

A Biography of Norman “Nourollah” Gabay

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Question: Dear Mr. Gabay, please tell us of your early days.

I, Norman “Nourollah” Gabay, was born in 1308 of the Persian calendar, 1929 C.E., to Morad Gabay and Morvarid Khanom Shoraka, in the city of Kashan, Iran. I received my elementary school education at The Alliance of Kashan, better known as The Agha Yeghouthi-El School in honor of its founder. When I was 12, my family and I moved to Tehran, where I started work in a company that imported goods from Europe, while I enrolled myself in the evening classes of Alborz, and next Arya; and a few years later, I received my high school diploma from the evening schools. Thereafter, I’ve remained mostly self-taught, and I recommend that others too allow themselves a larger role for self-education. A person who’s used to educate himself or herself is like a honey bee that collects nectar from every flower; and given their inner interest, they can learn by themselves even more than they might through a university education.

After seven years of office work and gathering much experience including in international commerce, I began several ventures all by myself and without help from the family. In 1953, I got married to my wife, Mahboubeh Khanom, the daughter of Mrs. Touba and Mr. Rahim Chadorchi; and three sons were born to us, Kamran, Mehran and Arman. I admit that my life is summed up in my love of my children and grandchildren.

Question: What was your first major business initiative?

Following my years in the office and wholesale supervision, in 1955 I set sail via Europe to New York, the first of my many trips so far to 42 countries. In New York, with the assistance of Mr. Zion Monasebian, I founded a trade office to import textile from the United States to Iran, which achieved considerable success in its own right. About that time, I suggested to my wife to

relocate our young family to the United States, but my family disagreed emphatically with the idea.

After this 9-month trip to New York, as I focused my persistent efforts on domestic and foreign trade, I established three retail centers; a workshop to produce blankets and wall-to-wall carpets in the worker's district of Majidieh; and the first factory in Iran to produce "hassir" rugs made of plastic straws, which I named Iran Tatami, in the industrial city of Alborz; all of which projects achieved major success. Besides, every year, I purchased a piece of real-estate for investment. Unfortunately, after the 1979 Revolution, 99% of what I owned were confiscated under the pretext of "owner's absence". These included 15 pieces of real-estate, three retail stores, one workshop and one factory with its products, besides a residential house in the suburb of Shahrak Gharb.

Question: Please tell us about the early years of immigration and the effect of the confiscations.

Let me quote an aphorism that some attribute to Abraham Lincoln: "The true measure of our wealth is to ask how much we would be worth if we lost all our money." Calm seas won't train skilled swimmers. Considering the troubling outcome of the confiscation of 99% of a person's wealth, mine or others, and yet to see him transform the remaining 1% into major financial or scientific achievements and a better education for the coming generation, this speaks of the individual's self-confidence and personal merits, rather than the presence or loss of the capital.

I had already experienced discrimination first-hand from some of the people around me, and as such, I was constantly concerned about the political, economic, social and security instability in Iran of the time, especially for the Jews of the country. As such, in 1969, I decided to immigrate to either Australia or America. A trip to Australia made me realize that a vibrant social life wouldn't be feasible for our small immigrant family over there. Thus, I applied instead for Green Cards to the American Embassy. In May 1971, together with my family and intent on providing a better education for my children, I came to California, when we were welcomed by the 1971 earthquake! Anyhow, after much hardship, two of my children got enrolled in the Orange County high schools and began their studies in the States.

In 1974, to relocate my production and trade activities from Iran to the United States, I established an industrial company in California, and given my past experience, I hired two

Japanese engineers and founded a factory to produce plastic “hassir” rugs in the city of Anaheim, California. Alas, shortly thereafter, we lost the price war to the cheaper Chinese products, the factory was closed, and its machinery were moved to Iran. In the meantime, the company’s extended production and trade activities continued in Tehran, where the number of its workers amounted to 105 employees.

That precious stability would not last long. In 1978, I was faced with the problems generated by the revolutionary crisis, and like a college student forced to sit at the first grade bench, enduring much damage, we left Iran three months before the revolution, with hopes of returning soon to the country. After a few days in Netherlands, together with my wife and my late father, we arrived in the United States.

On the way from Netherlands to America, my father said, “This is the second time that I’m rendered homeless because of the lack of security. The first time was in 1917, when the Bolsheviks attacked the city of Rasht and burned the Jewish stores, and we were forced to escape south on foot all the way to Qazvin! And today, I’m doing it all over on a plane!”

Only God’s essence knows what games
The trickster of Time will play out tomorrow.

After much hardship, in 1978 we settled in Los Angeles. Shortly afterwards, counting on my children, I began to invest in real-estate, and within a few years, we began our construction efforts which continue to date. About that time, I also offered my idea to produce electricity by harnessing the energy from the highway traffic to the Department of Energy, and following their recommendation and at my own cost, I had a prototype of the system built. The prototype passed the tests with flying flags, proving that my idea was practical, though an expanded production of the system for use by the public has yet to come to fruition.

