

For the Father's Day & In the Memory of  
The Spiritual Father of the Children of Kashan

# **Baba Yeghoutiel: A Legend of Love**

An Essay in Two Parts

By: Norman “Nourollah” Gabay

*English Translation by Payman Akhlaghi*

*نسخه فارسی این مقاله را در فایل همراه ملاحظه کنید.*

## **Part I**

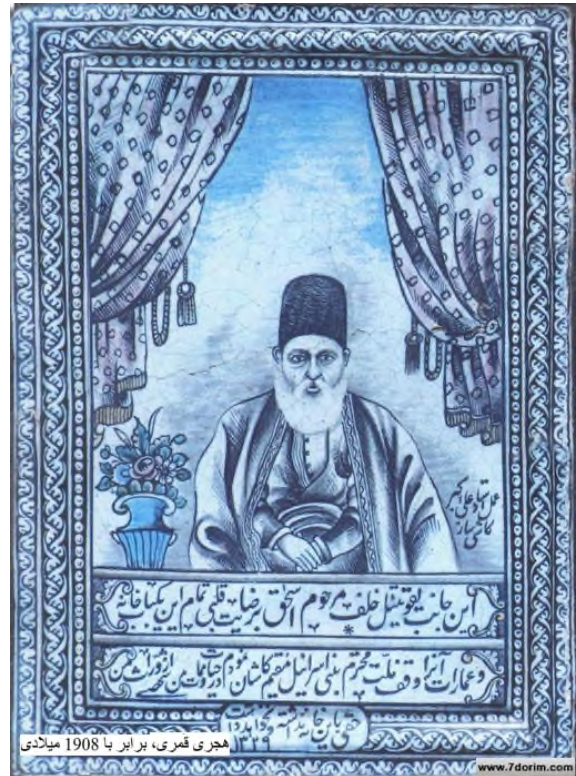
**“He who opens a school door, closes a prison.” — Victor Hugo**

**Aristotle** said, and I paraphrase, “A society won't last if it is ungrateful toward those who've served it.”

About 110 years ago, the Jews of Kashan, these surviving members of one of the most ancient cities of Iran with a sizeable Jewish population, a desert town in an underdeveloped country, among an underdeveloped and anti-Semitic people who saw Jews as “foreign citizens” or rather “second rate aliens” (*sic!*), a minority who had suffered so much pain, famine, illness, murder, plunder, and forced migration through its long history — these remnants of an old and large community minded still to merely survive than to truly live. They had no bath, nor clean water, nor a water reservoir; no freedom and security; no free private business, and no support. At such dire times, a great man named **Yeghoutiel** (*yeghou-ti-'els*, a nickname of the Prophet Moses), the son of Isaac and Sara-Hay, lived in the city with his four siblings — his three brothers, Abba, Yaghoub “Jacob” and Asher, and their sister, Sara. Sadly, the four brothers had no children, but Sara did marry, and her descendants can be found today among the Reyhani, Masjedi, Asherian and Roshan families.

With a vision broader than his times would normally afford, intent on serving the society and preserving his name, Yeghoutiel decided to demolish his house and build in its stead a house of education — not a thereto customary *maktab*, or another traditional Old Testament school with its Mullah Nasraddin kind of fables, but a modern school, one which would serve all children, both the girls and the boys.

Finally, taking upon himself the countless burdens of the enormous task, even constructing a brick-baking oven to ease providing the material, he succeeded to realize his dream. The school was built, and it was inaugurated in the year 1329 of the Lunar Hejri, i.e. the 1908 C.E., or the 1288 of the Persian Solar Calendar, at which time he installed the insignia tablet, bearing his image and the dedication legend, on the grand wall of the school — in the hopes that, as the poet said, *someday, perhaps, a kind man should feel compassion and pray in his memory.*



Ironically, according to Mr. Mousa “Moses” Reyhani, a descendant of Agha Yeghoutiel’s sister, the great man’s major act of kindness, may his memory last forever, failed to garner everybody’s praise, for it was opposed by the traditional school mullahs whose thoughts and deeds continued to stagnate within a framework of superstition and slavery. They were against the education of both girls and boys, so far as Agha Yeghoutiel was compelled to hire a few of them to teach in the school.

