

Word of Mouth

An Essay in Two Parts

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نسخه فارسی این نوشتار را در فایل همراه ملاحظه کنید.

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Part I

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**If sorrows gave off smoke,
The world would be in eternal darkness.
Look for yourself around the world,
And you'll find no wise man happy.**

Back in the old times, there was no literacy, nor was there any freedom. Few had access to pens and paper. There were neither newspapers, nor tape players, nor radios, nor books. There were just a *mullah* and the pulpit, and the tales of the sorrows told at the pulpit, by the mullah, or on occasion, recounted by the grandparents at the cradle, under the warm cover of the *korsi*, or next to the cool water of the *howz* or “pool”. Everyone took what they could from the treasure chest of the elderly’s minds, from the stories of their experiences, from the oral reports of those honest history-makers, so far as they knew, so far as their audience understood. For, in the chest of the mind, depending on our age, knowledge and situation, there lurk a host of experiences and instructive sweet and bitter memories, so that each generation could learn of the path traveled by the one before, and learn from the past experience through the word of mouth.

On a vast scale, large portions of what we know of the historical, religious, scientific, political and social events were passed down through the generations, related time after time by

the word of mouth. That is even true of an important part of the holy *Torah*, which is known as *torah she-be-'al peh*, i.e. *The Oral Torah*. In many ways, there's no difference between the *Written* vs. the *Oral Torah*. Indeed, the Jewish daily prayer known as the *Shema*, "Hear O Israel", which consists of several excerpts from the *Written Torah*, advises us unequivocally to talk about the included topics with our children even as we sit, walk, rest, go to sleep, or rise. We may not offer precise dates or concrete documents to support every oral religious tale or report and their likes. But we can all **ignore the speaker to focus on the words**, and everyone can make their conclusion from those words, depending on their mental capacity and analytical powers.

Over their 2700 years of life in the Persian land, the Jews of Iran, this last remaining undivided, intact and authentic portion of the Jewish world, have been through many ups and downs, endured much discrimination, and suffered countless catastrophes. Finally, a sudden jerk and colossal transformation in the recent decades led to the emigration of a large share of our people from Iran. Among its positive outcomes, that big change let us gain the freedom of expression, allowing us to write freely and to translate what we write into other languages. As such, this author believes that **who was born in the age of the Diaspora** in any of the many lands such as Yemen, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia or Europe, **including in Iran, and our immigrants in particular, they bear the obligation and carry the mission to write and translate their irreplaceable memories**, theirs and those of their ancestors, whether written or oral, read or heard, documented or the word of mouth, as memorabilia for the coming generation and generations to come.

Some people may question the necessity of knowing about the past, and its potential benefits for the future generation.

Our answer is quite clear: It's our duty to inform of that past, yours and mine, especially since the old seditious instructions, discrimination, the causes for the miseries and those who carry out the tragedies, they are still around, better equipped than ever before. And because to be aware of, and learn from, the good and bitter experiences of those who came before us, it's the best way to keep the coming generations awake. Who is ignorant of his past, he's bound to suffer frustration over and over again. **"Don't expect grapes of wheat from the barley seeds, / For you'll reap what you sowed."** We are duty-bound to inform the next generation and to keep

them alert, the more so because we the immigrants have certain means at our disposal which couldn't be dreamt of a mere generation ago.

Such beasts as the cursed Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Mussolini, even the neighborhood grocer who used to insult you and me, they all faded into dust, yet their aides and followers, their evil philosophies and even worse ideas, they perpetuate in our time. The short-sighted people imagine that the cruelty of discrimination afflicts only the religious minorities who live and suffer among them. Whereas any majority, including them, could some day, somewhere, turn into a minority and be subjected to ruthless discrimination. For an evident case in point, consider the vast flight of 700,000 members of the Muslim minority of Myanmar, formerly Burma, to the uninhabitable areas of their neighboring and less endowed country of Bangladesh, where they've descended to subsist in the worst of conditions, marching the mud. I'm reminded of the tale of a poor mother who explained her tears, "My children are about to come back from school, but I've got nothing at home to feed them!" At that moment, her neighbor broke into tears and she said, "You're better off than I am. I've got children, I've got no food, and guests are coming!" Poor Bangladesh, for besides its own many troubles, it has to host so many guests, too! Surprisingly, the seditious elements don't seem to realize that whereas Muslims, with a global population that exceeds 1.6 billion, live largely in 50 Muslim and often rich states, to speak of a "Muslim minority" is rather meaningless!

