

Opportunity

An Essay in Three Parts

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

Part I	1
Part II.....	7
Part III	12

Part I

Well-informed people take advantage of the opportunities, whereas the **genius** creates new opportunities.

Let’s appreciate Time, or else, we may regret the outcome of these moments.

Judaism says, *kol ma’aseh be-machshAvAh tehilAh*,¹ that is, “all action begins in the mind,” and that “the act that flows from the thought depends on the original decision.” By thinking correctly, we get used to acting right.

Or in the words of **Alfred Nobel**, “One single decision is enough to change a destiny.”

Indeed, taking advantage of a good opportunity could raise a person to the heights of success, while a single act of negligence could bring him down to the dust!

“I lost my attention for a moment, and my path became a hundred years longer. / I went astray, so far as my candle burnt out, and my home sank into darkness.” Many people believe in “chance” as “luck” and “fortune”. But the author believes that “chance” means to be prepared and to recognize an opportunity in time, and to take advantage of it. To recognize a

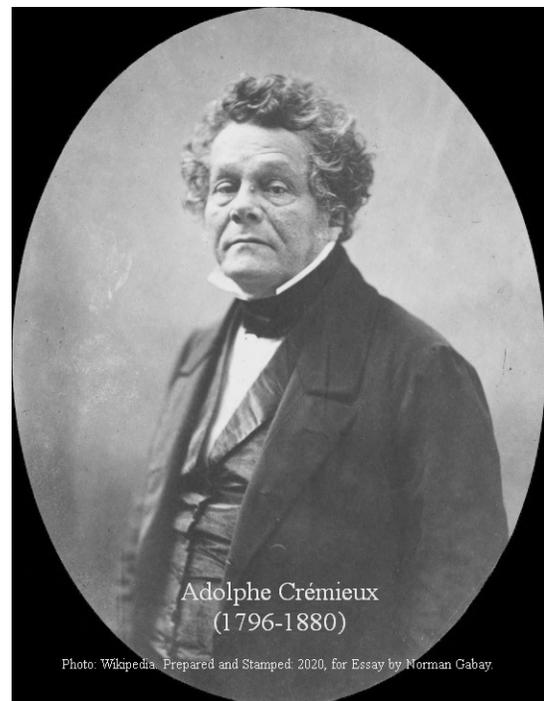
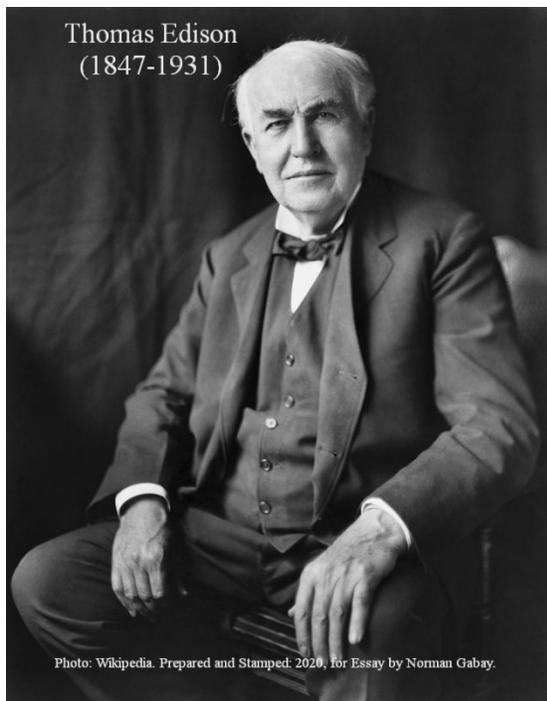
¹ “כל מעשה במחשבה תחילה.”

golden opportunity and to benefit from it can change the destiny of a person, a family and the society, but it could even transform the fate of generations and the world, of life-stories and history.

What came to pass, it's past behind!
Alas, untimely, but it's already passed!
We'd just begun to think and plan,
When a sign was put upon the gate,
“Who lived here, alas, he's gone...”

To illustrate, let's consider two documented cases, one of an international scale, and another concerning the Iranian Jewish community.

