

# *Zoroastrian's Festivals*

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# Abstract

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National customs and ceremonies of a country are regarded as an invaluable treasure of their culture and art, which has passed down to them from antiquity. Zoroastrianism, rising from the heart of an ancient culture, has played an important role in forming Iranian customs and ceremonies. The happy customs and ceremonies on different occasions are one such example. This essay sets out to describe five major ceremonies celebrated according to some history behind them. Noruz, Tirgan, Mehregan, Sadeh and Esfandgan are the main ones which will be described.

# Introduction

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"Ever since I have held thee (O Ahura Mazda) in my eye  
I have always regarded Thee  
O Ahura Mazda as the first of all, as worthy of worship,  
with pure thought  
as the father of Vohu Mana (good mind)  
as the real origin of truth  
and as the lord OVER ALL actions of this world."  
(Yasna 31.8)

Zoroastrianism is a religion based on the teachings ascribed to the prophet Zoroaster. Zoroastrians believe in one universal and transcendental God, Ahura Mazda, and the Avesta is the collection of the sacred texts of them.

They, based on their prophet's jurisprudence, Zoroaster, stick on the fact that life is manifested through joy and pleasure. With keeping this outlook in their mind they are constantly obsessed with their avoiding of grief and mourning. Therefore our ancestors held up different ceremonies based on religion's institutions and adaptation of nature life, to enjoy life better.

In Zoroastrian religion each day of a month had a name. Those names are names of deities. All months in their calendar had 30 days and each had its own

name. So there are thirty day names. For example, the first day is Ahuramazda day, the second is Bahman day, the third is Ordibehesht day, and so forth.

Some day names are the same as the month names. In fact, all months names are also day names. So in each month, there is one day in which the name of the month and the name of the day are the same. These are twelve festivals of ancient Iranians. For example, on Farvardin, we have the "farvardingan" feast. The "gan" suffix pluralizes a noun, so 'farvardingan' literally means 'farvardins.'

Therefore here we can see from these five festivals three of them are based on this fact, the name of the day matches the name of the month.

## Noruz

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The festival of Noruz (alternative spellings: Norooz, Noruz, Nowrouz ...), (meaning 'new day') is one of the most prominent and majestic Iranian

memorable festivals; one of those archaic ones that date back in history, and that the passage of time has not reduced its importance.

In harmony with rebirth of nature, Noruz always begins on the first day of spring, March 21<sup>st</sup>, of each year.

Based on priest Azargoshasb (1993, p.241) a panel of Iranian researchers and historians believed that the Persian king Jamshid introduced Noruz celebration. As a result they called it noruz-e- Jamshidi.

In Iran, Noruz preparation begins one month earlier, in Esfand, the last month of winter, by practicing what is called 'khane tekani' (meaning, 'clean-out'). As Mr. Niknam (2000, p.14) remarks, according to Zoroastrian doctrines, the spirit of the departed family members come back to visit their relatives ten days before Noruz. Consequently, the practice of 'khane takani' consists of cleaning the house, dusting the furniture and buying new clothes. Therefore the spirits observe the family pleased and cheerful, then return back to their place.

Today they also set a table cloth known as 'haft-sin', (seven S's) seven articles with their names in Persian beginning with the letter "S" (seen). Number seven has always been sacred and eminent in Iranian and Zoroastrian ancient cultures. The table is set according to various legends and traditions. Some researchers believe that in the past, people arranged 'haft-shin', seven articles which their names in Persian beginning with the letter "SH" (sheen). According to O'shihan, these included wine (sharâb), sugar (shakar), syrup (shîreh), honey (shahd), candy (shîrîni), milk (shîr), and rice pudding (shîr-berenj).

But others hold that at first there was 'haft-chin' (meaning 'seven gathered fruits').

The table is laid with a white cloth. White represents spotless purity. There on the table are a copy of the sacred book (the Gathas for Zoroastrians); picture of Zoroaster; a mirror; candles; a bowl of water with a living gold fish in; plates

and vessels with green sprouts, flowers, fruits, coins, bread, sugar cone, various grains fresh and colorfully painted boiled eggs, and above all, seven articles with their names in Persian beginning with the letter "S" (seen).

The whole table is beautifully laid. It symbolizes the Message and the Messenger, light, reflection, warmth, life, love, joy, production, prosperity, and nature. It is, in fact, a very elaborate thanksgiving table for all the good and beautiful things bestowed by God, as Dr. Ali A. Jafarey mentions.

