

During my lifetime I have been guided by various pieces of wisdom, said by thinkers who lived many years before me. Two of the more memorable ones, have stayed with me to this day:

One, from the **Book of Proverbs** (4; 7) says –

*“Wisdom is the principal thing;*

*Therefore, get wisdom: and with all thy getting,*

*Get understanding.”*

The other, comes from Socrates’ **Apology**:

*“The unexamined life*

*Is not worth living.”*

These two statements, I feel, represent my outlook on the world we live in and our life today.

For this I know: the books written by our forefathers, the historical traditions, and cultural heritage, these are the foundation of our lives. They provide us with our basic values, they nurture us with ideals and hopes, they keep us united, and centered. Yet, in addition to it all, we are also called for to carry-on probing, exploring and researching our world. We are required to examine, test and question our reality in each generation, so that we can expand, increase and deepen our understanding of the phenomena around us, and improve our performance in coping with the difficult circumstances of our existence.

While I have seen the immense benefit that tradition and the ancient religious writings have contributed to our society, by instilling in it solace and inner peace,

I have also been witness to the pain and divisiveness that the exclusive adherence to religion, could cause to the individual, to the family, and community.

It is when religion is practiced in a manner which blinds and blocks the abilities of its followers to see the reality around them - instead of providing them with the added knowledge to see **more** – it is then that religion becomes, in the words of one Russian ruler, like “opium for the masses.”

Throughout my life, I have never been dissuaded from believing in the God I was born into, nor have I lost my faith in it.

I have, however, learned, that a good way for a person to spend the second and third acts of his “life-drama”, is to write, read, study, and learn new lessons, because when we stop learning, we practically end our living. And learning, means acquiring fresh information, absorbing updated facts, listening to current theories, and opening up to new discoveries.

It is with this in mind, coupled with my unshakable faith and belief in my religion, as well as others, that I have set out to voice my views and draw attention to the dangers contained in the extremism, which has been practiced by religion in the past, and is still being practiced in the present.

Though my views might seem controversial to some, I hope they will grant me the honor of reading my Open Letter with an open mind, so as to open the door for an inspiring dialog between us, on the subject. I also take this opportunity of assuring each of you, of my sincere intention **not** to disparage anybody’s personal views, but rather to say a few things in praise of knowledge and open-mindedness. And in closing, may I quote one of the forefathers of this nation, Abraham Lincoln:

*“Lighting one candle in the dark*

*Is better than cursing it a thousand times.”*

My last message is addressed to those among my readers, who are more facile with the computer:

Please share this site with parents, relatives, friends, colleagues, acquaintances and other people you meet in your daily life, who have less access to this form of communication.

With utmost appreciation,

N.G.

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

### IN THE SCIENTIFIC AGE

An open letter to educators and persons-of-the-cloth

Of all faiths

From

Norman Gabay

Translated and adapted from Farsi

Dear Educators and clergy-persons,

There are hundred of stories about the great Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw.

We know he was witty. We know he was wise. We know he was talented.

But, we do not know that he had a degree in education.

Yet, the story goes, that he was once approached by a young couple, who asked him

at what time they should start educating their child.

“How old is your child?” asked the writer.

“Six days old,” said the proud parents.

“Then,” answered Shaw, “you are 6 days too late...”

The above exchange, had presumably taken place over 60 years ago, prior to Shaw's death, at the age of 94. It represents a mode of thinking that was already emerging in the last century, when the Industrial Age had just started to lay its new demands for a total transformation in society - in education, and in preparing the young generation towards a new age of discoveries and inventions.

Does Mr. Shaw's advice make any sense?

If you ask Educators, Psychologists, Sociologists and Medical Doctors – their answer will be in the affirmative.

Yes, from the moment of birth, a child does not cease to seek and absorb *information*.

*Information* about the face, touch, smell and voice of the parents. *Information* about the taste of food he or she is being fed. *Information* about the discomfort associated with the need to change clothing...and so on, and so on. The absorption process the child goes through, is *cumulative*, and follows him/her, through his growing and maturing process. Its value is in its sheer *usefulness*.

Once collected, the information is immediately imprinted in the young memory cells, and is recalled in moments of need, to help the child, from early on, and through later years, to make his or her steps through the complicated maze of life.

The more *useful, relevant* and *authentic* is the information that the child absorbs - the smoother his or her voyage through life will be. It is, therefore, easy to see why the need to start educating a child from Day One of the his/her life, is imperative. Accordingly, it is also quite clear why delaying it, would cause an unfortunate waste as well as undesirable delay in the child's development, and in the subsequent involvement of the young person into a mature, inspired and creative person, fully equipped to contribute to society.

I opened my letter by introducing the advise of an well-known person, who was not an educator.

I would like to continue by "confessing", that I, too, am not an educator.

And I am quite aware of the fact that many of you who read my letter,

Are equipped with the highest academic degrees and/or ordained as religious minister- which I do not own.

If I am using this venue to express my views about education, it is *not* in order to refute your views, or to undermine your positions; rather, it is with the utmost humility, and with deepest respect, for your knowledge, experience and the great achievements you have had in your respective fields.

The motivation for my writing this letter, is my awareness of the growing gap separating students of the faith-based schools, from today's world.

I know only too well that criticism can only be effective when accompanied by solutions; I am also aware of the disparity between my educational experience and knowledge, and yours. I, nevertheless, take this opportunity of sharing these opinions of mine, feeling especially privileged to do so in a country which promotes freedom of speech and expression, and hoping that you will indulge me, and read through these pages, even though they might contain thoughts which are in total opposition to yours.

Having had the opportunity of observing from close many religious schools, and after reviewing the history of European academic institutions in the past couple of centuries, it became clear to me that the Quota system, which barred Jews from entry into academic institutions in previous times, thus forcing them to be confined to studying at Yeshivot (religious Jewish institutions) - actually offered them the invaluable opportunity of learning their traditional values, mastering the language of their fathers - Hebrew - honing their minds on the laws of the Scriptures, and develop deep respect for the history of their people.

Amazingly enough, though, when the academies and universities finally did open their doors to Jewish students, where they were first introduced to secular curricula, the graduates of religious schools were, nevertheless, able to shine and excel, under the new circumstances, too; and though they were members of a tiny minority of the world population, they still managed to capture 22% of the Nobel prizes in the world, to date. Their brilliance and achievements could not have been possible without the foundation they had received in the Yeshivot - where they honed and sharpened their minds. Their astounding success could not have been achieved without the nurturing foundation they received in the religious schools.

However, can we be convinced of the same thing, today about professional rabbinical students? Do we find religious schools a source of knowledge for the young scientists of today? Should not credit for their achievements go the secular institutions of learning, which opened their doors to them? Nietzsche, the German philosopher said: "A suffering that does not paralyze me, makes me stronger."

In my opinion, the reason for the brilliance and the success of our scientists is not necessarily due to their being Jews. Neither does it have anything to do with religion.

This is not something new. It has been around for centuries. Like a plant growing in a pot, Jews in the circumstances of removal and re-plantation have so suffered from lack of water and the breakage of the branches and the pot that adaptability has become a second nature to them. They do not consider defeat as annihilation. In defeat, they preserve themselves for a more enlightened and hopeful day. Had any other nation in history endured the hardship and the sufferings that we have during the centuries past, without a doubt their natural and God given intelligence as human beings, having been intertwined with and exposed to world views, would have been advanced to the point that they too would have found such a key.

For example, a farmer in Yazd on the outskirts of the Great Desert in Iran can bring water up from the depth of a ninety meters well, and will be known as a meritorious and innovative farmer, while the Gilany farmer who lives by the sea and has never known drought is relatively less productive and has an easier life.

This has nothing to do with religion. Those people who attribute everything to religion muddy the waters because it is natural that any living being will become either lazy, or a hard worker depending on his environment and his needs. To make this point more clear, take note of the saying that "when the wind blows the hat off a bald man, he runs faster than anyone else to retrieve it."

The question I wish to pose, is whether today, at a time when the doors of the academic institutes throughout the world, as well as the internet - this double-edged sword, tireless and timeless tool - are open to one and all to acquire knowledge, doesn't the continued enslavement of the minds of our younger generation in the religious schools, constitute a waste of the limited time they are allotted for learning?

By employing an attitude of "laissez-faire", and letting things continue the way they used to be, are we not being responsible for allowing our youngsters to be exposed to the same old religious books, learn from teachers with limited knowledge about the modern world, and be subjected to these teachers' outmoded thinking? Are we to condone the practice continued in the religious schools, of filling the young minds of our kids, and the kids who will follow them, with dusty beliefs, obsolete ideas, and senseless interpretations of the world - all in the name of religion?

How can we justify asking them to follow an old tradition which relegates women to second class citizenship, and watch how the fundamental rights of 50% of our society, being trampled on? How can we stand back and take no action, when those 50% are forced to hide behind the Black Curtain of fanaticism - all in the name of religion? Has God created only man, and appointed him to order women where to sit and where to go? Must we wait for a heavenly message in order to change the existing customs, instead of effecting these changes, hinges on our own? After all, the old customs were man-made, too!