The first of these is the life of **Thomas Edison**², who once and for all transformed the world; and the second is the kindness of Alliance Israélite Universelle toward the Jews of Iran. What this organization did for us completely transformed our society, so far as generation after generation, we remain grateful to the benevolence of Alliance and its founder **Monsieur**



² Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931).

Adolphe Crémieux³, and the only way we could repay it is to continue their path.

One day, back from school, the little Thomas Edison passed on a note to his mother and explained, “My teacher said it was for you.” His mother took a look at the letter, and with tears in the eyes, she began to read to her child:

“Your son is a genius, and our school is too small for him. Please undertake his education by yourself!”

Years went by. By then, his mother had passed away, and Edison had become the greatest inventor of the century. One day, he was rapt in the memories of his mother as he was searching through their old closet. A little piece of paper, shoved into a crack in the wall, seized his attention. He pulled it out. The letter read, “Your child is dull. Beginning tomorrow, we won’t be letting him into the school.” Edison wept for hours, and later on, he wrote about it in his memoirs,

“Thomas Edison was a dull child who was turned into a genius by a hero mother.” For thousands of year, countless people have tried to convert copper to gold. This wise mother, unlike many others, didn’t scold her child. She didn’t shout at him, “Didn’t I say so?! Didn’t I...” Instead, she acted wisely, and within a moment, replacing just so few words, she stopped a mountain of gold from degrading into copper.

A large cruise ship with more than 3,000 passengers was sailing calmly upon the ocean, and the passengers were enjoying themselves. The weather turned cold, a storm gathered and raged, and suddenly, the ship’s engine stopped to work, and the ship halted. Two days later, the captain and his engine operators were still trying hard in vain to get the engine restarted.

A passenger informed Captain Jones Jr., the captain of the ship, of an old captain named George among the passengers, who could help with the situation. Captain Jones went to the old captain’s cabin and asked him for help.

The old captain joined Jones and his crew in the engine room. He examined the engine closely, asked for a hammer, and struck a hard blow to a corner of the large machine. At once, the engine turned on, and the ship resumed sail.

³ Isaac-Jacob Adolphe Crémieux (1796-1880).

They carried Captain George on hands to the deck, and they danced and drank in joy. The two captains sat for a talk. Sharing memories, George said, “When I was studying in Ohio, I had a good friend named Jones Sr., tall, blond, good-looking fellow. I heard he too became a naval captain. But I haven’t heard of him in a long while.” Captain Jones Jr. replied, “He was my father.” A delighted George exclaimed, “Oh! Then you must have taken after your mother!” They both laughed at the joke. “How’s the old man doing these days?” George asked. Jones’s voice dropped as he reported, “My father drowned on a trip at sea. His body was never recovered.” George, visibly moved, said, “Then tell me, how come you chose that same profession, well aware that your father lost his life to it?”

Jones said, “May I ask how your father died?” George answered, “My father died of heart attack one night in bed.” Jones laughed and said, “And yet you continue to sleep every night in a bed?!” They both laughed at the witty remark, left for their cabins, and with smiles on lips, lay down on beds, and fell asleep.

Crying out aloud, for even though humankind knows about all kinds of risks, every night he or she goes on sleeping on the bed of destiny, knowingly or unwittingly, alone or at times with a partner in crime!

The day after that eventful night, Captain George sent a bill for \$10,200 as his fee for the service to the accounting office of the ship. They called him from the accounting and asked, “Wouldn’t you think that \$10,200 is rather too much for merely half an hour of work and a single blow of the hammer?!” Captain George said, “My bill is in fact made up of two parts: \$200 as my wage for half an hour of labor, plus \$10,000 for my knowledge, as I knew how hard and at which exact point I should bring down the blow. That wasn’t learned in just 30 minutes, but instead it had taken me fifty years and 30 minutes to earn it — fifty years of experience, and a moment of execution!”