The concept of "minority" is a relative, regional and alterable concept. Only some intellectual myopics can be deluded to think that death only befalls their proverbial neighbors, and they generate hatred accordingly, unaware that corruption can grow anywhere and anytime, and on that note, it surely won't discriminate between people! The bacteria of tuberculosis have been the same for the past thousand years, except that they've grown more resistant over time. Likewise, the ancient virus of hostility toward the minorities has become ever more resistant. And it has no treatment or preventive measure other than the vaccine of "humanity", to be aware of what it is to be "human", and to teach and spread this quality. We can't prevent the storm, but we may diminish its damage substantially. Experience shows that the ship of minorities can't be immune to the harm of wind, but it could put the collective experience to good use, adjust the sails in time, adapt to the wind, and spare itself from wreckage and drowning. I take the opportunity to ask everyone but especially the parents to buy *Comprehensive History of the Jews*

*of Iran, the Outset of the Diaspora*¹, a pioneering book by the late Dr. Habib Levy, substantially revised and published in both Persian² and English, from Ketab Corporation, Los Angeles,³ and to ask their youngsters to study it. A major portion of this important historical book consists of those very oral reports passed down to us through the generations.

Allow me to relate some word of mouth from my ancestors, or to be exact, what was said between **my grandfather Agha Raphael Gabay** and **his grandfather Mordecai “Morad” Gabay**, more than five generations ago.

**O friends,
Hear the tale of my distress,
The saga of my secret sorrow.
For how long to cover up this soul-burning fire?
Help! For I’m burning!
For how long to hide this secret?**

Kashan is one of Iran’s most ancient cities, and the oldest “Jewish city” of the country, that is, a city with once a sizeable Jewish population. My grandfather Agha Raphael Gabay’s house in Kashan consisted of two sections known as the *Outer* and *Inside* areas. The Inside house was completely deserted, and we the children weren’t allowed to go there. They called this desolate area The House of Bakhajeh, “The Grandpa’s House”, i.e. the house of my great-great-grandfather.

One day, Agha Raphael pointed to a room in the deserted house and said, “When I was young, I noticed a wooden board lying there on the floor. I lifted it. To my surprise, there gaped at me a well with dark smoked walls! I asked my grandfather Mordecai, ‘What’s a well doing at the middle of a room?!’”

¹ Levy, Dr. Habib: *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran, the Outset of the Diaspora*; rev. & ed. 1997, Dr. Hooshang Ebrami; tr. George W. Maschke, 1999, Mazda Publishers, & The Cultural Foundation of Habib Levy. (Original publication in Persian, 1956-60, Tehran, Iran.) Also,

² لوی، دکتر حبیب: *تاریخ جامع یهودیان ایران*؛ بازنوشتۀ دکتر هوشنگ ابرامی، 1997، بنیاد فرهنگی حبیب لوی. (نسخه اصلی، چاپ 1956-1960).

³ www.ketab.com

Mordecai “Morad” Gabay, my ancestor from 5th generations ago, sighed in pain and told his grandson, “The era of discrimination was rife with miseries. There was oppression, with no help in sight. In the past, burglars, road bandits, rebels, hooligans, thugs and hoodlums, they didn’t violate the Zoroastrian and Jewish homes just to pilfer their properties. Those beasts came to kidnap the girls and young mothers. They took them away, and they left the families in eternal grief. Alas, the local guards and night watches in charge of protecting the city were complicit in these crimes. And there was no help in sight. **“You can’t ask of the Why and How, / For where the Giant’s attacked, reason and virtue are excused.”** If we got the news of the thieves in town, we’d hide our girls and young mothers in this well or in the narrow underground tunnels. The dark soot that you see on the walls of the well, it’s from when the thieves found the wells: **they would set fire to old clothes and throw them into the wells to suffocate our loved ones.”**

Mordecai continued, “My own grandfather related that when the Jews of Kashan gathered to welcome Shah Abbas the Safavid, the king saw among them a handsome young boy from the family “A.”, and he told his guards, ‘Bring this child to the court!’ The poor parents never heard of their child again!” This very Shah Abbas, who carries the historic title of “Great”, he had his son Safi Mirza’s throat slit and blinded his two other sons, Imam Gholi Mirza and Muhammad Mirza – so that they couldn’t claim the throne! (Cf. the book in Persian by Dr. Massoud Askari Sarvestani.) What things he won’t do to the others, who committed incest with his mother? Did we not see in our time how Saddam Hussein killed his sons-in-law and his own grandchild? Is there another story better documented and more tragic than these accounts? May I add that there was also a narrow escape tunnel underneath our own house in Kashan, at the depth of about 20 meters below the courtyard, through which a person could crawl and struggle for about 100 meters to reach their Jewish neighbors’ home.