Question: Could you share with us the difficulties that you may have faced in your family life?

Unfortunately, in 2003, my eldest son Kamran fell ill, and my international efforts to save and cure him went to no avail. Finally, as yet another effort to help him get cured, my wife and I honored his wish and stayed with him in a religious settlement in Israel for 100 days. Despite our best efforts, and to our regret, my dear Kamran lost his persistent eight-month fight to the illness,

and he passed away at the age of 48, leaving behind his six little children. The tragic impact of his untimely death has never left me or my family.

Question: Mr. Gabay, what made you write a book?

First, I think that writing is a job that you learn as you write; the more you write, the better you'll get at it. As to what motivated this novice to write: during those few months in that religious settlement due to my son's illness, I ran into some ponderable ideological dissonance that pertained to the contrast between my interpretation of the religious commandments as opposed to how they were interpreted by the religious extremists. Upon returning to the United States and prompted by such tragic inadequacies, I wrote an open letter in eight pages to the head of the Yeshiva or Jewish Seminary which my late Kamran used to support. The letter was published in the Persian magazine "Shofar of New York." Awhile later, Mr. Shaheri, one of the most effective public servants of our community and the founder of the said magazine, informed me that the head of Yeshiva University, New York, had read my letter and was interested to talk to me about it. When the respected rabbi called me, I expected him to protest my ideas which stood against those of the orthodoxy. To my surprise, however, not only he praised what I had written, but also he asked for my permission to have it printed in the University bulletin to be read by all students. Naturally, I agreed, and I realized anew,

How could the flower of meaning blossom

If we could not speak out in the world?

Clearly, attentive ears could be found in every group and social layer. Therefore, I decided that even as I would continue to write and publish articles, I would write a book in Persian and make an effort to provide its English translation, as well. The decision led to "Lahazati Baraye Tafakkor" or "Moments of Reflection", which was translated to English as "An Invitation to Reason". More than \$100,000.00 was collected from the checks donated for the book, the total of which I transferred directly to the Bikkur Cholim Hospital.

However, I may add that my interest in writing goes back to long before then. I was 15 when supported by my friend and relative, the late Nourollah Kharrazi, one of our well known authors, I began to attend the weekly meetings of the Persian magazine "Tofigh", and on occasion wrote for them. To date, especially since my retirement, and both before and after the publication of my book, I have printed more than 200 articles in the Persian publications outside Iran, even

though the content and tone of my work were dramatically transformed after the tragic loss of my child.

In many of these essays, I have criticized the continued practice of superstitions, not because I considered myself exceptionally qualified, but since observing the inadequacies all around and watching families fall apart have made me feel responsible to help correct such faults. Whereas I admit the deficiencies of my writings, I point out that the mission of my words has been to make the message understood; and in that regard, I respect everyone including who may disagree with me but understands my words correctly. I believe that humankind is not only a name but the outcome of his deeds, and what he leaves behind in writing will last long and will be judged. People's mistakes may be buried along with them, but the results of their good deeds and publicly useful writings are there to remain.

I have placed most of these articles and the digital version of my book, in many cases together with their English translations, on my website BabaNouri.com for the public to read.

Those interested may further download "The Glossary of the Kashani Jewish Dialect" from the said website. I edited and prepared this book in 2016, with valuable help from Mr. Haroon Soroudi, to preserve the culture of our mother tongue, which is rooted in the old Zoroastrian language, and to honor the late Kharrazi. This comprehensive volume contains both the English and the Persian equivalents of many Kashani-Jewish words and phrases, as well as pronunciation guides. The dialect is possibly thousands of years old, and it's particular to the Jews of Kashan, albeit similar to the Jewish dialects of Hamedan, Shiraz and Isfahan. To put together and publish this volume has been a step toward preserving a record of another portion of the Iranian Jewish oral history for the coming generations.

Question: Please share with us more about your travels since you immigrated to the United States.

To name one, I recall an interesting trip to Mexico together with my son, when we attended the signing ceremonies of the NAFTA between America, Mexico and Canada. During this trip, besides having breakfast with the President in the National Palace of Mexico, I met up-close many sectors of that society, which helped me form a better understanding of their people. That included their good Jewish community, as I could attend the gatherings of five Mexican Jewish

communities, those of the Halabi, Damascusan, American, European and Balkan Jews of Mexico City.

Question: May I ask about your social and cultural activities?