Similarly, that wise mother knew instantly how to change just a few words, how and where exactly to strike, not only to avoid discouraging her son, but instead to reinforce his self-confidence. And as a result, that very child grew up to shed a shining light upon the world. As the Persian poet Saadi put it, **“It takes much traveling to become mature. / The mystic won’t be pure until he’s drunk a cup.”**

The ship docked at the destination, and Captain Jones Jr. walked over in his beautiful sailor's suit to bid farewell to the old George. He handed George an envelope, inside of which were a check of \$10,200, two cruise ship tickets for a 10-day trip to Hawaii, and a letter of thank you. As they said goodbye, he added, "Go to bed with hope every night" — for, after all, **"Life's but a candlelight in the plain of existence, / Which could blow out by a blink."**

One wise decision could be all that it takes to change someone's destiny, maybe even that of a society or the whole world. But how are such decisions arrived at? Every correct decision requires accurate information and the right thinking. The accurate information comes from studying properly, sound counsel, a solid education, and appropriate social interaction. It's such superior knowledge that leads us to recognize the right opportunity, instead of locking the gates on ourselves and our children in the name of religion and adopting a path of imitation. Imitation has no outcome but a bunch of imitators, who as we've seen, blame all their shortcomings on "bad luck" or "the will of God", and ask *ha-shem* i.e. "the Almighty God" to make up for them. They're unaware that the wiser you are, the "luckier" you get. Wise people rely on themselves, don't wait in the illusion of *kismet* or "fate", and don't perpetually beg *ha-shem* for everything! As the poetess **Parvin Eteessami** put it,

Fate is a tale of madness, not that of luck:

To fall off the roof and blame it on the fate!

You can't buy back the lost time,

So don't sell cheap this priceless jewel.

In English, the word "chance" is synonymous with "opportunity", as for instance, when someone fails at a task, we may say, **"Give him another chance!"** That is, **"Give him another opportunity!"**

So often, "luck" or "chance" rings the bell on every door in time. Those who're awake greet it with open arms; but others in the house may not hear it, or if they do and get to meet it, they can't tell it for what it is, and miss its significance. The best of people comes courting them, but they reject the courter! The best modern facilities are available to their children, but instead, they send them to religious seminaries or *maktabs* to be brought up as so-called "religious"! They don't realize that one can both receive a modern education and be religious; besides that an

educated person would better understand the religion — and *understanding* the religion precedes *believing* in the religion.

One golden opportunity which was missed by some sectors of the Iranian Jewish people took place in about 1875 C.E. At the time, Alliance Israélite Universelle, having obtained the approval of Nasseraddin Shah, the Qajar King on July the 12th, 1873, sent two representatives to Iran to pave the grounds for establishing schools in that backward environment filled with prejudice. The two of them traveled to Iran at a time when there were no cars, nor decent roads. They rode horses and carts, and passed through rough terrains and unsafe roads, until they finally arrived in Tehran and gradually contacted the Jewish Associations and clerics in cities with a Jewish community. Given their large Jewish populations, Tehran, Hamedan and Isfahan were the first cities to welcome the two representatives and their sacred goal. However, the Jewish Associations and clerics of only two cities did not welcome them: one claimed that “they’ve come to convert us to Christianity!” while the other claimed, “it makes no sense for poor kids to learn how to read!” (To learn more about this page from our history, you may consult *Honoring the Founders of Alliance Israélite Universelle* by Dr. Houshang Zareh,⁴ and *The Foreign Cultural Record in Iran* by Dr. Homa Nategh.⁵)

As a result, to this day, about 120 years since those days, we can see that even the descendants of the three cities which originally welcomed the Alliance, they’re better educated, especially since they were first to send their daughters, these mothers of tomorrow, to school. In contrast, the innocent people of the two cities which rejected the Alliance, they’ve been more after religious observance. May I ask what sin had their children committed to be deprived of that wonderful blessing? We may say, Happy be a people with farsighted leaders, and happy be the children of erudite parents.

Don’t blame me if I grow

By myself in the lawn.

For, I grow as I’m raised.

The wisdom of the rational leaders of Alliance Israélite had the distinction that they didn’t interfere in the matter of religion within Iranian families at the time. They didn’t tell us what to

⁴ بزرگداشت آلیانس ایسرائلیت، به قلم دکتر هوشنگ زارح.