Human intelligence is not religion-bound, nor is it gender-related. The minds of those who ignore these truths are not synchronized with the sophisticated "mental watches" of today's world. These minds are liable to relegate our young men and women to a fate of non-productive life, making it impossible for them to develop their potential, forcing them to be cut-off from the stream of humanity, and making them a burden on society.

Max Weber says: "To describe any social decorum, one should seek the anxiety that had a role in formulating it, and also we must know how its advocates see it." In order to understand the reason for this phenomenon, we must see who benefits from it. The extremists should realize that directing young people towards an unclear destiny, by feeding them ambiguous predictions and baseless expectations, will cause these youngsters to reject religion altogether.

The most misguided people in the world are those who do not learn from the turmoil of the world. Nietzsche says: "we have not only inherited the wisdom and knowledge of our ancestors going back a thousand years, but also their mistakes and prophecies." What can one look forward to, when teachers and parents pass-on to their students unfounded beliefs and unproven theories, as an effective "road-map" for life? It is a pity that such teachers, particularly parents, are not aware that "the safety of a drop of water is in joining the ocean," the ocean of free thinking, not prejudice. The dark glass filter they place in front of their children's eyes is bound to dim their vision for life.

Our problems today stem neither from religion nor from the spiritual segment of our society. It stems from the few extremists who dress prophecies in holy clothing, whereas in truth, it is sheer propaganda for their own, ancient mode of thinking. They are not oblivious to the fact that in persuading these young people to follow their teachings, they are preventing them from developing the ability to perceive the social wrongs, which take place around them, and causing their judgment to become incurably damaged.

It behooves us to take notice of the fact that nonsense and inanity will stay with us only so long as the cup is not run over.

Gandhi says: "The logical vote of one can become the vote of the majority." There have been many incidents in history when one man has saved a whole nation. It is our responsibility and that of every individual in the world, to make every effort to prevent the spread of hatred and dark thoughts.

There is a saying in Farsi: "A man who gazes at the stars a lot, does not see the Earth under his feet, and will be destroyed." Our young people, encouraged by their teachers, come under the heavy influence of writings of great people who were great in their own times, and addressed issues relevant to their those times. Should we let them be deprived of the latest knowledge, and in the dawn of their life, be submerged under data, which is no longer relevant to the times we live in? Should not encourage them to become useful and productive individual, rather than become a burden to society and rely on charitable donations? Should their families support such non-productive individuals, and be deprived of their life-savings? Should the community tolerate this phenomenon, and encourage the existence of useless and nonproductive children?

Are moderate young people, with or without religious beliefs, who obtain their Ph.D's or other degrees in universities, and lead comfortable and productive lives, destined to go astray? If an educated person believes in the truth, is he not fulfilled unless he follows religious teachings and edicts? Why must one be slave to these beliefs?

In my opinion, the best color is no color at all, and the safest school is the family, especially when the parents are open to the views and developments of the outside world. Witness the fact that we Iranian Jews have never had religious schools, and yet, remained faithful to our faith and heritage for 2,700 years. Furthermore, our religiously moderate and tolerant children are among the best and most educated in the world, free of any prejudice and in tune with the world.

It has been said: "If you want to see what we are, see what we were, and if we want to see what we will become, see what we do."

The greatest power does not lie in having a great deal of money, or a great many children. But, rather, power is manifested in the way it is used.

Time has proven, that when children do not improve on their parents, they stay behind and remain underdeveloped. We should not let the minds of our children be toyed with, in the name of religion. The only safe place for gaining knowledge, meaning humaneness, is within the confines of the family, which prevents any pollution from outside, and where the constructive development of the individual is assured.

Napoleon said: "For me people are like numbers and the worth of each person depends on where he is located, like the number one, which when located in front of six zeroes becomes one million."

Are we, at your recommendation and in the name of religion, expected to expose our children to unfounded ideas? Should we not promote awareness to the social and scientific realities of the world community? Is not our preference to bring up useful, productive and proud individuals, instead of turning them into helpless, needy and un-informed individuals as if they were citizens of some third world societies? Is the only pride we can have in our children, is that they know how to say their prayers perfectly? Just try to imagine a situation where we would have nothing of value to trade with the world's civilized societies – would not they, rightfully so, think of us as a backward people? Enough! All Efforts to prove ancient prophecies in the name of religion are, actually, efforts, which end up obliterating the real significance of that religion.

In my opinion, the basis of today's global culture is in gaining knowledge every hour, and every day - whether in academic institutions, or via the Internet. Today's world is a world of convergence, not divergence. The future belongs to those who are ready to change and evolve. The seeds of hatred will cease their growth when religion becomes a tool for bringing people together, and a measure of a man's character.

Eghbale Lahoury says: "Hell is not a place but a situation a man finds himself in." There have been many religious thinkers whose sayings and ideas were worthy and edifying, but merely being religious does not guarantee knowledge and enlightenment. Many a poet and author were not religious, and yet their ideas and writings have in the past, as well as today, still do enrich us. It makes no difference, which was the source of the idea, but rather, what was the idea itself.

A great many people pay more attention to the history of religious interpretation of books, than to what these books contain. These books, which in centuries past, may have been among the best ones available, should respectfully be returned to the libraries as historical relics. They should not be used today as teaching tools for school children, while at the same time the children are denied the benefits of modern knowledge and information.

Since the concern for human rights and the aspiration for a new world order have become prominent on the current agenda of the enlightened societies of the world, no longer can governments deal with their citizens as they wish. Likewise, there are signs indicating the development of a similar transformation happening behind the walls of religion. These changes have been occurring in conjunction with the new sensibility, which has emerged within each religion – much like the awareness of human rights, which emerged among the citizens of some countries. If we continue to simply follow the old order, without forcing the religious institutions to adapt themselves to the knowledge and understandings of the times, we will find that our younger generation is falling behind, without the ability to keep up with the progress made in the rest of the civilized world. However, our mission should not be limited to just expressing our disagreement, or finding fault with the methods used by any group; Instead criticizing, we should come up with a proposal for a more viable and enlightened way, to effect the desirable changes. I am certain that the aim of the religious extremists is not to cause a split in our society; yet, in their manner and by their actions - they do exactly this. No matter what the source or the reason, a split of that kind is always the cause for hatred and prejudice.

Today's world is no longer the one we knew before, where we could plant, sow, read and act unilaterally in our own continent.

Therefore, many of the events, deeds, and ideas expressed in religions of old times, are not compatible with the sophistication of the current times.

In order to adjust to the spirit of the time, religions must open up the windows to the minds of their followers, and allow fresh air to come in.

I believe, that when all religions follow the direction, and stop trying to defeat one another, a new and different world will emerge, which - I dare say - could be a much better world. It is the responsibility of all parents and religious leaders to make everyone understand that although we follow different paths, we are equals; that all of us are the inheritors of the religions and ways of this world, and that none of us can have claim for preferential treatment. Those who are seeking advantage are afraid of the conquest of one civilization by another, and it is this fear that has made the world an unsecure place, because religion is like fire, which when temperate and controlled feels warm and soothing, but when burns out of control is destructive and life consuming.

By its very nature, humanity is not meant to hate its own kind. There is no difference between one human being and another. Any design or color of clothing worn in the name of tradition or custom, is worthy of respect, and as long as the washing instructions are printed on the label, a clothing-item originating in the U.S., will be washed the same way in Russia, too.

The claims made by certain parts of the world community about their impact on the rest of the world, are sometimes reminiscent of the rooster who caught a cold and was telling the hen: "I am not sad because I am sick and can not sing. I am just worried that when I don't sing in the morning the Sun will not rise!"

In today's global community, we should aspire to have societies intertwine with one another, for if there is no mutual respect between societies, and if we are unable to guaranty individual security and freedom - regardless of race, gender, and religion - we would not be able to guaranty our collective security. Believing that anyone who disagrees with your views is your enemy is nothing but shortsighted. Religions have been created to make a believer out of the nonbeliever, and not for promulgating hatred, religious wars, and carrying out personal agendas. Peace between religions will be possible only when all religions stop denying the validity of other religions, as is commanded in their books. History showed us that the most heinous crimes against humanity occurred in the name of one God or another. It is for this cause only that the pages of the history of religion have been covered with blood. Since it is too late in the day to eradicate this age-old practice, we must rely on the humanity of man, and through the institution of family ask each individual to teach their children, each in their own way, to see God only, and nobody else but God. Yes! A hopeful theory is far better than an ominous reality.