Do not imagine that such calamities befell just one city, one country, or one minority. Read the history to learn what crown of shame has ominous religious hatred mounted on humanity! Look at our world today. Somewhere every day, bearing another name, new disasters are taking place. I wonder if it’s been the way of the world, then what to do about the civilization? Which people, which government, the followers of which religion, which family or individual, and by which criteria, could be evaluated and deemed civilized? **Václav Havel**, the philosopher and former Czech president, offered the best answer of all sages, when he said in effect, **We could**

measure a people's or a government's degree of civilization by how they treat the minorities among them. On a personal scale, how an employer treats his employee, how spouses treat one another, or how the lady of the house treats her housemaid, these could be used to measure those individuals' degree of civilization.

Even as I agree with Mr. Havel, I also believe in yet another criterion to recognize people's civilization or even their humanity, and that is to discover their convictions and to judge them according to the balance of their comprehension. Could we deem someone "civilized" or "humane" who according to their own beliefs, won't allow as much as the right to live for who thinks differently than they do? Many years later, my childhood playmate laughed and said to me, "Back then, my grandmother used to give us a razor and ask us, 'When you go to the homes of the Jewish neighbors, slash their curtains and clothes!'" Even as today, the textbooks (*sic!*) of Iranian schools and other countries teach certain seditious content against the followers of other religions, including that "They are some animals like pigs!" Indeed, what else but "sedition" could we expect from a generation that was taught in such cultures? Guns and canons can never detoxify and purify the poisoned minds that were raised in such so-called religious cultures all around the world.

Religions, nations, teachers and families could be called "civilized" only when they bring up civilized children, devoid of all hatred and prejudice. The world continues to ignore that any one deviant adherent of religion can be far more dangerous than an atomic bomb; and that the effect won't go away until the cause is uncovered. **"Seal the river at the source by a mere shovel, / For once it overflowed, good luck blocking it with an elephant!"** Here, the institution of family stares at us with its effective role in eliminating the essence of sedition and replacing it with the love of people, in the civilized generations, a fundamental role that could transform the world. The world has no more need for military coalitions, but instead, it's wanting of alliances directed by the families to rear people and to teach and cultivate humanity.

We'd better take a break and sing along with our dear artists of *rāz-e khelghat*, i.e. "*The Secret of Creation*", with the words of the late poet, Moeini Kermanshahi...

Part II

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**I have a question, O God, the Omnipotent,
Who knows our thoughts:
When writing the fates of us earthlings,
What share of the vast creation did you
Assign to the residents of skies?
O exalted Judge! O King of certainty,
Who paints upon the carpet of the earth!
I must search your Seven Heavens on the wings of thought.
I must check up-close your stars and planets, one by one.
I must travel much, to Venus and Jupiter —
For perhaps the Sun sheds on them a different light.
So that perhaps somewhere in the skies,
At the heart of those stars,
I may find a piece of humankind's quest.
Maybe there, life's far from this hubbub.
Maybe there, peace and cool honesty
Will find their meaning...⁴**

Maybe there, peace and cool honesty will find their meaning...

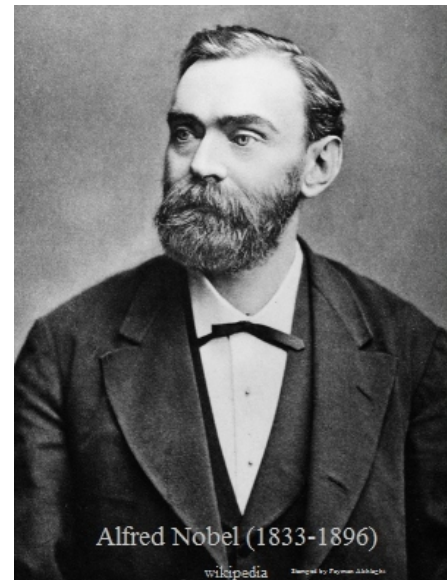
The world has yet to realize that “killing people” is no solution, but the solution is in “making the people”! Humankind is not born “human”, but it’s the proper upbringing that makes us into “humans”; whereas the same person might turn into something worse than a “beast” if reared improperly! To presume that the more and the stronger are their killing machines, the more successful are the governments — it’s no more than holding onto the tried and tired ways of the days of savagery, to a mindset that has not and will not bring peace to humanity. In