⁵ کارنامه فرهنگی فرنگی در ایران، به قلم دکتر هما ناطق.

wear, how to eat, or how to pray. They didn't teach the books of religious guidance by some ancient clerics in the fantasy of "preserving the religion". In practice, they said, "We help you to become literate, so that you can read and choose your own path."

Part II

"I was a student of Alliance Israélite of Isfahan."

Today, October the 4th, 2019, I received an email entitled *Anti-Semitism in New York*. I saw how a bunch of beasts were assaulting our dear brothers in today's streets of New York. It's been said that "if you feel pain, then you're alive; but if you feel the pain of the others, then you're human!" Whenever anyone, Jewish or non-Jewish, in any clothes and anywhere in the world, is subjected to prejudice and persecution especially in the name of "religion", then all Jews everywhere feel their pain. Otherwise, as the venerated **poet** said, "**Who feels not the sorrow of the others, / He ought not to be called Human.**" I felt the pain of our dear New Yorkers. I was also reminded of Germany ca. 1938 C.E., when the persecution and oppression of the peaceful and successful Jews began, and when the catastrophe of *Kristallnacht* or "The Night of Broken Glasses" took place in Berlin and other cities. And I wept — but with some difference, for back then, when the Jews of Germany were being attacked, the government was on the oppressors' side, and the State of Israel had not yet come to exist. May the chronic ill of anti-Semitism never afflict a government.

I wonder why our religious brothers aren't learning from the past. What are such obtrusive and inciting clothes and appearances for, attires which stand in sharp contrast to today's fashion? I know that they would tell me, "It's the Command!" In response, I would humbly point out that the holy *Torah* emphasizes two points in particular: first, observing **justice** at every level, and the other, **protecting one's own life** — as it's said, "*tzedek, tzedek tirdof...*" (*Deuteronomy*, 16:20), that is, "Justice, pursue justice..."⁶ And elsewhere it emphasizes, "*tishmor et nafshekha...*",⁷ that is, "Protect your own life." Furthermore, where the book commands us to fast on the designated day of *Yom Kippur*, i.e. the Day of Atonement, it also adds that "the sick are not permitted to fast" — that is, one's health, yours and mine, and protecting our lives, take

⁶ "צדק, צדק תרדוף." (דברים, ט"ז, כ')

⁷ "תשמור את נפשך."

the priority. The religious people realize, better than most others, the dangers of imposing discrimination and hostility, and the outcome of sticking out in the crowd. As such, given the command that gives “priority to preserving life”, and certainly to fulfill “justice for the innocent children”, they ought to give up such traditions as wearing distinct hats by men and wigs by women, or any other inciting trend that could lead to humiliating women; and instead, they should try and keep step with the world. Religious observance does not depend on appearances.

I don’t mean that removing such things will eradicate anti-Semitism. Not at all! But I mean that we should think of what’s best to do, and we shouldn’t hand an excuse to our enemies. If you and I can’t see something, it doesn’t mean necessarily that it doesn’t exist. We better take off the dark glasses of prejudice, be realistic, and see things as they are. Should perchance the increasing population of extremists find a majority, then sooner or later, there will remain no religion, nor any significant religious person to speak of.

Years ago, near our office in the Amir Chamber of the Grand Bazaar of Tehran, there were two brothers from Isfahan, namely Mehdi and Abdol-hussein, who imported textile. In 1954 C.E., Abdolhussein visited New York to purchase merchandise, and with the help of my friend, Sion Monassebian, he procured some goods. One day, he told Sion, “This Saturday morning, I’d like to go with you to the synagogue.” Sion was surprised, but Abdolhussein insisted, and together, they attended a service at a New York temple. Abdolhussein observed all customs, even reading from the *Torah*. As he explained to a surprised Sion,

“I was a student of Alliance Israélite “Ettehad” School of Isfahan, and I’m happy that I learned all the rituals even better than my Jewish classmates.”

