

**Speech by Mr. Norman (Nourallah) Gabay at the Gathering of
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Throughout history, the most fruitful changes have taken place wherever a variety of cultures found a chance to co-mingle—the prime example of which is the young America.

Our community has arrived at its present state of freedom after suffering much deprivation. Today, it hopes to make some utterly informed decisions to ensure its present and future progress, even as it tries to preserve its authentic culture. Undoubtedly, one of the major problems before us is to eliminate religious conflicts and prejudices, including religious extremism and the continuing practice of discrimination between men and women.

“To wish” does not equate “to be able to.” True ability can only be achieved by providing those conditions that are necessary to realize our wishes.

The present generation bears much responsibility for the future of our society. We are responsible for supplying the necessary conditions that would enable future generations to benefit from their faith and the advantages of modern civilization, according to their times and potentials.

Fortunately, our religious commandments are by no means as humble as some of the interpretations and commentaries that are heard to this date. For instance, consider those who boast that the Holy Torah was given first to women, but, at the same time, unreasonably forbid women from touching the Torah scrolls or even the curtain of the arc, and prevent girls from having their bat mitzvahs at temples, like boys do.

The Persian poet, Parvin E'tesāmi, put it so beautifully when she said, “Piety is in the purity of the intention, not the dress; how many a corrupt person who's put on clean clothes.”

For centuries, all kinds of religious discrimination have produced many troubling consequences on a global scale. Only recently, some well-meaning religious leaders—from the

Vatican and the Al-Azhar to some enlightened rabbis—have begun to convene under the auspices of the United Nations, Amnesty International, Dialogue of Civilizations, and other similar institutions that are committed to the glorious Bill of Human Rights. They have aspired to eliminate such religious prejudices — alas, with no success.

The main reason for the failure of such efforts has been the fact that each of these representatives carries along a book that says, “Thou shall not kill! Thou shall not rape! Thou shall not steal!” Yet, killing, raping or stealing from members of other tribes or the dissent are not only justified, but rewarded. Indeed, this is the root of all human conflicts, including anti-Semitism. Consequently, we can say that the religious books can be friends of humanity only if they are not followed blindly. Because, as we can already see, all religious extremists and instigators of violence are those who, in their deluded minds, wish to observe the commands of their religion in a literal fashion.

An effect can be removed only when the causes behind it have been revealed. Problems can be solved only if we stop covering up their so-called “religious” roots; if we end the arbitrary distinctions between each other; if we all realize that such differences have caused much unrest in the world, and could ultimately lead to its doom.

Mankind can’t bring about light by darkness, nor kindness by hatred. Anyone at anytime could draw a line between one person or group with another, simply based on the writings of religions and their pre-ordained verdicts, thereby effortlessly allowing for designations between a “friend” and a “foe” and the bringing of tyranny to “them.” If mankind follows such predetermined religious verdicts, there will be *no rights* left to observe. We need only to pay attention to the news and to the world around us to find out from where such problems have stemmed.

“Who’s to blame?”

The blame is on those who wish to take advantage of darkness and feed expired medicine to their followers, based on their own outdated beliefs. Sadly, some people perpetuate the conduct of these groups. They are convinced that the conduct of these groups is noble, without realizing that one cannot fight darkness with darkness, but rather by shining light on the problems that

plague civilizations. To fight against any wrong idea or culture, one must offer a more sophisticated one.

It's nothing but egotism and a disguise over the truth, when various religions claim to offer equal rights. Such hypocrisies will inevitably take societies to places where they shouldn't be, as we've already witnessed. We ought to eliminate the causes behind the darkness of the mind, so that light can be revealed. We've had enough.

Let us keep what agrees with reason and today's civilization, and let us discard the causes of conflicts, especially the misogyny of some ideological myopics. Short-sightedness could only make us take longer to get home.

Historically, the custom of discrimination originated from the conflicts inherent to religions, regarding how to treat other people.

In the 17th chapter of Deuteronomy, our *Holy Torah* tells us with foresight:

“When faced with a difficult case, refer to the judge of your time, so that he would judge between you, and you'll accept his verdict.”

In other words, 3300 years ago, predicting such days as ours, we were told to accept the verdict of the judge of *our* time. The judge of the time won't arrive from the skies, and the Torah never gave such a promise. The judge of the time means modern civilization; it means resilience; it means keeping in touch with our times and modern science.

There are those who think that eliminating unreasonable and outdated commentaries or traditions, including misogynistic notions, would weaken the religion. I simply ask this group to find out why 323 of the 613 commands became obsolete over time. They should realize that flowers are not there to stay forever; instead, we preserve their extracts, so that they could benefit us anytime, anywhere.

