

The day shall arrive when we'll no more have each other,

When we'll be taken out of the gang, one after another.

The day shall come when we'll make each other

Laugh or cry but in memories.

Sometimes, do remember us, my friend,

For some day, we shall lose one another.

Let's keep in mind that a wise friend is a trusted counsel and a fast cure, as it's been said,

The wise people's friendship, it's a golden cup:

It won't break, but if it does, can be fixed like the new.

The ignorant people's friendship, it's a clay vase:

Whether it breaks or not, you could toss it away.

Finally, happy are the wives and husbands who are friends to one another; and happier those whose children are friends to them and among themselves, besides their natural feelings.

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To receive copies of this and other essays and writings by Norman Gabay in English and Persian, including his book entitled *An Invitation to Reason*, and *The Glossary of the Kashani Jewish Dialect*, please visit the following website: BabaNouri.com.

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