I ask those friends, who believe in the religious dress code and a host of superstitions, to suppose that someone like Abdolhussein puts on the ritual cap i.e. the *kippah* or *yarmulke*; builds himself “twin kitchens” at home to keep separate the “meat and dairy” products and the like (!); abstains from using electricity and automobiles on the Shabbat; covers his hair with large hats, as the religious Jews do; and above all (!!) only takes the “kosher elevator” on the Shabbat (sic!). Or that he leaves the kitchen stove burning from Friday evening till Saturday night, altogether about 26 hours — even in houses or apartments within cities like Los Angeles, which are prone to earthquakes. In short, suppose that he observes all such practices, some of which are difficult

to speak of, acts that have no good and sound basis, and have absolutely no connection to the commands of the holy *Torah*. Then could we call him Jewish, and a Religious Jew, at that?

You'll surely say, "Never! Ever!" If so, then it's clear that being Jewish or not doesn't depend on such nonsense. Religion is an inherited belief, and we dare say that 99% of the adherents of various religions had no say in choosing their own. Let's admit that the a religion which offers more humane beliefs, and consequently, raises better people, individuals who are useful to themselves and the society, it'll have more useful followers.

Only the ignorant people, who inherited their religion, are hostile to the others who inherited their own religions or sects. Meanwhile, their leaders take advantage of the situation, mock people in secret, and promise them a distant Heaven.

Karl Popper said, and I paraphrase, "Who made the heaven of life into a hell for you, he must convince you that heaven exists elsewhere." Whereas, in the words of the **poet**, "Heaven is where there's no harassment, / Where everyone minds their own business." Unfortunately, given how religion has operated in the past and today, we may say, **"You can't find a human in this world of dust. / It'll take a new world to build humanity anew."**

The *Torah's* emphatic command to "observe justice" is so vast and reasonable that like a fair teacher, it can guide every faithful and conscientious person in their just practice of religious and social commands, anywhere and anytime. Meanwhile, we may observe that in the long run, in practice and in the pursuit of justice, the majority of religious people come to ignore the unjust aspects of the religion and what disagrees with modern knowledge and thought. A closer look shows this to be ultimately true even for those who see religious practice in taking the commandments literally.

For instance, consider an old command known as *yevamot*,⁸ which fully disregards the status of women. Accordingly, to be succinct, if a man passed away and left his wife without a child, the man's brother was obligated to marry his widow. (See *Genesis*, 38:8, and *Deuteronomy*, 25:5-10.) Although this command was certainly meant to maintain the family structure in an ancient and different era, it's rightly come to be seen as unjust, unfitting to modern thought, and

⁸ יבמות or ייבום.

impractical. Thence, in effect, by the rule of reason and to fulfill justice, this old command is politely ignored, and as with other similar cases, it's not observed.

To ignore certain religious codes, such as the practice of *pidyon haben*⁹ for an animal, it's not to defy a host of other commands; rather, it means to keep in step with modern thought, to implement justice, and to remain up-to-date. Such adjustments and corrections have always been there and continue to be, since by the rule of Nature, neither we will give up learning, nor Nature will stop teaching.

To believe or not to believe in some nonsense isn't just about an advantage for one or the other person; but it shows that people may understand and interpret the same thing in different ways.

The sales executive of a large shoe manufacturer sent one of two brothers who worked for the company to scout new markets in a far away island. The following day, by mistake, he also sent the younger brother to assess the potential market in the same island! A few days later, two letters arrived in the sales manager's office, one from each of the brothers.

The elder brother reported, "This thriving island has a population of 400,000, the majority of whom walk barefoot. There's no room to sell our products. I'll return tomorrow." But the younger brother, unaware of his sibling, stated, "The people of this populous island are mostly barefoot, so it presents us with a great market for our products. For the time being, send me 10,000 pairs of all types of our goods. I've marked a location at the beach for our showroom, and we should be selling soon 200,000 pairs a year for sure. I'll await the shoes and our brochures in Spanish." Two brothers, a single goal, a single location, yet two completely opposite interpretations of an identical situation! One is begging *ha-shem* or "the Almighty" all the time, whereas the other relies on his own intellect, this gift of *ha-shem*! One a burden, and the other a big success!

