

I Think, Therefore I Am

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Oral History, that is, a collection of personal accounts and surviving documents, often in the form of vibrant audio and video recordings made of first-hand recounts of distant memories or received quotes, speak of the instructive realities of past life and experiences, as they were lived. Let us appreciate and be grateful for the elderly of our societies, and let us place them at the prominent position which they truly deserve.

Before I'll share with you an exciting and informative episode from the history of the Jews of Kashan in the times of the Safavid Dynasty, I find it appropriate to dedicate a few lines to Kashan's Jewish ghetto and the city.

The word **Kashan** is said to be a diminution of *Kay-Ashian*, i.e. “The House of Kaykavous”. Kashan is one of Iran's oldest cities, with a proportionately old Jewish population, a fact which is evident from a 1400 year old living proof: **the dialect of the Jews of Kashan**. The Kashani Jewish dialect, like the Jewish dialects of Esfahan, Hamedan, and those of a few other Iranian cities which once hosted a sizable Jewish population, has its roots in the Zoroastrian language, which was spoken before the Arab invasion of Iran. There are no Arabic words found in these dialects, which goes to show that those Jews who survived the Arab invasion preserved their millennia-old local Zoroastrian language.

I once asked a young *tombak*-player sitting next to me in a party as to where he was from. “Abyaneh,” he said, “an astounding city located about 54 miles from Kashan. The color of its soil is inclined toward red, and the town has its own special customs and traditions.” I had heard that the residents of Abyaneh, as those of many of the other Iranian towns and villages before the Arab invasion, had all been Jewish, and that they all spoke the Kashani Jewish dialect.

I began to speak to the young musician in the Jewish dialect. Surprised, he asked in the same language, “Are you from Abyaneh, too? Which clan?” We continued to speak. I asked him, “Do you know that like so many other Iranian Muslims, you come from Jewish roots; and like the

Iranian Jews, you're more Persian than most other Persians, without realizing it yourself? Before the Arab invasion, the people of Iran were mostly Zoroastrian or Jewish, and it's ironic that today's anti-Zoroastrians and anti-Semites of the country aren't aware of their own origins. In truth, 'they fight themselves and trouble everyone.' The language that we're speaking even as now is the same as the pre-Islamic Zoroastrian language, which could be considered a living proof for this claim."

He said, "Our elders tell us that we're either *Gebr* (Zoroastrian) or *Jeyd* (Jewish)." I paused briefly before I replied, "Your religion was Judaism, and your language Zoroastrian, which you continue to speak to date. So let me prove it to you with one word that you were a *Jeyd!*" So while we were talking to each other like two Kashani Jews, I asked him, "Do you use the word *mehila* in your colloquy?" "Yes," he said. "And may I ask what it means?" "It means, 'Forgive me,'" he said. To which I replied, "*Mehila* is a Hebrew word; it found its way to our language from Hebrew, not from Arabic, Zoroastrian, or Persian." We shook hands, laughed, and enjoyed the remainder of the conversation. We also remembered one of Iran's best authors, the late Moti-oddoleh Hejazi and his book *The Mirror*.

Alas, all languages have a lifetime, and our dialect is no exception to this rule, as it has been gradually disappearing over the years. Two lifetimes are needed for the likes of the late Professor Amnon Netzer, our old friend, to be born, who could examine more than ever before the bloody stories of Iranian ethnicities, and to unearth them from the rubble of history. Once we study Iranian history, and the sad treatment of our compatriot Jews in the hands of most Persian kings and rulers, we would realize that despite certain shortcomings, that generation of Iranian Jews who were born during the Pahlavi Dynasty has been the most fortunate. I recommend that we read history as much as possible; presumably, prophets would tell us of the future, but history is a prophet that reports to us of the past. Let's spend more time with our senior citizens to learn more from them about bygone days, **because to make a better future you need to know your past.**

The memories and informative experiences of nations are as old as their history and their lands. The Zoroastrian, Jewish and Armenian people are among the oldest of all social groups in Iran, and every Iranian may learn from their experiences.