**‘Haft-sin’ Table Items (from [www.Persianmirror.com](http://www.Persianmirror.com))**

Persian Name	Definition	Description & Symbolism	Position
<u>Sabzeh</u>	Spring Sprouts	Made from wheat or lentil this S signifies rebirth and renewal. Read about how you grow these sprouts at home.	The First S on the Sofreh.
Senjed	A sweet, dry fruit of a lotus tree	The fragrant and blooming lotus tree makes people fall in love so it is natural that its fruit	The Second S on the Sofreh

		would signify love and affection	
Sib	Apple	A big red apple represents health and beauty.	Third S on the Sofreh
<u>Samanu</u>	Wheat Pudding	Wheat and wheat products signify sweetness and fertility.	Fourth S on the Sofreh
Serkeh	Vinegar	White Vinegar signifies age and patience.	Fifth S on the Sofreh
Somagh	Crushed Sumac berries	This S symbolizes the spice of life. Some say Somagh represents the color of the sunrise and with the sun all evil is conquered.	Sixth S on the Sofreh
Seer	Garlic	This medicinal S is a sign of good health.	Seventh S on the Sofreh
Sekeh	Gold Coins	Wealth and	Optional S.

		Prosperity	
Sonbol	Hyacinth Flower	Purple or pink hyacinth are common on the Sofreh and also represent life and beauty.	Optional S.
Sangak	Flatbread	Noon-e Sangak represents prosperity for the feasts. It can be accompanied by Naan-o Panir, which is Iranian feta cheese and fresh herbs to be eaten at the feast.	Optional S.
Sohan Asali	Honey Almonds	A sweet honey candy made with pistachios.	Optional S.
Gold Fish	Mahi	Gold Fish in a clear white bowl represents life and the end of the astral	On the Sofreh

		year associated with the constellation Pisces.	
Ayne	A Mirror	To bring light & brightness into the New Year	Head of the Sofreh
Sha'am	Two Candelabras	Candles large or small can be used and symbolize fire & energy.	On either side of the mirror.
Tokhm-e Morgh	Decorated Eggs	Symbolizes fertility. Eggs are painted by children much like Easter eggs are painted.	On the Sofreh. Can be as elaborate as desired.
Ajil	Assorted Nuts	Iranians love nuts. They can be roasted pistachios, walnuts, almonds, and hazelnuts	On the Sofreh

Scriptures	Avesta, Gatha Scriptures, or Poetry depending on beliefs	Symbolizes blessings and faith in the New Year. You can also place a Divan-e Hafez or other book of faith and knowledge.	Placed in the middle. Put money in the pages of the book and give out Eidi after sal tahvil.
Shirini	Sweets & Pastries	Noghl, Baaghlavaa, Toot, Noon-e Berenji, Noon-e Nokhodchi and any other sweets you prefer	On the Sofreh
Esfand or Esphand	Wild Rue	A brazier "Manghal" holding burning coals sprinkled with "Esphand" popular incense. It keeps the evil eye away and brings on health.	Nearby

Family members, all dressed in their best clothes, sit around the table and eagerly await the announcement of the celebration over radio or television. The head of the family recites the Noruz prayers, and after the time is announced, each member kisses the other and wishes him/ her a Happy Noruz. Elders give gifts to younger relatives. Sweets are offered to all to symbolically sweeten their life for the rest of the year. A small mirror is passed around, rose water is sprinkled into the air and *espan* a popular incense, is burnt to keep the evil eye away. Next, rounds of visits to neighbors, relatives, and friends begin. Each visit is reciprocated. Zarathustra's Birthday is celebrated by Zoroastrians at social centers on about 6 Farvardin (26 March).

Today Iranians celebrates it for 13 days, known as 'sizdah beh dar' which literally means 'getting rid of the omen of the 13<sup>th</sup> day'.

The thirteenth day of Farvardin is called '*tir*' or '*tishtar*'. God Tir is the god of rain. And, according to Zoroastrians, in order to have the God of Rain as victorious and the Fiend of Drought as destroyed in the New Year, people should commemorate him and ask him for rain. Therefore, after celebrating Noruz festival, and when the earth grows green, on the 13<sup>th</sup> day which belongs to the God of Rain, people go to plains and fields, and in dances and merriness, ask God for rain. They leave to water streams the plan they have grown and kept on their tables all these thirteen days, and wish for a blessed year, based on Mr.Niknam (2000, p.20).