It shouldn't come as a surprise that differences in judgment could also emerge between couples, siblings, or other close acquaintances. Many years ago, I was closely informed of a dispute between two brothers, who were partners in business and real-estate properties. The conflict led them to sever all ties between them, this disagreeable custom. Sadly, following the

⁹ פדיון הבן.

crisis and before they could have a chance to reconcile, both brothers passed away shortly apart. I observed how as a result of their estrangement both families broke apart. Even though the two were gone, their wives kept the conflict mutually aflame, and in such a sad way, so far as the estrangement still persists in their families like a **defective family gene!** Alas, the two fathers didn't realize that oceans couldn't drown a boat, unless water could leak into it through a tiny hole. The childish act of "becoming cross with each other" was the hole in the boat of these families; and to this date, the children, grandchildren and in-laws of the late two brothers might not know each other at all.

Decades went by, and I was informed once more that two brothers had become estranged. This time, I offered my experience and asked them, "**Don't let the hostilities become inheritable.** There won't be always another chance to make up for past mistakes." Gladly, they reconciled. Indeed, if ladies were running the world, then there would be no wars — just that a few countries would be on no speaking terms!

Plant the tree of friendship, for it bears much fruit.

Uproot the tree of enmity, for it bears only pain.

It's impossible that everyone would think the same way. As a French author wrote, "Where everybody thinks the same way, nobody is thinking!" Societies will succeed when they complement one another, not when they oppose each other, or fear one another! Practicing the reasonable and progressive commands of the holy *Torah* won't need instilling the fear of hell and hopes of heaven in people.

Children who fear their parents, as I've witnessed, they never advance in life. I had a classmate in the primary school, whom we called Khan. His ignorant father punished him repeatedly, so far as the child was badly afraid of him and stuttered when he wished to speak to him; and eventually, his stutter became permanent. Neither at school, nor in the society, did the poor boy achieve anything. His undeserving father was unaware that "father means comfort, and mother means peace". As with water which reflects the surrounding beauty only when it's standing calm, a child learns better and absorbs more when he or she finds themselves in a peaceful environment, imbued with kindness and love. Otherwise, like troubled waters, in a mixture of fear and anxiety, we could expect no better reflection in their behavior and the education they receive. My mother, seeing that child and others like him, used to tell me, "My

dearest! Not everybody deserves to get married and to have children!” It surprises me that professions such as hairdressing and the like require a license, but no control is in place to certify a person’s qualifications for an affair as important as marriage. My mother admonished the parents of children with mental disorders, who would say, “They’ll get well once they get married!” Such parents weren’t aware that by doing so, they made the misery far worse and many times over.

We human beings by nature desire freedom. So when it comes to religion and religious observance, a *fear* of hell, God, or one’s parents cannot replace the *love* of God and of the parents. Never! Fear, bridles and whips, these are beneath humanity. Only making people understand things through love and kindness suits human dignity, for as it’s said, Even to say “Hi!” out of fear is a forbidden sin.

**If the teacher’s lesson were a whisper of kindness,
It’d bring in the fleeing child to the school on Sunday.¹⁰**

Part III

Amir Kabir, the famed Iranian Prime Minister of the Qajar era, used to say, and I paraphrase, that the Iranian people began to regress when (in the name of religion) imitation replaced thinking, prayer substituted work and effort, “fate” purged “the will to advance”, and “whispering mantras” pushed out rational decision making.

Sadly, the problem of religious extremism has resulted in breaking up the united and continuous chain of the Iranian Jewish families, which extended back to 2700 years ago. I observed this phenomenon up-close while I had volunteered to cooperate and help settle the immigrants, alongside my dear nephew, the late **Manouchehr Ghodsian**, who voluntarily and whole-heartedly had undertaken managing the philanthropic aids. The said problem rose while the Iranian Jewish families were emigrating, and their children were often left alone and without supervision for long periods. In the meantime, a group of non-Iranian Jews, who promoted the Jewish culture of the Eastern European ghettos, entered the Iranian Jewish community whilst in migration. This group meant to serve and protect our youngsters, as they imagined they were

¹⁰ درس معلم ار بود زمزمه محبتی جمعه به مکتب آورد طفل گریز پای را

saving a “group of uninformed people” — and needless to say, some of them also meant to earn a living from it. Many Iranian parents were happy that a benevolent group had stepped in to prevent their children from going astray in strange lands, and who were taking care of them like true fathers.