Only in this way prejudice among religions and groups will, in the face of a belief in God alone, exit the competitive arena. This will be the day to bring an end to the ancient tendency of one individual appointing or declaring himself as the sole representative of his religion. Only then, would the stage be set for an individual, who, based on his qualifications alone, and regardless of any party-tag, will emerge as a true leader. No longer would eminent philosophers, such as Farabi, be diverted from their work and be accused of placing philosophy above religion; and the imprisonment of Galileo and in order to force him to disavow his scientific findings about the nature of the Solar System - which turned out to be correct - would not have occurred; and Ibne Sina, that Crown Jewel of Iranian and world science, would not have had to hear that because he did not believe in miracles, he was an agnostic and as ignoble as God is great, and have his books were burnt; similarly, Aboureyhane Birony, who already 500 years before Copernicus, rejected the concept of an Earth-based Solar System, and pronounced evolution of the species as a scientifically-based phenomenon (centuries later, Darwin called it Evolution - the theory of the survival of the fittest), he would not have been condemned as "faithless." Another example of this type of religious demagoguery occurred when the body of Hakim Abolghasem Ferdowsi, perhaps the greatest story-teller that ever lived - considered by some to be even far superior to Shakespeare - was not allowed to be buried in a Muslim cemetery because in his Shahnameh, he lauded the Zoroastrian religion. And another scholar, the eminent Persian mathematician, Zakaryare Razy, would not have been beaten with his own books, until he was blinded, for no other reason other than that he did not believe in miracles.

These are just a few examples of the barbaric acts committed in the name of religion, against individuals who dared to expose to the great truths about the ways of the world, which were later authenticated by science, but which clashed with the "truth" of the religions of their times and societies. Ironically, those, who like Galileo, Baruch Spinoza to Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, were excommunicated by their communities for daring to explore new paths of thinking, have since been vindicated by history, proven right, and are now hailed as intellectual geniuses. We must teach our children that their greatest enemies

are the un-informed and the unenlightened, whose teachings pollute the mind, rather than allow enlightenment to heal it; whose fanaticism encourages the spread of hatred and disdain, instead of promoting love and compassion.

Religions and cults were not, and are not supposed to be opponents of one another, but should supplement each other for the cause of peace and security of their followers. In this way, so called "minorities" will not exist, and their educated elite shall not be forced to put their words and their thoughts in the mouths of animals in stories such as Calile & Damneh, and cats and mice, for the fear of the so-called "majority" in their midst.

Dear teachers and educators: enlightenment and lucid vision do not emerge from knowledge alone; rather, it arises from the correct interpretation of religious commandments.

Civilized groups around the world, while different in tradition, are similar in nature and characteristic, because it is knowledge and science that they have in common, not religion. If we study the background of the greatest scientists, philosophers, poets, and the wise individuals of the world, we discover that they were all, and still are, first and foremost "knowledgeable" in one way or the other, and that their religion had very little to do with the acquisition of that knowledge. God has given us eyes to see and ears to hear with, but the interpretation of what we see, read, and hear is left to the individual and his intellect. Religious edicts only give us a message, but the way of interpretation and implementation of that message is left to us as individuals, as is dictated by our conscious and intellect. Religious leaders must see to it that the door to the human intellect is not shut, and that their followers are availed a space for personal interpretation – each according to his/her different analytical ability.

It is with a great deal of gratitude that I acknowledge the fact that Orthodox Jewry has been responsible for the preservation of the Jewish religion. But, the problem is that today's world is changing virtually on a daily basis, solely because of the ease and the speed of communication brought about by so many scientific advances. Yet, some nevertheless, insist on passing to their offspring the ancient legacy of their ancestors as if it were information and knowledge relevant to our times. However, what was, indeed, relevant and applicable in centuries past, where there was practically no communication with groups outside their own confines, cannot be relevant to our children living today in a world of instant communication and immediate information. As religious groups keep insisting on maintaining the status quo, many of our children unleash themselves each day from the extreme constrictions of the religious confines – a desertion which, unfortunately, has affected even the moderate followers of religion. One manifestation of this exodus among moderates is the alarming rise in decisive. Have you ever asked yourselves: "Why is this so?" You observe the occurrence, have a little panic attack, and try a little harder to change the situation, but due to your obsession with the religious customs of the distant past, you cannot, or will not to see the real truth. The truth, my friends, is your rigid adherence to the same basic, old, irrelevant and outdated teachings. You are responsible for this tragedy, because you insist on refusing to see, and you do not take into consideration centuries of progress in people's thinking, as well as the scientific leaps that are made each day, which have changed the fabric of the life of each of us - not only as Jews, but also as citizens of the world. You are teaching our children to swim upstream of an increasingly faster-flowing river. You bellow your orders, and tout your decrees while oblivious to the fact that although a small few keep on swimming, others, end up drowning, because they no longer have the strength to swim on, and many others, yet, question your orders and choose to swim ashore, navigated by their natural survival instincts.

Your reliance on some of the old religious decrees to determine what is sinful in our conduct as Jews, is an excuse, which is worse than the sin itself, because they distantiate us from our civilized status by thousands of years, and mark us as oddities among our neighbors. Would you consider the law against capital punishment, which was passed by some of the more enlightened countries, including Israel, a law which clashes with the Biblical law, or is it one that affirms it – in accordance with the reality and moral values of our times? It takes an enlightened mind to see that these are indeed manifestations of age-old human values, and not a violation of same. Isn't it better, safer and easier to swim with the flow, rather than against it? While it has not been ordered in the Torah, your reading of the Book, will have us all stay mentally stuck in the same place, like in a marshland - until we get a signal from heaven which would save us from the swamp's stench. Life is not a rehearsal, and we are not born twice. Opposition to change, based on citations of the commandments is, in fact, an aspect of degradation of the philosophy of religion. Throughout the world, the ignorant are much more liable to be prejudiced. Adapting the commandments to the times is not tantamount to repudiating them; rather, it is a positive step towards their preservation. It is like people who speak and think in the language of the country they live in, who neither repudiate, nor insult their mother tongue.

To adapt the commandments to the times is as important as the commandments themselves, because it reinforces their real value and worth, and makes them eternal. Some commandments, of course, like the Ten Commandments of the Torah, are so fundamental and basic that they remained unchanged, and have retained their relevance in every area of life, and in every generation - even after three thousand years. Similarly, the three ancient Persian Commandments of "speak sound, think sound, and act sound" will never become rusty, nor will time render them forgotten.

Jean-Paul Sartre said: "A person does not wish to be condemned to freedom, he wants to enjoy it."

Yes! People want to enjoy their religious beliefs and be proud of their religious affiliations, and not be embarrassed by the reading or listening to worthless dogma, which is forced upon them. The youth of today seek their validation through knowledge and science, and not from extremist beliefs. The means for eliminating extremism are by themselves excuses in the hands of enemies. Just as it is not possible to stop breathing until those who are offended by the sound of air are extinct, so it is impossible to stop the flow of inquisitive thoughts. How is it possible to remain calm and quiet in the presence of those who conduct in their school seminars about peaceful relations and tranquility in the family, when they themselves are the very cause of disruptions in family life. The hate mongering and hate-mongers of today are yesterday's anti-Semites, and this problem will be solved only when it is acknowledged as a problem of the entire world. A few years ago, the Soviet Union was seen shaking hands with terrorists; the same Russia, today, is asking the West for help in combating terrorism in its own territories. A contagious disease does not recognize borders, nor does it see colors - to the germs, white or black are the same; they attack evenly, regardless of skin, gender, or religion.

Parts of the make-up of any society are the opinions, which others have about it. In his application for an entry-visa to the United States, Albert Einstein, was asked about his race. His reply was summed up in one word: "human." Similarly, in addition to being simply Jews, we, like followers of any other religion, are first and foremost, humans. It is this trait, which binds us together. Inheriting a religion is not the reason to be blind to the events around us; neither is it cause to raise our children to be as blind. We should not bury our heads in the sand, nor should we follow ambiguous messages, which would prevent the actualization of this transformation.

Many knowledgeable and erudite individuals, in each society, are aware of the spread of invalid religious writings and edicts, which are taught at religious schools. But, unlike this writer, they maintain their quiet, because - as the famous Persian saying goes - "they are either smart, or experienced," and thus fail to point out the weaknesses of the societies they live in. They fail to realize that one of the obstacles to a society's progress is censorship. Even in our small society, here in the Land of the Brave, freedom of speech and freedom of expression do not fully exist. Yet, is there any writing which does not contain controversy? It all depends on the reader's point of view. Sad will be the day when the sands are blown away from our heads, and we will be carried by the winds to the land of oblivion, only because we kept quiet, and remained indifferent in the face of the need for change.

To stand up against the spread of backwards thoughts and ideas requires bravery and courage. We must promote change, and not deny the realities. You cannot fight the darkness in the dark. You need light and enlightened thinking to do so. This is precisely what the extremists are afraid of - not realizing that those who voice their opinions do so in order to corroborate their views, or, to demonstrate to their audience, the scope of their knowledge and intelligence. This is precisely the source of the great affection that Iranian Jews have for Hakham Yedidya Shofet who epitomizes the willingness to change, and is open-minded enough to interpret Jewish laws according to the times. In society, some process natural respect and power, which stems from their intelligence not their position, fortune or beliefs. Benjamin Franklyn says: a spoon full of honey gathers more bees around it than a barrel of vinegar.

Yes! You extremists have the right to promote whatever and however you wish, but you should not forget that an act, which shatters the foundation of society by causing division among family members, is not a right, but a wrong. And for this, you are to bear full responsibility.