The essential commands of the Holy Torah are of such sound foundation that even if 99% of the 613 were to lose their necessity or validity over time, the remaining 1%, consisting of the Ten Commandments and the universal command, “Wish for thy neighbor as you'd wish for thyself,” would be able to lead the world to peace and happiness.

Words have been used by religions as mere vehicles of meaning and intent. As such, every generation should rather focus on their scientific wisdom, emotional and intellectual content, in practical ways, instead of parroting the empty shells of these words and mistaking them for religious observance—or even worse, going on to teach them as such to others.

It's not “piety” to rely on religion and pull people's minds into the whirlpools of discrimination, blind imitation, endless repetitions, cultural poverty and intellectual paralysis — it's an absolute deprivation. Today's world is much more interconnected than what we might imagine. Local and tribal traditions are no longer an issue. But until the safety of every single person isn't ensured, regardless of one's religion, ideology, race, sex, or gender, the world will not achieve collective security.

Pointing fingers at one group or another is not a solution, either. Instead, we should identify all religious, factional, and racial sources of hatred and discrimination and eliminate them. Otherwise, thousand times more than those who've so far been killed, maimed, or dislocated, in the name of religion, will continue to inherit prejudice and discrimination at extremist religious schools. If so, there'll be no end to this vicious cycle that yields thousands of victims every day.

The United Nations and world powers should abandon violent physical confrontations in favor of cleansing textbooks and rinsing teachers everywhere from hateful ideologies, in order to shrivel the roots of violence and discrimination.

Mark Twain said, “It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me; it is the parts that I do understand.” Let's file away such obsolete parts in the archives of history, before some unpredictable changes occur.

World peace will not be possible without peace between religions; and peace among religions will not be realized as long as the discriminatory commands of religious books, in terms of “they” vs. “us,” “friend” vs. “foe,” and “like-minded” vs. “dissent,” continue to be obeyed. In that case, the wheels of horror will keep turning, and the calm of each period will merely be the calmness between one invasion to another—one with sling-shots while riding camels, the other with nuclear bombs while flying planes.

Criticism is constructive only if it comes with a remedy. What could a solution be?

They say, “If everyone swept in front of their own door, the whole town would be clean.” The only reasonable and pragmatic cure to this contagious epidemic is to keep every mind, especially childrens’ minds, from being contaminated by prejudice, superstition, and dogmatism. This can be achieved by acquiring the knowledge of our time. Every person should start with oneself, then one’s family, putting aside all presumptions, learning facts, and wiping away all causes of hatred and prejudice from his or her mind and those of our children.

Solving global problems require collective efforts, as well as time. We saw this when humankind was finally able to abolish the abominable practice of slavery, even though this went against certain aspects of the writings of Abrahamian religions. Likewise, time will dictate any other necessary changes, as it submits to reason, regardless of religions or ideologies. Let’s not postpone this process. At the end, science, reason, and faith will make peace with each other.

As Hillel said, “When a religious idea is found in disagreement with science, you should take side with science.” Similarly, the 9th century Persian scientist Rhazes said, “If a religious issue is found to be in conflict with reason, you should side with reason.”

Science will be the currency of the future, *not* religion, dollars, or gold. An inheritance of this universal currency will be a key element for the future of our children.

We can’t hope for religion to survive by throwing dust at the sun, by keeping facts hidden and weaknesses ignored, or by blowing wind underneath the cloak of hypocrisy.

Maimonides, known as the “Second Moses,” said with a nod to Hillel that, “After years of studies, I have realized that the essence of the Torah is nothing but the command, ‘Wish for thy neighbor as you’d wish for thyself.’ This sums up our religion.”

I’m as much worried about regression, as I’m horrified by indifference and a lack of identity. But I find the solution to both of these challenges—eliminating ruinous discrimination and preserving our valuable identity—in spreading knowledge and science and in avoiding superstitions, not in promoting some nonsense. I have expanded this notion by referring to a variety of sources in my book, *Lahazāti Barāye Tafakkor*, i.e. “Moments of Thought”, the reading of which I recommend for everyone. In addition, an English translation of the book, under the working title, *Invitation to Reason: Jews and Judaism in Today’s World*, will soon be made available to the public.

As Dr. Iqbal Lahouri said, “The veins of the vine bear inside thousand glasses of wine, still undrunk.” In other words, much has to be left unsaid.

Yet, I find it most appropriate to conclude my thoughts by the words of the late Chacham Yedidya Shofet, who in his sweet local Kashani accent said, “Gentlemen, don’t do such things, just don’t! Stop discriminating, so that this custom of discrimination will come to an end...”

You could obtain a copy of this speech in its original Farsi, as well as in English and Hebrew, from BabaNouri.com.