I understand what people go through in exile, I empathize with them, and I feel responsible toward them. Thus, I've made ample effort, whether through my writings or by direct assistance to families and social organizations in various areas, to remove a rock before their feet or a weight off of their shoulders. For instance, in 1982, by the leadership of the late Manouchehr Ghodsian, my dear nephew and one of the public servants of our community, I personally acted to help resettle thousands of immigrants. In this regard, I feel particularly grateful for the cooperation of the late Ghodsian, the details of which are outside the scope of this interview.

In 1986, with help from a number of friends, we founded The Magbit Foundation in Los Angeles, where I initiated the idea of interest-free educational loans granted by this foundation to college and university students. I'm glad to say that to date, the foundation has been able to assist more than 12,000 students in various universities, especially since these students are obligated to pay back their loans. No doubt, given the support of the meritorious members of this foundation, such financial assistance to qualified students will continue into the future.

Since its inception, I've been a member of the Board of Trustees of The Iranian American Jewish Federation of Los Angeles, and at one time, the Vice Chair of the Trustees. In 1990, I personally managed to honor the unique services of Agha Yeghouthi-El and Sara Kashani, who in 1904 had founded The Ettihad (Alliance) School of Kashan, aka The Agha Yeghouthi-El School. To that end, I coordinated and collected aid from my fellow Kashani Jews, and I succeeded in helping build a center to their name, to keep their memories alive and their names preserved.

Furthermore, I was a member of the Advisory Board of The Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History since its foundation about 1995.

Altogether, a significant part of my life has been dedicated to cultural activities, and as of now I try and continue evermore my social and especially cultural services. I believe that culture is a basic measure of people's lives, and that the most important thing which our largely deprived ancestors left for us through much hardship and suffering has been the part which they spent on culture. As a poet said,

I think it's best for friends to drop everything they hold,
And set out on the road to seek culture and knowledge.

Question: How do you see your role toward the future generations?

As I have said and written repeatedly, we are indebted to our forefathers and responsible for our youth and coming generations. To that end, I recently made a large collection of video recordings in English to share decades of memories and experience from my rather adventurous life, which were recalled during many interviews conducted by my grandchildren and Ellis, my great-niece. The videos have been placed on our family YouTube channel, meant especially for my grandchildren, and with hopes that others in the future may also learn from them. I here recommend that each of our friends take a similar step for themselves. I believe that who hasn't left something behind, he has never been. I also believe that the future of our community and society depends on the knowledge and awareness of our children and grandchildren. Who doesn't know the past, they can't make better futures and remain conversant with the world; whereas to keep step with others and with the larger world is deemed so precious a task that the Talmud says, "O havruta, o mituta", that is, "bonding and friendship, or death and annihilation."

Question: It's clear that Religion has been one of your lasting concerns.

My problem is the difference between how I and those who agree with me interpret the religion, versus how the extremists understand it. The problem isn't the religion itself. I believe that the best religion is Humanity, and that the true identity of a person, which precedes his religious, racial and national identities, it's his Human identity, which is common between him and the rest of humankind. We better consider religion as a kind of membership in a club, a matter of free and personal choice, and respect everyone within that framework. The most religious person is who is a better human being.

But as it concerns our global security, sadly, I don't see a bright future ahead of us, because the war of cultures continues to expand in the guise of the war between religions. This catastrophe will end in the long run on the day when humankind will have come to realize that religion means Humanity; and that God means Justice, and Justice means God.

Question: What advice do you have for our friends?

I humbly remind everyone that the unintended mass immigration of our community was not a mere dislocation in space, but it was a leap worth centuries in time. Who knows, maybe someday they'll remember our immigration in its own right, as we speak today of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Today, the glorious success of the Iranian diaspora manifests the outcome of the fusion of the Iranian Ahourai culture with modern culture and civilization. It shows that the universal connection between civilized people today could never agree with religious and national causes and conflicts. These immigrants were the fish who reached the ocean and thereafter swam freely. **And the best proof for any claim is for it to be realized.** Read the press, or take a look at universities, hospitals, or other scientific, economic or social centers. See the successful Iranian youth for yourself, and be the more optimistic about the growing progress of the coming generations of the Iranian diaspora. Meanwhile, let's keep in mind that success is worthwhile only when it's maintained by wisdom and served by a healthy intellect; and let's remember that the true impact of power lies in how we put the power to use.

Let's benefit from the gift of freedom around us, and let's end past mistakes by eliminating what nonsense we've inherited. For, by repeating past errors, we may only expect to suffer the recurrence of past troubles.

It's our mission and duty today, culturally speaking, to bring families up to date with modern science and civilization; and to prevent such means as politics, religion or wealth from hindering the progress of the coming generations, so that they can live better lives, the intellectual gap between them and their contemporary world will be closed, they'll keep in step with time, and they'll make up for past negligence and deprivations by their modern insight. For, a people who remains in the inherited chains of pointless prejudice, they can never stand on their feet; and the children who don't improve on their parents, they'll be deemed dull.

Norman "Nourollah" Gabay

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