As a child, I grew up in the heydays of the Jewish population of Kashan, when the families were still identified by their older nicknames or last names. The **400-year old Moushi-Shahi** family was one of them, As I recall, one member of this family, Mr. Yousef, was the *shammāsh* or the caretaker of the largest synagogue of the city, known as Mollāh Mikhāil Temple. By then, together with his brother Mirzā, they had chosen **Aharonian** as their newly registered last name, the name by which their grandchildren are known today in Los Angeles and Israel. Curiously, as far as I've studied, few people know the origins of their traditional surname, whose story has the potential to be made into an interesting movie. (I'll do some further research for the film.)

The connotation of the **Moushi-Shahi** surname goes back to a dramatic story which took place in the Safavid period. The account that has reached to us bespeaks of the wisdom of a couple named **Sarah** and **Mosheh**, combined with some guess work which points to their astonishing common sense and apt timing. It calls for much boast and praise, not the least since it happened during the cruel and tyrannical reign of Shah Abbās the Safavid.

Shah Abbās, very much liked the city of Kashan and its spring of the Feen Village, so much that he had a large garden and a court built near this spring, considered today as a historic site. The spring is perhaps as old as 2000 years, and it continues to date to burst and flow. During the Pahlavi dynasty, it became a tourism and recreation site, open to the public, including the Jews, and many stories about it have reached to us. Shah Abbās lived in that garden, and eventually, he died in Kashan. His remains were buried in a place called *Mash-had-e Ghāli-shourān*,

To gain a better understanding of the tyrannical nature of this anti-Semitic king and his ruthless treatment of his subjects, let us consider a passage from *Jahān-e Fardā yā Rouh-e Tārikh*, "Tomorrow's World or the Spirit of History", written by Dr. Ezzat-ollah Homayounfar (p. 123), where we read, and I paraphrase, "A calligrapher lived in the times of Shah Abbās, whose pen did marvels, unprecedented in every way. His name was Mir-Emād, and he was apparently inclined toward the Sunni branch of Islam." Shah Abbās, a Shiite, ordered an assassin to murder Mir-Emād at his home, even though Sunni and Shiite were merely two branches of the same religion. Just notice the blindness of the abhorrent prejudice. The assassin goes to Mir-Emād's house, on the pretense of having lunch with him. The beast eats his lunch, then he murders his innocent host, so that the table-cloth that had served him as the guest becomes drenched in the poor man's blood. He takes Mir-Emād's head to the king to quench the tyrant's

thirst of prejudice. Meanwhile, the king of India sends a message to Shah Abbās, asking him to forgive Mir-Emād, and to send him to India in return for as much gold as the artist's weighs. Alas, the news has arrived too late.

On another occasion, Shah Abbās, ironically known for his fanatical adherence to his religion and his efforts to promote it, became suspicious of the ambitions of his own son, Safī Mirzā, to dethrone him; and subsequently, he ordered his hangman to behead the son! Soon enough, a remorseful king regretting the execution of his own son, asked the unfortunate hangman to behead *his* son, presumably to balance things out. The hangman did just that, and he was rewarded by the king's grace. (In recent times, we've heard of Saddam Hussein, a tyrant who built a mosque and wrote holy verses on its walls in his own blood; who also murdered his son-in-laws, and as it appears, his grandchild.)

As if that wasn't enough, Shah Abbās also had his two other sons blinded, to make sure that Gholi Mirzā and Mohammad Mirzā would not be tempted to become the king.

According to the standard *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran* by Dr. Habib Levy, and *A Social History of Kashan* by Hasan Naraghi, during the reign of Shah Abbās, a governor named Mohammad Beyk Etemad-oddoleh beheaded 150 Jews of Kashan within a day, because they had refused to convert to Islam, forcing thousands of other Jews to convert. To this day, an alley named *Koocheh-yeh Jadidha*, i.e. "The Alley of the New Converts", located at the heart of the Jewish ghetto of Kashan, has remained as a painful reminder of those cruel times. Meanwhile, what he did to Zoroastrians and Armenians would justly deserve a dedicated essay. Altogether, we are led to wonder whether the commandment "*Thou Shall Not Murder!*", accepted unequivocally by all religions, was meant to be taken with *Ifs*, *Buts*, and *Maybes*? All generations ought to remember what a poet once noted, that:

The stories written on straw-woven carpets

Were inscribed by the feet of bygone friends.