**Men hate the knowledge which they fail to know.**

**Science is a summary of the religion, and yet,**

**They call it “heresy”, when they’re ignorant of it.**

In their own right, his brother **Agha Baba** built a public bath dedicated to the Jewish community, to a people who up to that point had not been allowed to use the public baths of their city; another brother **Agha Yaghoub “Jacob”** donated his famous farm to the society; and his

third brother, **Agha Asher** rebuilt a deserted *sipak* and offered it to the community, to let the public have access to a clean underground stream of water — and I remember personally how this *sipak*, known as *The Sipak of Asher*, was located next to a synagogue and was used by the Jewish people. (To put it succinctly, a *sipak* was a slanted corridor with a built-in staircase which allowed people to descend comfortably deep down below the ground surface so far as they could reach the underground stream of a *ghanat*. For more information regarding *sipak*, please refer to my essay in Persian under the said name at [BabaNouri.com](http://BabaNouri.com).)

Thus, I was witness to a true miracle, for within an atmosphere imbued with pure prejudice and discrimination, there lay a very deep *sipak* used by my people for bathing! May I point out that billions of dollars in wealth and properties belonging to the Jews of Iran, the accumulated outcome of centuries of hard work and savings by our ancestors and us, have so far stayed in Iran and are currently out of our hands. And yet, due to the good will of these four brothers, as well as the other beloved members of our community who donated or willed their properties to the public, the real-estate properties that belonged to our community have mostly been registered to the Tehran Jewish Association, and thus preserved — thanks in particular to the tireless efforts of the late Dr. Rouhollah Kohanim and Mohandess Es-hagh “Isaac” Bral.

Today, of these four brothers, only Agha Yeghoutiel, the founder of the Alliance Israélite “Ettehad” School of Kashan, is widely remembered by the posterity. No doubt, all of the Jewish, Muslim and Baha’i children born into that city, that is, all of the students who attended the school during its active years, as well as their children and grandchildren, have been indebted to the compassionate love of that great man. To cite a small instance of the school’s worth, and particularly, to offer a sample of the general public behavior in the poisonous and anti-Semitic air of Kashan of the time, I’d like to quote an autobiographical account by Dr. Jahanshah Saleh, a former Minister of Health, a Professor at Tehran University, and an advisor to the Shah of Iran.

### **The Tale of Hakim Yaghoub\* and My Destiny**

(\*) *Hakim Yaghoub “Jacob” Berjis, a.k.a. “Shams-ol Hokama” or “The Sun of Doctors”*

**By: Dr. Jahanshah Saleh**

*Senator, Former President of Tehran University, and Former Minister of Health and Culture*



Dr. Jahanshah Saleh

*Cited From Donya Annual Journal, No. 27, in Persian*

**On the first day of the Creation, in the golden castle of the sun,  
On the tablet of the blue dome, they inscribed a message:  
“How shall you bask in the morning light of your later days,  
If you didn’t breathe the candle’s smoke at the nights of youth?”**

— Jami

Sometimes, throughout our lives, but especially in our childhood, a simple tiny incident can leave a large impact on our spirit, so far as it may even change the direction of our lives and our destiny. I was a little child. My mother fell badly ill. I remember very well what anxiety it raised in our family. At that time, most of the doctors of Kashan, called the “Hakim-Bashi”, i.e. a traditional doctor, were Jewish; and it’s an interesting fact in itself regarding a city like Kashan, widely known as Dar-ol Mo’menin or “The Home of the Faithful”, for its doctors to be all Jewish. Sadly, back then, due to ignorance or perhaps extreme prejudice, Jews were obligated to live in a specific neighborhood. And the common means of transportation at the time were horses or donkeys. According to the custom, if a Muslim walking in an alley ran into a Jew riding a donkey, the Jew had to get off the donkey and wait for the Muslim to pass by! That’s how far misplaced prejudice had led to discrimination and class disparities in that city.