⁴ This is an English rendition of an excerpt from *rāz-e khelghat* or *Secret of the Creation*, a song in Persian, with lyrics by Rahim Moeini Kermanshahi, composed by Anoshirvan Rohani, and performed by Ms. Mahasti.

contrast, within merely two to three generations, with the participation of all governments and especially the religions, we could raise a civilized generation. And the first step to realize this dream is to throw away the seditious words and inciting writings, along with those who teach and promote them.

A short account of the life of Alfred Nobel and his lasting scientific initiative would be relevant to our discussion.

Alfred Nobel (1833-1896) is known as the founder of the Nobel Foundation, and the eternal motivator and supporter of the scientists of the world. He discovered and introduced dynamite for industrial applications, but against the wishes of this scientist, many governments abused this compound to kill people. When Alfred's brother, Ludvig, passed away, the newspapers wrote by mistake that "Alfred Nobel, the messenger of death, is dead!" Alfred read the news and said, "I saw today how posterity will be judging me!" To remedy such notoriety, he decided to create an everlasting institution in his name to help promote science, peace and economy across the world — and today, every scientist dreams of earning for themselves this glorious international award.



Alfred Nobel said in practice that, "I did not intend to kill people, but it's been my goal and dream to advocate humanity by encouraging the meritorious people all over the world. The world is wanting of promoting humanity, and not the spread of homicide."

The philosophy of the religion is about building bridges instead of walls. But at times, some of those who thought differently were afflicted by self-grandeur and narcissism; and under the motto of "My God is the only God!" they drew baseless lines between them and the others, separating their religion, sect, temple and *mullah* from those of the other religions and traditions. Perhaps inadvertently, they've brought about some mind-boggling results, so far as even in the modern America, in most every city and on most every street, several churches can be found standing close to each other. Named after one or another Christian sect, they each sing their own

song, even though they all follow the same book. The most important feature common to all such groups and temples amid their variety is to collect more money and to recruit larger crowds. Also, we who since a hundred years ago, had our own “Seven-Synagogue Alley” in the Jewish neighborhood of Tehran, thanks God, by an increasing rate, have become the proud owners of tens of synagogues almost facing each other — and that’s just within two streets in only two cities in America! Such people seem to be unaware that, **“Egotism is the ladder of this world, / And at the end, this ladder shall fall.”** And the rest could not be said!

Once upon a time, a new-money asked a bookseller, “I’ve heard many nice things about that book. Please send 100 copies of it over to my home, along with the bill.” The bookseller took the books to the gentleman’s house, received his money, and wondered about the ignorance of his inexperienced customer, who didn’t know that no matter how exciting a book was, you wouldn’t need more than one copy to read it! Why the pretense, and for whom? Those many volumes could only take the valuable space away from other useful books in the man’s library. By the way, what did happen to our synagogues on the Seven-Synagogue Alley, after we migrated to the northern Tehran, and later, to North America? What a strange world we live in...

I asked a sage about the world.

He said, “It’s either a wind, a legend, or a dream.”

I asked, “What about those who’re in love with it?”

He said, “They’re either asleep, drunk, or downright mad.”

They asked a lady, “What’s the difference between the American synagogues and those of Tehran?” She said, “The American synagogues have a trifle more Americans!” The Seven-Synagogue Alley, like the shops-turned-temples of today, lacked in loud-speakers and parkings! Of course, back then, also the bride couldn’t leave the house if she didn’t have a *chador*, i.e. a traditional cloak! But what excuse do we have today?! Many a person whose body exists in the 21st century, but whose thoughts remain behind in the Seven-Synagogue Alley. They don’t realize that “a thriving village is better than ten arid cities!” Needless to say, nobody is against building synagogues, this secret of the Jewish survival through the ages of Diaspora. But we emphasize that synagogues should be built to the extent that they are needed. Let’s keep in mind that the *quality* takes precedence over the *quantity*!