Whether a religion was the first of the three major religions, which set forth the belief in one God, or whether it was second or third, does not give any advantage over the others. America has a two hundred year history, Egypt - a six-thousand years one. Yet, the former sends people to walk on the Moon, while the people of the latter - walk in the desert. One swims in wealth, the other - wallows in poverty. In America, 12 of each hundred thousand women, die in childbirth; while among the strictly religious Taliban, the number of fatalities rises to 6,500 among a hundred thousand.

Prejudice is not an innate characteristic, which is imbedded in human nature from birth. Rather, it is an acquired one, and it is learned in all forms - religious, racial, national, gender, or others. We've seen prejudice existing even within members of the same group, including family, nationality or religion. Of all the above, religious prejudice has been the most destructive and damaging to mankind, and it still continues to be so. The majority of Christians in the civilized world, who experienced atrocities committed in the name of religion in the past in the name of , religion (such as burning at the stake of the Inquisition for committing heresy), were transformed into a much more tolerant form of belief, and have adhered to a practice of change and respect for differing views. This is evidenced by the many denominations of Christianity, which are being practiced in the world today. These forms of Christianity owe their strength and appeal to their ability to go through change, and to practice tolerance. They understood only too well that if they did not accept change, time will force them to do so.

Should we let time pass us by in the name of religion, whereas we are left to raising our children to become oblivious to the current changes, and be unaware of the rhythm of life, for fear of exposing them to the experiences of this world? All parents should exercise a measure of control over the teachers and over the curriculum of their children, by establishing



"Parental Committees." The family is where the young child absorbs his fundamental values and idea, and it is the family, which should be pivotal in providing the child guidance and direction - supported by the help of the community, and the governmental institutions.

There is a difference between trimming your eyebrows and damaging your eyes to the point of blindness. It is said that he who cannot swim, is afraid of the water and speaks badly of the oceans. It is the past and present levels of one's knowledge that enable one to make an approximate prediction regarding the course of future events, and take the appropriate steps to advance with the times.

Yes! Starting-off on the wrong foot, one can only go wrong. Voltaire addresses God as follows: "If I avoid the Church it is because I want to be closer to you." My howling against religious prejudice and the spread of hatred is like Sadi's saying: "Man will reach a stage when he sees none but God." When one believes in a religion, or sticks to a thought to the point of obsession, he loses his ability to analyze and to think clearly. People who oppose this dogma, also reject different views of their very own religious affiliates. They accept the unacceptable and faulty writings and edicts of their so-called religion purely out of habit, and all on face value, without any evaluation, and without using their common sense and God-given intelligence. These people prefer to drown in the cesspool of their sham beliefs, rather than change direction. They do not have the courage to leave the scene and instead try to bring others under the same leaky roof. After seventy years of suffering, the Communists abandoned their dogmatic ideology, and then realized that it was far better to divide riches instead of languishing in poverty, as they have been doing in the past, even though they were a superpower second only to the United States. Isn't it wiser for you, too, instead of promulgating the old and outdated religious edicts and dogma, to use your minds and talents in a more useful line of work, and leave the scene to the more enlightened teachers who were educated by a more tolerant and modern system, so that they can teach our children the true ideology?

For centuries it has been erroneously believed that if we abandon the practice of our old customs and habits, which were part of the legacy of our forefathers, nothing will be left of our heritage. But for quite some time now, it has been obvious, that it is the adherence to these outdated and illogical customs that has endangered our heritage, by driving many of us away from it. Should we reject the ideas of Rambam, the medieval scholar, physician and philosopher, who said that "for every city, ten Mullahs are enough?" Can we compare the graduates of the Yeshiva University of New York with their universal knowledge to inexperienced young clerical student who fancy themselves as religious leaders, promote ideologies designed solely to keep them in spiritual control over their community – instead of having the well-being of their flock at his heart?

Have you not noticed that during the recent services, quite a few members of the audience left the sanctuary as a gesture of protest? These kind of statements are becoming more and more common every day.

Emmanuel Kant, the great German philosopher, said: "The purpose of teaching is not a familiarity with the subject matter, but rather an evaluation of it."

Doesn't a correct decision require correct information? Do the students of extremist religious schools gain any up-to-date information and knowledge in order to better evaluate things and make the correct decisions in their life?

If you pay careful attention, you can see that societies basing their educational system on religion are among the most backward in the world. They are famous for planting in the minds of their youth their unwise and stubborn positions on ridiculous and outdated ideologies regarding issues like the status of women in society, other religions, civil and laws, etc. By doing this, they commit the double sin of corrupting the minds of a whole new generation, as well as denying the young generation the peace of mind that comes with tolerance and a blending of the fruits of human intelligence with the compassionate words of God. The existence of religious schools is necessary in all societies, but with what kind of teachers - those with superstitious ideas, which tie the child up in knots for the rest of his life? Teaching what books? Books, which contain ideas about the manner of the implementation of religious edicts dating back hundreds of years, and which are made irrelevant in today's society? Such teachers want to be the purveyors of religion and I've the ones to make decisions for the children, instead of leaving it to their parents. Can a teacher, or Mullah be more attuned and caring for the child's education than the child's parent? The initial purpose of religion was to break idols, not to make idols of individuals.

Individual-worship is worse than idolatry: it leads to the enslavement of the mind, and a shackled mind can never be free to follow logic.

In old days, due lack of other choices, and the stress of the times, schools and teachers of this kind were put in charge of the education of the children. Why should this practice still continue? Should future generations pay that high a price for the single purpose of providing jobs for a select few?

I believe that those who remain silent in the face of this situation, contribute not only to the stagnation of their family, but also to the stagnation of the entire society; they may be unaware of the opportunity that a university avails to the student, of empowering independent thinking, and of promoting the students' self-sufficiency, by the knowledge they pass-on to them. By contrast, students in un-inspiring institutions are taught to place power in the hands of God, and rely solely on the power of prayer.

With all due respect to those who dismiss this kind of writing as meaningless, I say that compassion compels us all - regardless of religion and gender - to commit to teaching our children love instead of hate, and promote free thought instead of fanatic stale, old ideas. And furthermore, it is my conviction that the teaching of these lessons begins at home, otherwise, our children will end up being consumed by the fires of hate and prejudice.

It is said that when Abraham was thrown in the middle of a great fire by Namrood, he noticed a little bird flying out to a distant river, filling its beak with a few drops of water and releasing the drops on the fire. Abraham asked the bird: "Don't you see this mountain of fire? Your tiny beak is not capable of putting it out, so why are you troubling yourself?" The bird answered: "Yes I see the fire, and I know very well that the few drops of water is not going to put it out, but each of us has to try to do something about it, according to his capability."

Similarly, by writing these things, I am doing my share to the best of my capacity, to sound a call of alert. And I'm doing it now, for - tomorrow might be too late!

God has shown us the way, but how we walk it, is up to us. Religious commandments are fixed, but a better understanding of them opens for us a broader way to follow them. A human is neither a standstill plant, nor an animal whose life is limited to eating and sleeping, or a stationary stone. And, as long as this world continues to go on, no human being will ever cease to think, stop to search, or refrain from improving themselves. Progress means putting the past behind us, and turning back no more.

In other words, we must constantly adapt the religious teachings to the needs and requirements of the times.

Zakaryaye Razi said: "If you reached a point of indecision and doubt, follow your intelligence." Fortunately the Torah has provided us with guidance. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 17, verses 8-9, it is written: "If there arises a matter too hard for thee in judgment...then thou shalt arise...and thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge *that shall be in those days*." In other words, if you are unable to make up your mind about something, go to the judge of the time and consult with him and accept his judgment. Note that it says "the judge in those days," meaning go to someone who is in tune with the times.

A community lacking the ability to tolerate the views and judgments prevalent in its times, cannot be proud of itself.

A religion is honored and revered, when it enables the enrichment of its teachings, by adapting them to the spirit of the times, and to the knowledge existing during that time. A tree which stops growing will die. The same applies to religion. The relative success of our community worldwide is partly due to the fact that the Jewish people have always sought refuge in academics and the sciences, and have been at the forefront of its progress. Not in vain were they known in Europe as the People of the Book. According to Babylonian Talmud 31A, the first night a Jew spends in the grave, he is being asked three questions: "Have you been honest in your dealing with others?" "Have you made an effort to study every day?" and, "Were you more optimistic about your future?" Therefore, **honesty**, **education** and **hope**, are the three fundamental values of the Judaic teachings.

The great French writer, Victor Hugo said: "Be like a bird, which, even when sitting on a shaky branch, it continues to sing because it is confident that it has wings." The wings of a young man is his knowledge and education, and not just his beliefs. Most of the big issues of today arose from the erroneous teachings of the past, and whatever suffering exists today in the world because of religious beliefs, is due to the fact that we did not open our eyes and the eyes of our children in time to see what awaits us in the future.

Henry Ford, the great car manufacturer, was once asked: "What is the secret of your success?" He answered: "I learned one minute before others, and acted 30 seconds before them." The key to our children's success is a higher understanding and preventing them from getting involved with religious fanatics, earlier in life.