Our family doctor was an experienced man named Hakim Yaghoub “Jacob”, with an adequate knowledge of the traditional medicine. He was called to my mother’s bedside. It was a relatively cold and rainy night. Hakim-Bashi, riding his fast-paced donkey, guided by a 12-year old child who was holding a lantern and walked ahead of them, arrived at our house. My father was waiting and pacing impatiently the space of the *hashti*, or the open area right behind the entrance gate of the house, and I was standing next to him. The moment Hakim-Bashi got near us, my father rushed toward him, offered a warm greeting, held under the man’s arm, helped him climb down the donkey, and guided him to my mother’s bedside. Even as a little child, I was familiar with the customs of our town. My father was for years the ruler of Kashan and Natanz, and according to the titles of the time, he was considered to be one of the well-known and elite Khans or “feudal heads” of the

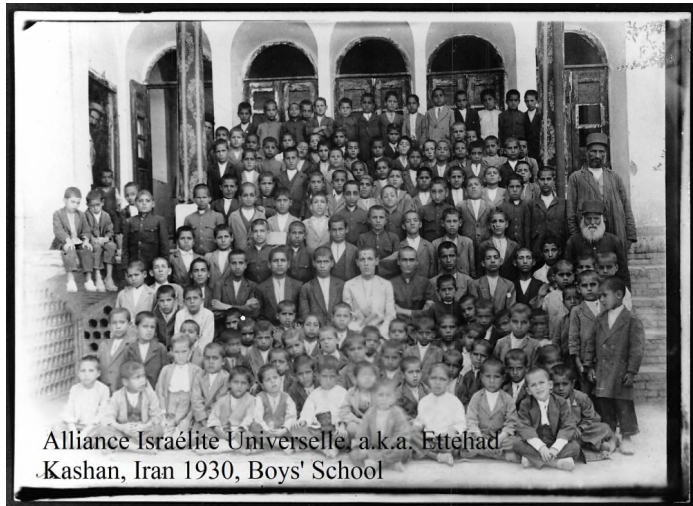
city. Yet, to my surprise, despite his position, he respected Hakim Yaghoub so much, and so far as the doctor was leaving our house, my father himself accompanied our guest to the door! I asked for an explanation. My father, an enlightened man with a modest “dervish-like” attitude, took my hand and led me to his library. There he showed me a shelf on which he had placed a *Quran*, a *Bible*, a *Torah*, and a volume of *Avesta*. Pointing to them, he answered me and said, “All of these volumes are divine holy books and the guides of various religions. The followers of each of these religions deserve to be respected, and they are free in choosing their own leader.” He then added, “The *Torah* or the holy book of the Jewish people is among the first divine books. Besides that, Hakim Yaghoub is a doctor, and a doctor is among the most honorable classes of people, respected by both the elite and the commoners.” His answer was a big lesson for me, and to give me an even better lesson, he took me three times a week to the École Alliance Israélite, or the Alliance “Ettehad” School, which had been formed by the French in Kashan, and where I learned French as my first foreign language under the guidance of French teachers. In the following brief account [in the original publication] you will see how this incident changed the direction of my life and encouraged me to pursue my studies in medicine.



Hakim Yaghoub "Jacob" Berjis  
a.k.a. Shams-ol-Hokama

The above short recount indicates clearly both the anti-Semitic environment of the time, and the invaluable services of Agha Yeghoutiel, and on a wider scale, of Alliance Israélite, to the Iranian culture.