However, those parents were unaware that the wholehearted support of that group of religious advocates was meant to change the religious way and beliefs of the Iranian Jews. It was meant to have these immigrants join their way of life, and adopt a culture and tradition that was in sharp conflict with their own — with the ancestral culture of the rational Iranian Jew, which was best manifest in the sound and moderate way of the late Chacham Yedidia Shofet. At this stage, a group of wandering Iranian Jews joined to imitate the way of the Eastern European religious Jews; whereas another group remained loyal to their ancestral Iranian Jewish tradition. Thenceforth, many families began to divide up and break apart, and the friendship of those advocates turned into the proverbial “friendship of the bear.”¹¹ As a result, those immigrants neither learned the proverbial gait of the partridge, nor could they remember their own ancestral walk.¹²

Some people are imitators, while another group aims to make a living off of them. And some people remain indifferent, while the others are catching fish from the muddy waters. As it’s said, “It’s best to be friends with the erudite people.” If only these Iranian Jewish immigrants, instead of the extremist religious advocates, had met the rational European and American Jewish sectors, whether Orthodox or else, so that they could take a step forward, not backward. If only instead of the ultra-Orthodox teachers, it were the modern Orthodox people, wise and reasonable as they are, who taught in the classrooms. The latter group, far from the nonsense, have acquired the best of modern education, mind their own business, and earn their own living. They don’t aim to make the others religious, and their children, in their own right, are studying at the best universities. **If only rationality were contagious, and there were a vaccine against prejudice.** If only those religious advocates heeded what the **poet** said, that “**ambivalence** was wise for no

¹¹ As the fable goes, once upon a time, a young man befriended a big bear. One hot afternoon, the man was sound asleep in the shade of a tree, when a horsefly arrived and landed on his forehead. The bear, afraid that his human friend could be awakened, picked a large rock and brought it down on the fly. The fly managed to flee, but the man was badly wounded.

¹² A Persian proverb says, “A crow tried in vain to walk like the partridge, but also forgot how he used to walk.”

one; / a heart can't belong to two beloveds." Or as another **poet** put it, "Two hearts united as one break through mountains. / They shall scatter the giant masses."

Humankind has suffered a big punishment for failing to understand the true purpose of religion, so far as today, what was meant as "a means to sustain life" has turned into a huge problem and "the murderer of souls". And as long as people are afraid of the opportunistic advocates of religion, the problem will persist. Let's keep in mind that justified fear stems from reason, whereas misplaced fear originates in cowardice. For that same reason, it shouldn't come to us as a surprise that according to available statistics, the religious population of the world, including the global Jewish population, is on the decline. The author believes that for every person or family who becomes religious, several times more of those who surround them turn away from the religion; because one is acting in excess, another pays no attention, and the majority remains indifferent!

In other words, the decline of the Jewish population worldwide isn't due to a "lack of religious observance", but instead, one major cause for such decline has been the misguided activities of the religious extremists. Despite their benevolent wishes, the mistaken activities of this sector — which involve the instruction and spread of some antiquated superstitions in the guise of religious advocacy — has ended up defeating their purpose. Sadly, the tangible and undeniable outcome of their mistakes have been the hundreds of thousands of jobless people who've become burdens to the state and the people. Such people have discouraged hundreds of thousands of their relatives and close acquaintances, sometimes making them run away from the religion. The latter see the superstitious behavior of those wasted young people — gifted youngsters who deserved to enjoy the best and most honorable lives, who could create bright futures for themselves and the future generation — and they wonder. They weigh the benefits of the religion against its evident flaws, and they give it up altogether, choosing a new path for themselves. They adopt a brighter and more productive lifestyle, so they won't suffer the same fate as those who constantly plead *ha-shem* the Almighty for help without an answer, and who go on living in **self-made poverty** with their many children.