Throughout 2,700 years of history in a prejudiced society, we, Iranian Jews, never ceased to promote the studies of Judaism, and the mastering of the Hebrew language; yet, the achievements of our youth - in science, and in social studies - have outdone the achievements of other youth in many other countries. As a result, they brought great pride to all Iranians - and not only Jews.

Would any youngster be this successful if he or she, too, had attended strictly religious schools? I doubt it.

In the Iranian culture, giving charitable donations to the needy is an honor and a privilege, but for an able-bodied person to receive a donation is worse than death.

Even our rabbis, following the three basic rules of Jewish tradition (Tora "Avoda" Gemilothasadim) - knowledge, work, helping the needy – performed their tasks without the expectation of any reward. I remember how the father of Hakham Yedidya, the much beloved Rabbi of the Iranian Jewish community, together with his family, were in the silk trade business in Kashan, weaving Persian silk carpets and textiles. I hope the day never arrives when our children, at your encouragement, look to a donation of few hundred dollars rely on religious contribution for their survival. Why should they go idle, do no work, and be a burden to their community - in the name of religion? Such a life has never been a part of our culture and never will be. We are proud to be charity-givers to people in need. We believe that any person, who in any way depends on charity, will either live his life in desperation and poverty, or like others today, will have to rely on a totally illogical pronouncement, thus causing undue damage and problems for the community – and all in the name of religion. If someone wishes to spend his life in prayer, why should others be forced to be responsible for his daily existence? A believer is not one who prays daily, but one who prays and understands the meaning of his prayer. No matter what one's belief is - a young man who does not question and doubt what he reads or is being told to believe, will never reach a state of total conviction when he is older. Do not be afraid of the doubt expressed by young people and by your students. Rather, be afraid of the opportunities wasted by those whose opinions and utterances are not much greater than those who voiced and expressed them in the first place. A broken watch will surely show the correct time at least twice a day, but a young man whose thought processes are broken down, like a watch that has never been set to any time, will never show the correct time. Be weary of false settings. The machinery of prejudice breaks the bones of society and the families, who themselves tighten the screws in it.

The secret by which extremists manage to attract those who are young at heart, making them fall for their superstitions, lies in their ability, from the start, to they identify the daily problems that their targets-at-hand face – whether physical and/or mental illnesses, business, family, etc. - and are able to immediately prescribe for them an instant religious cure. They are oblivious to the fact that while they may be able to convert a few dozens of people in this way, thousands of others who question their faith, are being turned-off and alienated by this very religion. Their best candidates, therefore, are always the weak and the people who are besotted with insurmountable problems.

Cecile B. Demille, the famous Hollywood Director who produced "The Ten Commandments," "Samson and Delilah," and many others, when asked: "Why do you choose religious subjects for your films?" answered: "What better subject is there, with so much promotion and advertisement over thousands of years – than religion."

My question to you, who are reigning supreme over thousands of students, is: without proper knowledge of technological, economic, and social sciences, will these students become self-reliant in the future, or will they have to resort to daily prayers for their daily survival? Is their religious training sufficient to make them self-sufficient? Does God only determine the time of our death, and the source of our daily subsistence, or does he also select the source of our power and activities? Those who, in the name of religion, advocate stagnation and immobility, creating a docile generation with a "no can do" mentality, are only thinking of themselves and taking care of their own agendas. These people will never try to bring themselves up to the level of others, as they have always tried to bring others down to their own levels.

Dr. Erany has said: "History is a holy river, which flows into an ocean of evolution." Let us be the drops in a river, which flows into this ocean instead of one, which runs into a swamp.

The unsubstantiated edicts and the meanings of the writings put out by the extremists of yesterday and today, have planted despair in the majority of our youth, and imbued them with a fear of life. Indeed, a great part of these writings is not fit for the living. We should abstain from self-belief, and past convictions.

Parents will know how aware they are when their grown children ask them serious questions. With knowledge, one can give new answers to old questions, and not be forced to give old, unfathomable, so-called religious answers, to new questions.

No nation, secular or ecclesiastic, should be condemned to the path of extremism. It is the people, who with the encouragement of opportunists among them, sentence themselves to following these man-made edicts. Why should thousands of the most worthy among the youth of the world, be deprived of at least making a basic living, and why in the name of religion should they be denied the necessary knowledge for attaining economic self-sufficiency? Why should these youngsters follow hollow slogans, which will result in the loss of their self-respect as well as the respect and love of their families? What use is religion if it does not promote progress and lead to respect for a family, and its advancement? If religion does not bring family and society together, and enrich their existence - what other purpose does it serve?

There is no difference between two brothers of differing faiths, or two brothers of the same faith, but for the different methods in practicing their faiths. Any deviation from this thought is the root of hatred and the cause of spiritual cancer in societies and families. Understanding and maintaining the proper balance when practicing one's faith, is as important as the practice itself.

A king was once asked, which would he teach his children first - swimming, or writing? His answer was, "swimming, because if necessary my children can ask others to write for them, but no one can swim in their stead". Today learning to swim in a free world, is on a higher priority than being imprisoned in the cage of religious dogma. We do not live to have a religion or be religious. We have a religion and are religious in order to live. Religion is not everything in life. According to George Bernard Shaw, "there is only one religion, which has hundreds of various forms." Lucky are those whose hearts are full of love, and devoid of hatred.

As the great American educator John Dewey once said: "Education is not just for preparing people for life, it is life itself." I like to add this by saying that yes! Humanity and kindness is religion itself.

The Jewish nation has never considered it necessary to propagate its religion, because it does not believe in imposing it on others, since it never considered it needy of propaganda. Societies, which relied on propagating their old dogma and beliefs and did not keep pace with the times, have all disappeared at one time or another, but those who wisely and logically adapted to the times, survived and prospered. The survival of a society depends on its ability to keep in step with the global societies; it should not depend on being in love with its own beliefs and dogma. "Do not beware of the person with a huge library," as the old saying goes. "Beware of the person with only one book," who imagines that it contains all the knowledge in the world, while in fact, he has only brought a bucket of water from an a ocean, thinking he has brought the whole ocean.

Closing the door on change, and ignoring the bond that should exist between religion and knowledge, may cause both to end up in a state of paralysis.

If the zealots were to understand the true meaning of religion, they would not have been as zealot.

The great German writer, Goethe, once said: "A person learns what he learns." You should deposit modern knowledge at the disposal of your students because the young, during their lifetime, must sail through the rough times, as well as the good ones, their college years, their daily interactions with people, and learn from their own mistakes so that they may lead a worthwhile life. **No bird has ever learned to fly in a cage and no bird ever will.** You may liken a human brain to a parachute, which is useful only when it is open. If, in the name of any religion, you close the minds of young people, you will cause the their inevitable downfall.

When Professor Haim Weitzman, Israel's first president, and David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, asked Albert Einstein to accept the position of President of Israel, the famous scientist said: "I can serve better with my science."

It is science, which counter-acts yesterday's bigots and anti-Semites, who are today's anti-humans; when confronted with scientists like Fleming, Pasteur, Salk and many others, who cured millions of dreaded diseases, these bigots are forced down on their knees, because the immense contributions these brilliant individuals made to humanity, contradicts prejudice, bigotry and hatred. In denying the benefit of these great contributions, every bigot would be condemned to a fate of pain, disease and untimely death.

When you look at the Iranian-Jewish community, you see a totally different community. The only thing we have in common is our religion, which plays only a part of a society's culture - not all of it. It would suffice to compare our family relationships with those of others. You will notice that the migration of Iranians was not merely limited to moving from one place to another. We have traveled from one time zone to another, and it is our duty to look at this new time with a broader and different view than is viewed by our religion. We must forget past prejudices and irrelevant customs. We, humans try not let ourselves be fooled by life. If there is any danger we should beware of, it is the danger coming from ourselves; for the first ones we fool, is ourselves, and then we fool our children – and particularly when religious absurdities are concerned.

Albert Einstein says: "Do not be ashamed of your wrinkled old clothes. Be ashamed of your old and outdated ideas."

Our Iranian society has never embraced the double standard and superstitions of the East-Europeans. For 2,700 years, we have lived by, and obeyed the Commandments of the Torah, without any self-serving and irrelevant interpretations. We have paid particular attention to the commandment, which orders us to mind, love, and treat with respect all human beings regardless of creed, color, and religion.

Division and strife within all religions are the gifts of extremists, who by indoctrination and brainwashing, prey on the emotions of young people and make intolerant monsters out of them. In my opinion, any book, pamphlet or article, which does not enhance the richness of a student's life, is not just unworthy of being taught, but must be thrown out and relegated to the trashcan of history; because, while it confuses the minds of the young, today, tomorrow, as they themselves become parents and open-up to enlightenment, these teachings will, like a compressed coil, spring back at them, and become self-destruct, destroying everything on their paths.