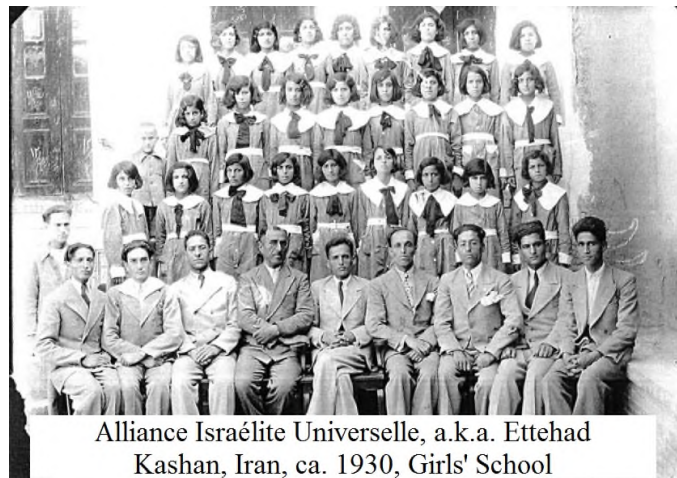
Sadly, on the fifth of Av, 5674 of the Jewish Calendar, or the 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1914, about five years after the opening of the school, Agha Yeghoutiel passed away. Having no house of himself, to the end, he lived with his wife in a room inside the school. As such, a room at the school was set aside for his widow where she could live. I remember how the student girls competed against each other to serve “Aunt Sara”, and how happy she was that she and her husband had received us as their own children. In their unsaid words, they told a world, “**Ahoy! Send**



Alliance Israélite Universelle, a.k.a. Ettéhad  
Kashan, Iran 1930, Boys' School

**some savings to your own grave! / No one returned with such things from the tomb, so you better send them ahead!”**

I emphasize again that Agha Yeghoutiel’s services to the people of Kashan, and on a wider scale, the services of Alliance Israélite to the culture of Iran, have been unparalleled. It would suffice to keep in mind that even many of the prominent figures of Kashan and the political personalities of the Pahlavi period — such as Mr. Hossein Ala, the Prime Minister, and his like — were among the students of the Alliance system. Altogether, in all of the cities where Alliance Israélite had opened a school, the majority of the children of the prominent Muslim figures of the city studied in the Alliance — so far as Ms. **Homa Nategh** wrote in her book, *The History of the Foreign Culture in Iran* (Persian, p. 50) that out of 654 students of the Alliance of Hamedan, only 173 were Jewish. (I recommend the studying of this book to all friends.)



Alliance Israélite Universelle, a.k.a. Ettéhad  
Kashan, Iran, ca. 1930, Girls' School

## Part II

Alas, the invaluable services of the Alliance Israélite were never appreciated in the Iranian media, because at the end, the philosophy of anti-Semitism is based on violating the rights of the others.

Even as we appreciate the wholehearted services of Alliance Israélite, we can say that relatively speaking, Agha Yeghoutiel's service even though limited to the Jewish population of Kashan was in its own right no less valuable than the services of Alliance.

Agha Yeghoutiel acted single-handedly, amid a shortage of means and facilities, and despite a lack of freedom wherein he lived; and he converted his only house to a school. In contrast, the Alliance Israélite organization was much better situated economically, and it enjoyed much broader freedoms available at the time where it was positioned; and it acted



kindly toward the Jews of the world, so far as the Jewish world is indebted to the kindness and benevolence of this institution. Such love cannot be reciprocated except for continuing their path in the hands of the future generations...

I'm reminded of a story about Bill Gates, the wealthiest man in the world. Gates was asked, as we are told, "Is anyone out there richer than you?" He answered, "Yes, and he's a young man who used to sell newspapers at an airport. Two times within three months, he let me have the newspaper for free, out of his own pocket, when I didn't have the money on me to pay for it. With a broad smile, the young boy handed me the paper and said, 'Come on! Take it! It's fine. I'll give it to you for free.' Nineteen years later, having made my fortune, one day I remembered him and ask my people to find him for me. He was working then as an usher in a theater. They brought him to me. I asked, "Do you know me?" He said, "Of course, you're Bill Gates, the richest man in the world!"