It's sad when some useful and enlightened content from the treasure chest of the Jewish culture is offered together with a bunch of antiquated words that date back to thousands of years ago. As of now, outdated ideas that humiliate women, or the like, more or less continue to be

taught. Sayings such as “women are light in the head” from the *Gemara*, or “O God! I thank you for I wasn’t created a woman!” from the daily prayer, and so forth, these are nothing more than short-sighted secretions of some closed, fossil minds — and yet, they keep being repeated. Given the above, how could we expect for the Jewish population to grow, or even for the Jewish religion to survive? What *religion* are they talking about in the first place? Where can you find in the *Torah* what they imagine to be “religious observance”?

Let me warn that by continuing to teach such subjects, no significant religion will remain to have any significant followers. **The population of religious people around the world**, including Jews, will continue to decline, as long as inciting points such as insulting and humiliating women and their status, or other nonsense, have not come to an end. **My point is** that not only such absurdities should not be taught, but also such writings, such weaknesses, should be eliminated before they can pass on to yet another generation. Our ancestors could not fulfill this obligation, but today we can stop teaching such books at schools, and end the activities of those who teach them. Otherwise, there’ll always be regressive people, as we see today, who by way of their poor understanding, misrepresent the nonsense of these books as commands of the religion. We may not always readily see the cause. To better understand the threats that face the Jewish population worldwide, it would suffice to examine some well-documented and credible statistics for the last year and the coming year. Let’s try to uncover and understand the reasons for the decline and fall of the religious observance, and to respond to it properly. History will be the judge of us.

It could be said that **the first step** to cause the decline of religious observance worldwide, including the Jewish society’s share of it, was giving preference to religious seminaries, or *yeshivot* and *kollels*, over universities and a true education in modern knowledge. This phenomenon has continued to this date due to fundamentalist activities. Whereas, quite the contrary, studying modern sciences has always taken precedence over learning the religious laws. To fight against this principle would be the same as swimming upstream in the river of life, as a result of which, **the swimmer, i.e. the society, will surely drown.**

In my view, studying modern sciences, on the one hand, and learning the religious subjects, on the other, don’t have to compete with one another at all. Each of these two areas has its rightful place and specific purposes, and they could reasonably follow their individual paths

without crossing their boundaries. From this point of view, we can't and shouldn't keep one of these to the exclusion of the other. Instead, everybody can benefit from the best that they both can offer.

Religion and science, each should have its rightful place. Alas, so many people who wouldn't buy anything before tasting samples, yet they accept any superstition attributed to the religion with closed eyes, even at the cost of becoming jobless. Whereas, the *Talmud* calls those who don't work on purpose *moleh olAm*,¹³ i.e. "who ruins the world."

The faith in God and religion can't provide for the daily expenses of every individual or family. In contrast, those who have studied any branches of science, they'll be able to provide the best of lives for themselves, their family and their children, and yet maintain their beliefs and religious practice, too, if that's what they wish. Given the above, it's sad for a number of people to spend their entire time, their whole life, in the religious seminaries, and either constantly beg *ha-shem* the Almighty for help, or become burdens to the state and the people. This is but another solid reason to criticize an extremist and superstitious religious education. Studying science supports both the life and the **faith of a family** in many respects. In contrast, studying the religious books and laws can't provide at all for the necessities of modern life and society. Needless to say, professional rabbis, as well as teachers, historians and informed religious scholars, have their own rightful place, and the need for their expertise needn't be reminded.

Finally, I'd like to address the religious advocates and teachers and say, *tikkun olAm*,¹⁴ and not *lehachriv olAm*¹⁵ — that is, "mend the world, instead of destroying it!" Advocate, but do not destroy.

We're in the quest of piety, though we're drunk from the wine.

We desire the world, and yet we want the afterlife.

Whenever did the earthly world get along with religion?

That's why we've got neither a religion, nor the world.

¹³ מולה עולם.

¹⁴ תיקון עולם.

¹⁵ להחריב עולם.

Nonsense and superstition can't go together with a sound mind. Let's stop superstitions from seeping into the brains, for they scatter both our religion and our world into the wind.

At any rate, as the dear **Mash-hadi** people would say, eventually, everyone will know that "either I'm right, or they'll understand that I am right!"

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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.