Placing the decisions facing our society, such as the education of our children, in a bidding contest between one group or another in the name of religion, is a criminal offense against the present and future generations. Communities must not allow schools to fall under the control of those who denigrate science. If there be any concern and thought on your part, the thousands year old books and those who teach them, must be modified - with your help and assistance, of course. A school and university is a place of teaching, not a stage for preaching dogma. Schools must not teach books and edicts whose useful life span has expired and has now become poisonous. Schools must not be a tool in the hands of opportunists who drive a wedge between children and their parents, the world, society, and modern science. Schools should enable the youth to absorb fresh ideas, and allow them to adapt to the times, and thus, be able to secure a better future for themselves and their community.

Regardless of the type of religion and its customs - when parents pollute a child's mind by hate and superstition, and subsequent similar pollution continues at school, the child turns into a destructive instrument, which will, in turn, contaminate the minds of his own children, and enslave their spirit. If such children acquire higher education in normal and modern schools, they will recover, but will never be cured. It is for parents and teachers to understand and convey to the children that although all humans are of different race, creed and color, they are all equal and worthy of respect.

A religious person is recognized as such only when he is shown to be a good human being. A good example of this is Pope John Paul II, who the world honored to a much higher degree than his religious position called for. After centuries of abusing Jews and calling them "Christ Killers," he rose up, apologized to Jews in writing, and called them "our older brothers." He reminded everyone that at the time of the young Jesus, Jews were at the mercy of the Romans, who put a crown of thorns on the head of the innocent Jesus and crucified him as the "King of the Jews."

Yes! True heroes of the world are those who work hard for a better and more peaceful world, and have nothing to do with religion. The written apology of Pope Paul II to Jews, and his visit to Yad-Vashem, the Martyrs' Museum, mosques as well as synagogues - did not demean him.

On the contrary, it placed him on such a higher level, that his funeral was attended by Heads of State of the world including those from Muslim countries as well as Israel. This great outpouring of reverence and respect was not bestowed upon this man because he was a good Christian, but because he was a good human being. He taught us that we should know God out of love and obey him not out of fear. Those who make us fear God, want us to fear them.

I remember in 1956, in the State of Tennessee, there was a restaurant with a sign, which said: "No dogs or Blacks allowed in!" But today, we see that qualified African-Americans occupy some of the highest offices of the US government. Yes! People are redeemable and capable of change, if they have proper teachers. In the future, the present generation will not be judged by its religion, nor even by its economic, social, or scientific achievements, but rather by the measure of its ability to convey human values from one generation to the next, and the ones following.

I repeat: the best proof of the truth of any idea is in its implementation. In the 19th century our ancestors in Iran reached out to the civilized French Jews for help in escaping the poverty, lack of education, opportunity for self-improvement, and most of all, the prejudiced environment they were living in. The French Jewish Federation answered back: "Educate your children." The Iranian Jews sent another appeal: "We need help today."

Again the answer came back: "Educate your children so that others may be in need of you." They did not say what to eat, or advise that the Iranians pray harder. Finally, it was the lion-hearted, liberal French Jews of Alliance Israelite, who came to Iran as teachers, and saved our fathers and some Muslims of Iran, and the rest of the Middle East and North Africa, from ignorance by educating them in modern sciences. If not for them, our fathers and we, too, like our ancestors would have had to attend religious schools and learn the stories of Mullah Nassir Eldin - the fictitious Persian purveyor of false wisdom - and each day, add to our ignorance and illiteracy.

One of the relative successes of the Iranian Jews during the Pahlavi dynasty was due to their education at the Alliance Schools. All of us and even some Muslims owe a debt of gratitude to Alliance Israelite who, starting from 1873, helped us during those trying times of immense religious prejudice, wide-spread poverty, and worst of all, a total lack of cultural facilities in Iran, during the Ghajar dynasty. The Alliance did not send us books that interpret and solve our religious problems. After 15

years of investigation and securing facilities and training teachers, finally in 1898, the first group of French teachers comprised of men and unveiled women, who had been schooled in the modern Europe of that time, were sent to us riding thousands of kilometers through desert and unsafe roads on donkeys and horse-drawn carriages to get to us.

Isn't this single act a prime example of the proof of my ideas?

The Alliance way did not involve religious zeal, because its architects knew that such sentiments have no value for humanity. Alliance never stipulated that non-Jews could not attend its schools, therefore, the children of the leading citizens of the city were the first to enroll, and for this reason alone many of the statesmen of the Pahlavi dynasty were educated at the Alliance Israelite schools.

Religious schools must teach lessons that, according to the Persian philosopher Rabea: "inflames paradise and de-flames hell," so that their students will learn to love all their fellow human beings just as the Torah says, without the promises of heaven and the fear of hell.

Dr. Jonas Salk, the Jewish inventor of the polio vaccine which has saved hundreds of millions of children from a lifetime of paralysis, injected himself with his vaccine first, and when this secret was revealed, he said this is not an honor for myself alone, it is an honor for all of humanity. It is people like Dr. Salk who prove that a candle is never extinguished, because millions of other candles are lit from its flame. This kind of selfless dedication and humanity, is born only in an environment free of religious bigotry and bias, and thrives in the name of humanity. The Jewish penchant for freedom and even the independence of America is due to a desire for the elimination of prejudice.

Like Hady Khorsandi has said: "the smell of garlic is like a just assertion," it is acceptable when it comes out of the mouths of the so-called majority, but there is hell to pay when it comes out of the mouth of another," particularly when members of a community, who have not eaten garlic, are accused of having smelly mouths for no other reason than the color of their eyes. I am sure in the future, the millions of Iranian immigrants who are falsely accused of having smelly mouths will be the most serious advocates of freedom in all its variation.

Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright, who became President of his country, says: "The measure of the civilization of a people and a government, is in the way they treat the minorities among them."

In July 12, 1873, when King Nasser-EI-Din Shah traveled to Paris, A Mr. Kermeo, a member of the French parliament, and the leaders of Alliance Israelite, following a letter from Iranian Jewish community seeking their help, met with the Shah and in the presence of Mirza Hassein Sepahsalar, requested that the Alliance be permitted to establish schools in Iran. The request was granted, but it took 15 years of further negotiations, political maneuvering, and preparations until the first Alliance school was established in 1898 - first in Teheran, then in 1900 in Hamedan, in 1901 in Isfahan, in 1903 in Shiraz, in 1904 in Kermanshah, and gradually in other major Iranian cities of Nahavand, Sanandaj, Bijar, Brojerd, Yazd, and Kashan. In 1925, the first of the graduates of the Alliance school in Isfahan were sent to France to continue with their higher education. The son of one of these graduates has donated millions to charities including \$30,000,000 to the University of Southern California. The service that Alliance Israelite performed for Iran had never been matched by any other foreign government or organization. Among the most prominent of these graduates was Dr. Jahanshah Saleh, senator and former President of Teheran University, and the former Minister of Health and Education whose story is a very interesting one, which I describe in the addendum.

The Etehad (Alliance) school in Kashan was established in 1904 by Mr. Yeghootyel and his wife Sara, who did not have any children. It had a capacity of 500 students, and after a hundred years, it is still in operation, and most recently was reconstructed by a generous grant from Lord David Alliance an alumni of the school. It is most regrettable that anti-Semitism has not yet been eradicated even in a community, which does not count any Jews among its members, and a government, which castigates the greatest, and most beloved and respected individual in the 2500 year history of Iran, Kourosh the Great, the first advocate of human rights in history, and labels him a Zionist (without knowing the first thing about Zionism or its history), solely because he helped Jews gain their freedom from ancient Babylon.

Isn't anti-Semitism the affirmation of the teachings of Nahj-Al-Balaghe – an Islamic holy book – one of which is: "Be weary of the one you help, and are kind to?" Many of the anti-Semitic acts of the past, and even today's anti-Americanism, are the reaction to the inferiority complex of their perpetrators, who cannot bear the fact that they owe their education to the people who helped them, and their lives - to America.

Fortunately, with the help of the 60-70 years old graduates of the Kashan Alliance School, a center containing a school, library, synagogue and a banquet-hall is now under construction, in honor of Mr. Yaghotyel and Sara Kashani.

No doubt that it is necessary to teach enlightened religious laws in all communities. But, the river that originated in Mount Sinai 3000 years ago, under the banner of Judaic religion, came into existence when the total population of the world was less than 50 million. While the path maintains the ability to remain the same, the water flowing it, is different today. The same applies to other rivers, which sprang out, in that very region where they were ripe to get 2000 and 1400 years ago. The ancillaries of these rivers have not managed to address the issues of today, and their followers are much like ducks swimming in the river, seeming calm on the surface, but underneath, are forced to constantly paddle with their feet, in an effort to struggle to keep their balance and stay afloat.

I ask you not to close the duck's eyes to the acquisition of knowledge, or its mind to the seeking of freedom; do not tie its wings so it cannot fly, and its feet from moving towards progress, because in so doing, the duck will become paralyzed and end-up drowning in the river of religious dogma. Do not let religion become a tool in the hands of a few, to be used for the sake of their own purposes. The confrontation between religious teachings and modern knowledge will set a modern community thousands of years back, and will transform its clear-headed members into prejudiced and intolerant individuals. Self-worship is suicide. Those societies will advance, who are armed with the latest knowledge and are in tune with the times.