How could we expect any different other than ruthless cruelty, and deep-seated animosity toward his fellow humans, from someone who had incest with his mother? He commanded that whoever drank wine should be killed; even though at times, he used to walk around the town

disguised as a modest *Dervish*, complete with the *axe & the kashkool*, calling out *ya-hoo! ya-hagh!*, making casual visits to various neighborhoods.

Thus, about 400 years ago, one Friday evening at sunset, the king disguised as a poor *dervish* made an excursion to the Jewish ghetto of Kashan. He knocked, and Sarah opened the door. The smart lady, who had recognized the king on the spot, invited him respectfully to the Shabbat dinner, and she managed to whisper to her husband Mosheh, “Moushi, *Shah!*” Mosheh made some room next to himself for the dervish-clad king. The curious eyes of the king roamed around the room, until they landed on a cup of wine placed on the table-cloth spread on the floor for the Shabbat dinner. Mosheh lifted the cup with quivering hands, said the special prayer, smelled the wine, and placed the cup back on the cloth.

The “dervish” asked, “Why didn’t you drink from the cup?” Mosheh replied softly, “Haven’t you heard? The king has ordered that anyone who drinks wine should be killed. So we Jews only smell the wine, instead of drinking it, to fulfill his majesty’s decree, since our religion commands us that wherever we live, we should obey the laws of that state, and the orders of the king precede our own traditions. We are even obligated to pray for the king and the heads of the State every Saturday in the presence of our Holy Torah.” Then he proceeded to translate the exact text of that prayer.

As the Persian poet Sa’di said,

When there’s no escape route left

The hand pulls out the sword to guard the head.

The politically savvy Mosheh and the wise Sarah, like the thousands of Mosheh’s and Sarah’s of our time, using their sharp intellect instead of relying on meaningless prayers and superstitions, not only succeeded to save their own lives and those of their children, but also saved their entire community from definite danger.

Thus, considering the power of the mind, I ask those who teach and promote the superstitious elements of religions, “When we can’t make the times fit to our children, let us prepare the children for their time.” Before religious observance, we should aim first to raise the youngsters as wise, thinking, and vigilant people. They ought to grow to become rational people, capable of

thinking critically for themselves, instead of some religious parrots, some blind imitators; for where there's intellect, there would be logic, too. As the poet said,

Wisdom sent a messenger to Wealth:

“I'd like for us to become friends!”

Wealth answered, “No need, dear,

For wherever I'll be, you must be there too.”

As it's been said, **Wise people solve problems, while the genius prevent problems from taking place.** The “Moushi-Shahi” couple certainly belonged to the ranks of such geni.

It's said in *Pirkey Avot*, “Chapters of the Fathers”, and I paraphrase, “Dear God, if you didn't give a person the gift of intellect, whatever did you give? And whomever you blessed with the gift of intellect, whatever did you not give?” The gift of intellect is a gift of everything.

May I add, “God, whatever didn't you give a person, whom you blessed with a wise spouse? And whatever did you give the one whom you deprived from a wise spouse?”

It's said that Solomon was asked three questions at his death bed: *How did you find the world?* The worse of the worst. *Which is the best way to live?* To live without need, and without fame. And finally, the question that is worth volumes, *Who was the worst person whom you met in your life?* **Those who judged without knowing the facts.**

Alas, we run into so many people who keep running judgment on all kinds of topics, even make decisions based on their judgments, without a working knowledge of those subjects. My friends! This humble doesn't have the right to run judgments or issue verdicts; but as with everyone else, he has the right to express his opinion. He believes that we humans, before our familial, religious, ethnic, national, racial, or other categorical identities, we all share in a common human identity. A proper understanding of this colorless and unmarked identity could somehow make us all share in the common pool of life; and it could lead to the comfort and welfare of humankind, and lasting global peace, devoid of all arbitrary discriminations.