Bill Gates told him, “Nineteen years ago, when I had no money on me, you gave me the newspaper for free at your own expense. I want to pay you back for your act of kindness. Please tell me what you need. I’ll give you whatever you wish.” The young African American, now a 32-year old man, told Mr. Gates, “But you cannot repay me for what I did.” Bill Gates was surprised. “How could that be? I’ve lent 50 billion dollars in loans to governments! How couldn’t I of all people make it up to you?” The young man laughed and said, “You want to, but you can’t, because I donated the money to you **when I was dirt poor**, but you want to gift me something at the peak of your wealth. This will pay back next to nothing.”

As Bill Gates would say, “I always feel that no one’s richer than me, save that young man.” Likewise, Agha Yeghoutiel, with very little means at his disposal, converted his house to a school for a small group of people, and he went on to live with his wife in a room at that same school; whereas the Alliance served a world at a time of flourishing and freedom.

The Agha Yeghoutiel School was used by the Jews for no more than 50 years, as the Jews of Kashan began to gradually leave the city. The emigration happened especially after the horrible murder of Dr. Sulayman Berjis — Baha’i, the son of the Jewish doctor Hakim Yaghoub “Jacob” a.k.a. Shams-ol Hokama or “The Sun of Doctors”, himself a doctor of the court of Qajar — and the unparalleled reception that the people of Kashan offered when the late Berjis’s murderer was acquitted and returned to the city. Thus, Jews gradually left the city behind and immigrated to Tehran, Israel, or later on, to Europe and America. Those people were shaken, but they didn’t wake up in time.

It used to be impossible for our ancestors to relocate freely and flee from unsafe places, a sad aspect of their lives which, alas, has perpetuated into our times. For instance, many alarming incidents happened to the people of Kashan and other cities — such as the period of plundering and other crimes of Nayeb Hossein Kashi and his band of criminals; the brutal murder of Dr. Sulayman Berjis in 1950, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Bahman 1328 of the Persian Calendar; the catastrophe of the Mahalleh “*Ghetto*” of Tehran that ensued over an “insult”



to an Agha's donkey (sic!); the Allah-Dadi Tragedy in Mash-had; the troubling affair of the 1968 Iran-Israel soccer game; and so forth — shocking incidents which everyone witnessed, but no one moved, because they could not emigrate at the time, or when they could, they did not. For, all around the world, especially among the minorities, many



Hakim Yaghoub "Jacob" Berjis  
a.k.a. Shams-ol-Hokama



Dr. Sulayman Berjis, ca. 1946  
(1897-1950)

people don't believe that fire burns things until it's burnt their own hand. Thence, they stagnated there for long, until an earth-shattering quake arrived, the times and the sites changed, eyes half opened and watched their surroundings, and relocation became possible miraculously for a number of them. Evidently, one reason for this sudden ease and surge in immigration were the youngsters of these families who had already left the country to study abroad before the transformative events were to take place. Nevertheless, a group of people, either by necessity, by expediency, or due to oblivion and negligence, continue to stay where they are and eat the honey!

The expression "to stay and eat the honey" goes back to one of my fond memories from a few decades ago. In the 1970's, I was doing business with a number of Belgian knitting factories. One day, the head of the sales department at one of the biggest factories of Brussels told me and my son, who was with me at the time in Belgium, "I wish to introduce you to Mr. Joe, the owner of the factory." We entered Mr. Joe's office. He

greeted us, pronounced my name correctly, and introduced himself to us. A warm conversation ensued, during which he spoke of the years of forced migrations since the 1492 Spain to the date. Although the Europeans seldom invite guests to their homes, he invited us to have lunch with them at their house. There, he introduced us to his wife, a graceful and dignified lady, well-informed and active in social affairs. She said, “You are the fourth Iranian whom I get to meet. In the past, I met with Mr. Habib Elghanian and Mr. Ebrahim Moreh at the World Congress of Alliance Israélite, to which I contributed as the program manager. Mr. Moreh spoke before me and told the audience, ‘*Galut* (the discrimination of the Diaspora) is similar to the stray dogs, as it’s sometimes calm and at other times rabid.’”