It is interesting to note, that criticism of religious authorities is considered unfortunate and even labeled as blasphemous, and if the validity of even one sentence is questioned, they have no answer, because they never read them in the first place. The efforts of any educational institution can be fruitful when they are based on logic and the truth, not on religious bigotry and bias. Otherwise, the opportunists citing the faulty and illogical interpretations of the extremists, knowing well that all monoliths are in the same boat, deride everybody else, and make a scapegoat of Jewry, in order to reach their own goal and achieve their own agenda. The commandments of the Torah are like the constitution of the Jewish civilization. Its customs, interpretations, and timely addendum are subject to change in accordance with the necessities dictated by time and place. Why, then, should we be quartered in cages made of outdated customs, and be divided by their principles?

The train of the civilized world will roar on without this or that religion, and according to the laws of nature, it will be tolerant of all the hardships it might encounter. It is, therefore, we who should make sure that neither us nor our children miss this train. The ticket to ride on this train is not religion, but knowledge - the truth of which must be understood by ourselves, and not conveyed by others. Neither we nor other societies can change the way the wind blows, but we can set our sails to adjust to the changes in the wind.

The pessimists complain about the wind, optimists look forward to the change in the direction of the wind, while realists adjust themselves to it. Humans adjust their understanding of religious doctrines to the knowledge and realistic times. Books show us the road, but taking this road, based on weather considerations, lighting and road conditions - is strictly up to us.

According to George Bernard Shaw, "We can recognize religion in science, but we can never find science in religion." Thus, if a student does not receive a proper education and does not have any understanding of science, he will not understand religion, and will not be able to say "Science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind," as Einstein said. Learning does not come by religion alone, and real death occurs when learning has stopped.

World progress has not stopped by receiving religious books.

Napoleon has said: "History and knowledge are sworn enemies of religion, and vice versa." The proponents of stagnations know that as people get more educated, they drift further apart from them. We must seize the moment, otherwise the educated members of our community will go to the sidelines while the extremists succeed, and then the world will look at us as a backward people.

Today most of the young educated people who listen to religious sermons are more enlightened than the speakers are, and know all too well that the worst type of damage that can be inflicted upon a good idea is an erroneous defense of it. They accept that intelligence is more constructive than slogans, and it brings about a higher level of knowledge and humanity. They realize that one minute of inspired thinking can dwarf years of defeat of a society.

The French classical writer and moralist of the 17th Century, La Rochefoucauld, said: "A clever mind is a worthy gift, which God grants to few people, but few people think they are not blessed with it."

Dear teachers: Let us at least learn from the bitter, yet rewarding experiences of the friends among us. We have seen that we can refrain from a total observance of all religious edicts and laws, yet remain erudite. We can refrain from observing all the customs and traditions and remain aware. We can say, "I am not religious," and remain enlightened, but we can never remain static in the name of religion, and survive.

Those words came from the brave Jews of Mashad and Spanish Morano who are the best example of people who with extraordinary religiosity kept their legacy. Yes! The Mashhadies and the Spanish, who lived under the gun of religious prejudice and oppression, created a free-flowing river for themselves. By escaping a physical and mental swamp, they managed to survive, because in a free-flowing river they lived like trout, whereas in a swamp they would have become fodder for mosquitoes.

Unfortunately the biggest lesson of history is that people do not learn from their own history, and tend to confine themselves in a self-imposed ghetto of stale, outmoded beliefs.

The prophets, it is said, bring the news of the future, and history - the news of the past. How can we build our tomorrow if we do not learn the wisdom of today? Today, when even human rights have been politicized, we must be on the alert because the footsteps of the crusaders can be heard in the conflict between the various religions. We mourn the death of one individual for seven days, but seven generations are punished for the errors of one teacher. For reaching the light, a society has to know the darkness first. If we want to know what keeps us healthy and aware, we must learn from our past experiences and know what causes illnesses in the first place, so that we may avoid them.

The pages of the history of human savagery are heavier than the pages of its civilized history. The anti-Semites of yesterday, i.e. the human rights violators of today, believe in what they chose to believe, not what the truth was.

This is the nature of bigotry and intolerance, and has nothing to do with religion. Wasn't the murderer of Itzhac Rabin, the Prime Minister of Israel a so-called Jewish fanatic? Wasn't the murderer of Gandhi a so-called religious Hindu fanatic? Wasn't Gabriel Perinchip, who murdered Prince Franze Ferdinand, the Crown prince of Austria, in Sarievo and started the fire of the First World War a fanatic Christian?

Today's human society is paying the price for its silence in the face of anti-Semitism, which led to the slaughter of 6 million Jews by Hitler, and all the human rights violations, which led to the slaughter of 1.5 million Armenians, 800,000 Hutu tribesmen and women, and the ongoing wholesale murder of Sudanese Christians.

Nowhere, and at no time in human history, have religious fanatics been able to make human beings act more humanely. They have only managed to create division and prejudice for the benefit of one or a few groups of people, and lit the flames of hatred, which has engulfed both the hunter and the hunted, like the millions who died on both sides of the conflict in Europe during World War II. Today, the virus of human-abhorrence has, true to its own nature, risen against itself and against humanity and the best way to fight it is not with prayers and fasting, but with free thought which promotes love, instead of hate, and with knowledge and awareness. God condemns those who turn to fanaticism instead of knowledge, those who and reverse the progress of their children by teaching them outdated, unwise, and illogical so-called religious doctrines, because fanaticism and its natural offspring - the spread of hatred in the name of religion - are far more destructive than having no religion at all.

It was very interesting for me to read that the French have a saying, which says: "The good fortune of a nation is inversely related to the length of its history." In other words, the longer the life of a nation, the more problems its people face. May be this stems from the fact that a longer history entails more customs and traditions. As a society or a nation's culture is infused with more and more superstition and dogma of various religious and group practices, its resistance to them is decreased due to fanaticism, and thus their purveyors become more and more visible. We must all be aware that the number of roads leading to our faith in God, is as numerous as God's creatures, and it is us who have to study them and choose which road we want to take. How beautifully it has been said in David's poems that: "The Creator has not revealed all his powers to us, but is revealed to each of us according to our individual power.

The English philosopher, Bertrand Russell said: "I don't know how, in a world that keeps getting smaller and smaller, and the number of its denizens keeps getting larger and larger, get farther and farther apart, and more of a stranger to each other."

Look at India, in the 15th Century, in the city of Ahmad Abad in Kechrat, there was a Hindu temple, which was destroyed at the hands of the Muslims, and on its ruins rose a Mosque. This structure has changed hands a few times since, and during its most recent change of fortune, something like 3000 people from both sides were killed, many of them burned alive, and there is still no end to the conflict over it, just like the situations in other holy places.

Look at Europe: After centuries of sacrificing tens of millions of people at the behest of Popes, kings, and dictators in order to preserve their territorial imperative, we have arrived at a time, today, when 25 of them - for the time being - signed a document, which does not even mention God, in which they agreed to share the same parliament, the same army and even the same monetary currency. Pity those who were killed needlessly; have more pity on those who perpetuated the killings



and died an ignominious death, but mourn those who still won't learn and keep on fighting and killing in the name of freedom for the Basque in Spain, and the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland .

I ask you! Wouldn't future generations recall us as a people who, despite having millions of acres of land available to them, fought bitterly, and killed each other over a few acres of dry, dusty land covered by a stone building? Aren't new mosques, synagogues or churches that are being built every day, as holy as those ancient ones we fight over every day? Aren't there any other historical buildings and sites that can remind us of our past heritage and history, that we should kill each other over the so-called religious sites? What happened to the thousands of religious sites sanctified by the various religions? Was not the famous Aya Sofia mosque in Istanbul, where a mosaic portrait of Jesus still adorns its walls, a church once? Was not the famous Cordova Church in Spain, a mosque once? Isn't the life of even one man worth more than a claim to the whole world?

I can offer no answer other than recall the saying of one of history's greatest philosophers, Plato, who, when asked: "How did you live?" answered: "I came in full of anxiety and trepidation, lived in wonderment, and now, reluctantly am leaving it, and what is clear is that nothing is clear."

Many are not aware that so long as people do not respect and honor other people, they too will not honor and respect them. Maintaining one's legacy and traditions is not in any way dependent on rejecting other people's legacies and traditions, the same way that the destruction of one temple does not cause the rise of another place of worship. Lack of understanding is the result of a lack of comprehension. Similarly, poisonous bad mouthing and lack of comprehension on the part of parents is the basis for the rebelliousness of their children.

Dear teachers: In my opinion we cannot criticize anybody for having a logical opinion. In the final analysis, there is no reason for anyone to consider his opinion as the ultimate truth, and consider anyone who disagrees with him as his enemy and be belligerent towards him and show him animosity. There is no difference between the dark thinkers of one group and any other group, they are all dark thinkers.

Emmanuel Kant says: "Man has two measures of the truth: one is his own intelligence, the other is other people's intelligence who look at a problem from a different point of view."