My friends! Those who came before us were akin to trembling mud-straw bridges that provided for our safe passage. Instead of erecting a wall of separation called Religion, and

instead of following the nonsense attributed to it, let us keep step with today's sciences. Let us be a firmer bridge than our forefathers were, a modern bridge, updated with the latest scientific measurements, so that the future generations would have a safer journey than we had.

Let us be warned: a one-sided dogmatic personality is tantamount to evading reason; and the peak of the achievements of religious regressors and fanatics would certainly overthrow the rule of reason; and it would end the independence of states, religions and families. Let's be rational in our convictions and beliefs, and let's be moderate in our practice, so that regression and hypocrisy won't find a chance to take hold.

No religion ever benefited from pretensions, blind imitation, or inherited religious and sectarian hatred. Let's avoid sycophants, as it's said,

In the school of religions

People are of two types:

Either the tricksters and hypocrites,

Or those played by the tricksters.

There's no other way in the court of life:

Either "think", or "stay in this prison."

Reality doesn't present itself so readily. We need to be realistic, so that as the people of Shiraz say, we could understand "what happened that this happened?!"

The hereditary nature of religions, the fact that we're often born into them, should not be taken to mean that we must turn a blind eye to the realities of the day, or raise our children as some mindless followers, in the name of a sect or a religion. My address to the teachers and advocates of religious nonsense and superstitions is as follows: schools, seminaries and textbooks are capable to contribute to world peace, more than all armies combined. Think reasonably. As a poet said,

A wise man never builds a house,

Which could be ruined by a sneeze.

You weave a web, only to be swept away.

You draw a design, which could be tarnished.

You make a pillar, but it's frail and broken,

And draw great pictures, sadly on the water.

Putting my trust in your well-meaning, I would add that you're building schools and seminaries. They are good, flourishing, joyous, all admirable in their own right. But who's going to be the teacher? Does he or she follow today's advanced culture, or the nonsense attributed to the religion? What do you teach in those classrooms, other than some millennia-old separatist words, utterly out of synch with today's science, culture, and sophisticated comprehension?

Believe me that all people and societies, including this humble, will be on your side in unison, if you join hands with the adherents of all other religions to wipe away the superficial layers of holiness from the religious nonsense and superstitions, and instead, promote kindness; and if you only teach at your schools reasonable religious commandments, combined with modern science, and devoid of divisive animosities. Today's sincerely faithful parents are happy that they are sending their children to good schools; but they are oblivious to the fact that the school itself is no more than some walls and windows, some bricks and mortar. Pay attention. Find out what are they teaching to your children? Religious observance does not mean a culture of discrimination and animosity.

A reasonable religion means to be open-minded, rational, in step with modern science and civilization. Even the rebellion led by Moses was meant to fight superstitions, witchcraft, psychic forecasting, and other such nonsense. Only if the advocates of superstitions, instead of spewing senseless quotes, had the courage to tell the truth, that their insignificant words were their own ideas, and those of their like-minded colleagues; only if they would stop polluting the religion. The philosophy of religion was about forming unity between scattered members of humanity; and not generating conflicts to tear apart the chain of humanity. Hillel the Great said, "Whenever in doubt about the practice of a Commandment, ask your own reason." I warn that to support and to defend the superstitions in the name of promoting the religion is to support all sorts of regressions. Today, the culture of regression is shaking the foundations of families, even those of states. Let's stay vigilant and resolve senseless animosities, known in Hebrew as *sin'at chinam*;

and let's consider the extent of possibilities available to every single member of the society. **Nature dictates that life's troubles are certain to happen; therefore, it's up to us to think in advance and be prepared.**

I think therefore I am.

We think therefore we are. The intellect of the likes of Sarah, and the subtle diplomatic skills of her husband Mosheh, and a variety of humane and cultural bonds have kept together and continue to preserve all societies; not the superstitions attributed to religions. Otherwise, again as the poet said,

You make a pillar, but it's frail and broken,

And you draw great pictures, sadly on the water.

A friend asked, "Which one of your articles do you like most?" I said, the next one, and here we go: until the next one.

To receive a copy of this article, and the book, *Invitation to Reason* in Persian or English, please visit: www.BabaNouri.com .Thank you.