The lady continued, “During my speech, in response to Mr. Moreh, I said that, ‘Today, you are in slumber while eating the honey.’ Then I explained that one day, a man was attacked by a wild beast. The man ran away, chased by the dangerous animal. The man spotted a well, and having no other choice, he climbed down the hole. As his legs pressed against the walls, he looked down only to be horrified by the sight of a pile of snakes intertwined at the bottom of the well! Hanging in the air between the wild beast awaiting him above at the brink of the well, and the poisonous snakes hissing down below his feet, he reached with his hand for a hole in the wall, and he learned that there was a honeycomb. He began to eat from the honey, which gave him enough energy to stay in that position and ignore for the time being the dangers of the beast hovering above him and the snakes crawling on the bed of the well.” She then added, “I told the gentlemen, ‘Considering your high incomes today, for the time being, you’ll eat the honey as you walk in your sleep; you are alive, but you don’t see the world, as you are oblivious to what’s going on around you.’” Thence, in 1970, I visited Australia as I considered immigrating to that country; but that would belong to another paper. At any rate, today, we too seem to be eating the honey, come what may tomorrow!

**No one but the essence of God knows**

**The games that Life shall play tomorrow.**

Alas, as time passed, the name of Agha Yeghoutiel, this spiritual father of the many students of the Alliance “Ettehad” School of Kashan, was completely forgotten, until one night in the December of 1995, when in my dreams, I remembered the days of childhood, the school, the classmates and the teachers, the punishments, the whip and the flogging, and the stories told about the lives of Agha Yaghouh and Aunt Sara, who kept a photo of her late husband on the wall of her room — and I asked myself, “True that *the flower withered away, and the garden went to ruins*, but *why shouldn't we seek the scent of the flower in the rosewater?* Why shouldn't we, whom he received as his own children, preserve the perfume of his good name? Why wouldn't we build a center named after him and make his memory last forever?” As such, intent on founding such a cultural center dedicated to his name, may he rest in peace, I told my old classmates, “Let's call out all the Kids! We're going to have a meeting!”

Hence, with the collaboration of four of my friends, namely the late Ehsan Asherian, and Misters Elias Abrishami, Rafie Javid, and Lord David Alliance, who would arrive from London



to attend the ceremony, we invited the Kashi Kids who lived at the time in Los Angeles to commemorate the late Agha Yeghoutiel. The celebration took place on the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> of

January, 1996, at the Sephardic Temple. It was a large ceremony, with several speeches and fine food and drinks. Altogether, about 600 Kashi Kids attended the event, accompanied by their families.

At this ceremony, the late Chacham Yedidia Shofet, his honor Rabbi David Shofet, the late Eliahu Ghodsian, and Lord David Alliance, each presented a speech. In my turn, I offered my greetings, and said,

“My Friends! A great man named Yeghoutiel carried out a precious service to us, to the students of the Alliance “Ettihad” School of Kashan, at a sensitive time in history. He is no more among us so that we could thank him in person; but as I wish to, we could build a cultural center named after him and keep his loving memory alive forevermore.

“Fortunately, to date, there have lived such meritorious people as Agha Yeghoutiel, who understood things correctly and could recognize how to benefit from the available means better than the others did; who stepped forward to act in the interests of the society; and who thus transformed the path that lay before the society and helped nurture its gifts and energies.

“To climb a ladder, however tall, we must start with the first step. He was the one who made the first steps open to us; otherwise, at the most, we the boys would have gone on attending the traditional schools or *maktabs* of the time, as our ancestors had done for long, whilst our girls would have stayed home to weave Persian rugs and do house chores.