All people must learn that others possess rights also. Tolerance for other people's civil right is a sign of one's own civility.

In our every day dealings, we maintain a belief in certain truths; the dangerm, however, sets in, when we begin to believe that our truths are the only truth, to the exclusion of all others. This is fanaticism. Any one who becomes a fanatic about his own religious beliefs, loses his ability to think logically, and perceives whatever he reads and hears through his emotions, instead of through his logic and reason. May I repeat, again: Beware not of the person with a whole library, but of the one who owns only one book. Yes! The past is the place for our memories, and the future the place for our hopes and dreams. The present, however, is the place for a better understanding of our thoughts and actions, where everything has to be evaluated and measured with the dictates of the times in mind. Napoleon has said: "Be weary of the people who seem to agree with you, because they do not have the courage to declare their disagreement." Only the two-faced among us are to blame for presenting legitimate criticism of religious dogma as a battle against religion itself. It is best that everybody strengthen his or her inner faith to the point that it does not foster hate for others, be them a religious, or any other type of a group. This is the way of humanity and compassion.

The problems of today's society should be the concern of all people. Let us not just look at the face of a problem, but probe deeper and see what it entails. Religious bigotry is like a bone stuck in the throats of our youngsters: it can neither be coughed up, nor swallowed. Of you, who believe in the power of prayers, I ask that you pray for more understanding of the commandments, the obeying of which should be understood in light of the time they were created.

What endangers a society most, shaking its very foundations is not the lack of religious zeal; but rather a narrow vision, the inability to adjust itself to the circumstances and needs of modern times, and the spread of hatred among its people. Those who take the correct path to religion, who act free of the constraints of old beliefs and emotional upheavals; those who are guided by their own logic and intelligence, are the ones who understand that people may be different, yet equal in rights and the right for respect.

There was a time when humans were sacrificed at the feet of idols and Sun Gods, or thrown in a cage or an arena together with wild animals, for the sake of bringing a smile to the lips of gladiators, and Roman emperors like Nero and his entourage. The time came, when this brutal practice was changed, and animal sacrifices were substituted for humans. Today, in many religions, there are some, who in the name of human and animal rights, claim that neither was the right thing to do. Today's practice of beheading hostages is rooted in the idea and practice of olden days, where a human or an animal, were

sacrificed in order to atone for a sin, avoid a divine tragedy, or bring the rain down. Are these practices performed in tune with the march of time? Are they not a mere spark in the far distant sun of evolution? In replacing prayers for sacrifices, more than two thousand years ago, the Torah's commandments regarding sacrificing of animals had successfully come to a halt. Thus, with the help of the teachings of religious schools, the old practice of sacrifice, along with others, were brought in line with modern times' sensibility. As a result, we live in a better world today. I am confident that, just as in the name of humanity, slavery, which was condoned by all religions, was eradicated, hatred and bigotry, too, will be eliminated from the dawn of a new day, for the benefit of all people in generations to come.

In anticipation of the dawn of such a day for the foundations of which, we are responsible today.

It is our responsibility, to put today, the foundations which will guarantee and ensure the arrival of such a day, tomorrow.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is obvious that the people of the world are in agreement about the fact that good fortune is the basis of living. But, they do not agree as to how to go about achieving it, and here is where laws, beliefs and, various methods come into the picture.

Albert Einstein has said: "No law can be better than those who carry it out."

Since the best religious or secular law at the hands of uninformed persons is no different than a bad law, what puts families in danger is the inability to conform to the modern times, not a lack of religiosity.

Today, considering the traditional differences existing throughout the world, it becomes increasingly clear that Judaism is not just a religion, but a noble culture just like many other noble cultures, which date back thousands of years. As we can see, a majority of the Jews all over the world, such as the Noble Laureates, were not, and are not necessarily religious; but in actuality, they are better followers of the religious tenets than many who proclaim to be religious.

They do not flinch at being asked to offer assistance, even when if it involves the sacrificing of their life for the advancement of science and humanity. Their conduct, education, actions, and unbiased opinions, like that of free thinkers of all religions, are in tune with the times and the environment in which they lived. Thus by taking advantage of their social, economic and educational circumstances they managed to gain enormous successes like winning the Nobel Prize. The requirement for reaching such heights is neither religiosity, nor the lack of it; it involves an understanding of commandments such as love your fellow human being as you do yourself, and the ability to apply them meaningfully to the circumstances of the present time. To the extremists, these moderates, who constitute the majority of the Jewish community throughout the world, are not recognized as real Jews. The moderate Jews, enlightened by modern ideas, which are not based on faith alone, pose a threat to the extremists, because more and more it becomes clear to them that eventually their rigid doctrines will not endure.

It is erroneous to think that with the force of superstition and the inflicting of fear, one can make believers of the masses. No! A far stronger reaction should be defiance and the rejection of religion, in favor of a better life and stronger beliefs. I can say without fear, that the endurance of the Jewish people was not due to the writings and edicts of many of its proponents - which were more often than not, were responsible for creating problems, rather than solving them - but rather due to the richness of Jewish culture and civilization. The imperative task in today's society is the prevention of pollution of our children's minds, and the dissemination of love instead of hatred through education - religious and otherwise - so that they will come to see no one but God. All societies have weaknesses, but it takes courage to face them head-on, in order to eliminate them. The very fact that I can convey my message to you, and making sure that you understand it, is far more important to me than your approval of it, or opposing it. I respect all those who oppose my views - provided that they understand them. The age of a man is not just a number, but the combination of his experiences, actions, and legacies - like this very writing - by which we are judged and are remembered.

Jamshid Amouzegar, a former Prime Minister of Iran said once: "A speech must be short like a miniskirt, but contain the essential points."

With the hope that the essential points and messages of this writing endure, I am,

With respect and thanks;

Baba Nouri

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## FIRST ADDENDUM

### THE STORY OF HAKIM YAGHOUB AND THE LIFE OF DR. JAHANSHAHE SALEH, SENATOR, AND FORMER MINISTER OF HEALTH,

### AND PRESIDENT OF TEHERAN UNIVERSITY

In answer to "How did you chose to become a doctor," Dr. Saleh has said: "Sometimes in a man's life, especially when he is very young, a seemingly simple incident can have such a great impact on the psyche of a person that it changes the course of his life. I was a small child when my mother became gravely ill, and I remember very well how much anxiety and concern it created in our family. At that time, most of the physicians in Kashan, who were called "Hakim Bashy," were Jewish. It is interesting to note that doctors in a Muslim city like Kashan, which was known as "Dar Al Momenin," (A place of believers), should be Jewish, who of course, in the eyes of Muslims were non-believers. Unfortunately in those days, due to excessive zeal and, of course, ignorance, Jews were forced to live in a ghetto. The mode of transportation in those days was horse and donkey, and it was a custom that if a Muslim was walking in the street while a Jew was riding a horse or a donkey, the Jew should disembark, and wait until the Muslim passes by, then ride the animal again. This is the extreme extent to which prejudice was rampant in the city at that time.

Our family doctor who was an experienced physician named "Hakim Yaghoub," and knew about ancient medicine, was called to my mother's bedside. It was a cold rainy night, and Hakin Bashy got on his feisty donkey, and while a boy holding a lantern ran in front of it to light the way, he arrived at our home. My father was pacing the parlor with me beside him waiting for Hakim Bashy to arrive. As Hakim Bashy neared our home, my father ran, greeted him with enthusiasm, and helped him off his donkey and took him to my mother's bedside. Although I was still a child, I was aware of the customs of the city, and was quite surprised that my father, who for years was the governor of the Province of Kashan and Natanz, and a member of a very influential tribe, acted so deferentially towards Hakim Yaghoub, and even escorted him to the door of the house when he was leaving. I was in search of an explanation for this strange behavior when my father, who was quite a humble man and an intellectual, took me to his library and pointed to a whole row of religious books namely the Koran, the Torah, the Bible and the Avesta and said: "These are all holy books of the various religions, and the followers of each are all entitled to respect and free to choose their own way." He then added: "The Torah, the book of the Jews, is the first of the holy books. Besides, Hakim Yaghoub is a healer, and as such, he is entitled to the utmost respect from all members of our community." This encounter was responsible for one of the greatest lessons of my life, and in order for it to be even more unique and special, he enrolled me in a study period of three-times-a-week, in the Jewish Alliance Israelite School, which had been established by French Jews in Kashan. There, under the tutelage of the French Jewish teachers, I learned my first foreign language. You can see from this story, how one incident - like my mother's illness - changed the entire course of my life, and encouraged me to pursue the science of medicine.

Hakim Yaghoub, also named as Shams Al Hokama (The Sun of Physicians), fathered a dynasty of 35 medical doctors - children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren - including the late Professors Shaeib Berjis, and Drs. Nahid, Tahereh, Houshang, Nasser, Valla, Parviz, Mansour, Feraz, Yahya, Peyman Berjis, and Dr. Parvize Nazar, Dr. Mehrdad Moghadam, Dr. Nanaz Pirnia, Dr. Esther Shoraka, Dr. Maleka Shoraka - all of whom now live in Europe and the United States.