The late **Moussa Kermanian**, a Jewish community philanthropist, used to tell a fine story. “The storm cast a sailor and his boat onto an uninhabited island. His boat wrecked into pieces, the man was forced to survive on the island alone for years. Then one day, a large ship happened to sail by, and its captain saw and saved the stranded man. The castaway thanked the captain, showed him around the island, and told him all about the ordeal that he had been through for so many years. The captain noticed two similar shacks built on the opposite sides of the island. Asked why, the sailor explained, “Oh, I’m Jewish, and I built these two synagogues for myself to pray!” “But you were here all by yourself, so why build two?” Wondered the captain. The sailor explained, “So that each time I got cross with one synagogue, I could go to the other!” Perchance, could it have been the philosophy behind the Seven-Synagogue Alley or today’s multitude of synagogues?! Let’s hope that the adherents of all religions will be concerned with the content, not the title and cover — and that it won’t be like every *mullah* will get to have their own temple and followers. Indeed, some adherents of the monotheistic religions seem to be stuck back in the ancient cultures of the times of revelation!

Conclusion

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Sadly, there has been much oppression in the guise of religion, and alas, the trend continues to this day.

Einstein said to effect, “Insanity is to repeat something over and over again and to expect different results!” Surprisingly, hate-mongers everywhere, despite millennia of experience, continue to expect better results from their old shameful acts. **A fool** told his friend, “I’ve been to that Indian movie ten times so far, you know, the one where the actor slips and falls into the pool!” His friend asked, “I know, it’s a cool film. But is it really ten times cool?!” The fool explained, “I had to see if the guy would finally watch his step before he’d fall into the pool!” **Newton** said, “I am capable of calculating the movements of the heavenly objects, but I cannot measure human insanity.” **A student** asked Einstein, “Herr Professor, aren’t these physics questions the same as we were asked on the finals last year?” **Einstein** said, “Indeed, but the answers have changed!”

Alas, humanity has yet to learn from the bitter history of religious hatemongering. And sadly, humankind doesn't notice that the world and our understanding of things, in step with the philosophy of life, they change and evolve constantly — and this ignorance is an extension of the mentality of the Stone Age.

Oppression and cruelty emerge every day in some new guise: One day in the Christian world, as in the era of Inquisition, but another, under the brand of Nazism. One day in the name of “Islamic extremism”, but another in a radical form — and against the explicit and repeated commands of the *Holy Torah* that instructed us to “love our kind” and to “choose life”. One day in the name of Fascism, and another in the name of Communism or Anarchism — but altogether, always bearing the flag of a fossil, the fossil of **Fanaticism!** Can we imagine an end to this disaster?

As we study the bloody pages of the history of religions, as we listen to our ancestors' oral reports, and as we take into account today's tragic events, we come to realize that **humankind has acted against his own interests and in spite of the philosophy of “the knowledge of God”** — which at the end is about “the knowledge of self”. Humankind has traveled too far and has invested too much on the path of religion, beyond all needs, to the extent that many believers still approve of being cruel to the others, even killing them, in order to serve and advocate their own God! They've gone astray so far as for thousands of years, far more than attending to sciences and economy, they've been building giant temples, one after another, particularly in Asia and Europe, to induce awe and fear in the hearts of men — edifices which for the time being have turned mostly into interesting historic sites and tourist attractions! Thence, it shouldn't come as a surprise when billions of people around the world instead of being productive, they've become burdens to governments and peoples, and they rely no more on their own hands, but instead they pray and beg of God! Thence, the word “God” rather than being their support, has become their weakness.

Too little knowledge can move us away from God, while lots of knowledge blended with morality and a correct understanding of the religion, they can bring us closer to God. Unfortunately, besides the many huge temples erected through the ages, we can't find that many academic centers from those periods that were dedicated to the promotion of sciences and economy, these sources of peace and progress for humankind. This went so far as a sign was

posted above the gate of the historic Nezamyeh of Baghdad, one of the most accredited religious academies of its time, which read, **“The rational sciences are not allowed entry!”** Regrettably, that warning remains mounted above the gates of all extremist schools today, and the reasonable people, and all others who were hurt by the extremist religions, read it and suffer. As the poet said, **“The flower, in all softness, drinks from the mud, / And the wise man grieves for the ignorant!”**

At the end, with difference to a poem by **Rahi Mo’ayyeri**,

**Why cry in vain before who hasn’t known pain?
Better spill my heart before the one with a big heart.
Behind the mask, I burn like the petals,
And in the chest, I boil like the wine:
I’m no disgraced candle to cry in the gathering.
First, I’ll think to choose a task, but then
I’ll void all thought by a cup of the wine.**

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