“*The Mishna* says, ‘Even if you learned just one word from someone, you ought to be grateful to them and respect them for a lifetime.’ The Jewish culture has placed such a high import on the daily practice of acquiring knowledge that the *Talmud* says, ‘On the first night of the grave, the dead man is asked three questions: Were you honest through life in your dealings with people? Did you learn every day? Did you always maintain hope for a better future?’ Honesty, education, hope.

“**Plato** says, and I paraphrase, ‘In all its awesomeness and power, Death has not succeeded to obliterate the good names of people.’ We should draw upon our counsel and financial support to make sure that the name of Yeghoutiel shall not disappear.

“Agha Yeghoutiel gave us hope for our futures by providing the means to our education. We who pray for the host of the table even after a single bite of their bread, we have now gathered after all these years at this commemoration ceremony to ask for God’s forgiveness for that great man, to perform together the religious traditions of *hashkava* and *kaddish* for the dead, and to set out and preserve his name.

**Who lived by a good name, he found himself a lasting wealth,  
For the good talk will revive his name long after he’ll be gone.**

“**Today, Agha Yeghoutiel would have told us:** ‘I placed a light before you at the heart of darkness. You in turn will continue my way in the brightness of your day, help the others with their education, and preserve my name for an eternity.’”



In that event, a sufficient sum, although less than what we had anticipated, was collected toward that goal. Fortunately, about that time, I heard from the late Mr. Farzan, who lived in Ramat Gan, Israel, that the City of Netanyah had released a piece of land to the authority of Zekhor Yousef Synagogue of the Persian community, for the purposes of building adult classes, a festivity hall, and a synagogue — but also that they didn’t have any budget to construct the building. I went to the city of Netanyah, and with prior appointment, I attended a meeting of the synagogue’s Board of Directors. To my great joy, three of the eight members of the board were

old students of the Agha Yeghoutiel School, the Alliance “Ettehad” of Kashan. Even though the funds that we had collected were not enough to build the entire building, we agreed to offer the current sum and future gifts to the synagogue to establish a center named after Agha Yeghoutiel, and to make certain that the name of our spiritual father would never be forgotten. Thus, the posterity would remember the one who taught us how to swim in a lake, so that we and the future generations could find our ways to the sea.

Fortunately, as with most other nonprofit organizations, the building, including the synagogue, the festivity hall and the classrooms, was gradually constructed over time, with a variety of support coming from philanthropists and former students, including Lord David Alliance and Mr. Benyahu Sakhai. This major project was further supervised by the synagogue’s meritorious Board of Directors, and with the valuable efforts of Mohandess Parviz Yaghoub-



Zadeh. We spent much effort to transfer the insignia tablet of the original school in Kashan to the building in Israel. However, the principal of the school at the time, who was responsible to direct its 500 Muslim students, refused to fulfill our wishes, saying that, “This insignia tablet is the birth certificate of the school.” Awhile later, I heard that they had dismantled the insignia and moved it to a museum. I still hope that perhaps in the future, we will succeed in fulfilling this wish, as well. The late poetess **Ms. Mahin Amid** said,

**Someday, only a tale will remain of us in the world;  
But a vague memory of you and me will survive after us.  
We all wrongly make an “I” and a “We” from the “Self”,  
Yet what will remain of me is not the “I” of “myself”.  
We can’t tell the road from the well, yet we let our eyes  
Run around, though what remains of us is but a footstep.**

May our friends, in their trips to Israel, remember Agha Yeghoutiel and visit this cultural center, located at **Khativat Har’el St., 8, Netanyah, Israel**, and offer their financial support to help maintain this edifice.

*Norman “Nourollah” Gabay,  
June 2017, Los Angeles*

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

**(The End)**

Translator’s Website  
[www.ComposerPA.com](http://www.ComposerPA.com)