## Tirgan

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The 13<sup>th</sup> day of each month is called '*tir*' in Zoroastrian religion; '*tishtar*', in modern Persian; and '*tishtrya*', in Avesta. So when the day of '*tir*' approaches the month of *tir*, Zoroastrians hold a ceremony with the name of Tirgan, which is observed on July 1<sup>st</sup>, and is known as 'rain festival', according to Faravahar's report (2004).

There are some customs associated with Tirgan. For instance, one such a tradition is known as 'chakuduleh' or 'fate-pot'.

According to Mr. Niknam (2000, p.78), one day before the festival, they gather in a village or country side, choose a maid and give her a green color, wide mouth jar. They call it '*duleh*'. She pours water inside it and most of the time takes it from fountainhead, then she puts a green silk handkerchief on its opening. After that, she carries the jar toward every one, and those who are

interested put some small objects such as: coin, ring, pin and things like that, in the jar and also make a wish. Then she takes it under a green tree usually a cypress. On the festival day, those people who made a vow gather together. The girl brings the jar while there are also some elders present, who versify and sing some couplets. Consequently the girl brings those things out of the jar one by one. The owner of the object comes out, finds out that the couplets which were sung already are somehow related to his/her wish and desire.

Another related custom is 'tying rainbow-colored bracelet on their wrists', which are worn for ten days and on '*bad rooz*' (wind day), they throw it from some high places such as a rooftop and give it to the wind. This bracelet is made from seven colorful silk cottons, which is very soft and spins together. It is seven, because they are emblematic of the seven colors of rainbow in sky.

Beside these traditions and customs there are also some histories behind it. According to O'shihan, Tirgan is associated with the legend of the arrow (*tir*). Some believed that during the kingdom of Manochehr over Iran, Afrasiab's army occupied most parts of Iran. So they determined to make peace and to set the boundary between Iran and Turan. So Arash, who was then know as Arash the Archer, had to ascend Mount Damavand and from there discharge an arrow towards the east, and the place in which the arrow fell should form the boundary between two kingdoms. So he unleashed the arrow and it fell on the banks of the Oxus.

There is also another belief about this festival: that in Sussanian period, it did not rain for seven years so that there was a famine. Finally, on this day, people went to deserts and by praying God wished for rain. The rain started, and therefore the country was emancipated from aridity and drought. Thus Zoroastrians celebrate this day and sprinkle water on one another.

# Mehregan

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Mehregan is one the well known Zoroastrian festivals. This feast is celebrated for six days, starting on the 16<sup>th</sup> of the 'Mihr' and ending on 21<sup>st</sup> known as 'Raam'. Based on Iran Zamin (2003) Mehr in Avesta is 'Miora' and in Pahlavi, 'Mitr'. In modern Frasi it has become Mehr.

The word Mehr means 'friendship' and 'love contracts'. In ancient Iran, after Noruz, Mehregan was of a most importance, because both were introductions to new seasons.

This feast is a time for life and gratitude for life. The history dates back to the day of the victory of Fereidoun, with the help of Kaveh, over Zahak. They imprisoned him in Damavand Mountain. Thereafter he became the king and all people held up great ceremony on that day, based on a report by Massoume Price (2006).

The participants for this celebration wear new clothes and set a beautiful and colorful table. The table is decorated with the holy book of Avesta, a mirror, sweets, flowers, vegetables and fruits, especially pomegranates and apples.

Today, Zoroastrians on this day go to their temples and serve each other by preparing traditional foods. They also accompany this celebrated festival with prayers, religious speeches, poems and other programs.

## Sadeh

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O Ahura Mazda we ardently desire (we choose) Thy,  
fire, mighty,  
Swiftest  
courageous,  
ever giving delight - giving help in various ways (or  
miraculously) through Asha .  
O Ahura Mazda!  
(Fire) through his full strength  
is the holder strongly the tormentor and the avenger .  
(Ushtavada 43.4)

The word sadeh comes from the root 'SAT' and in Farsi language it means 'sad', meaning 'hundred'. When Iranians divided the year into the two seasons of summer and winter, from the beginning of the month of Farvardin (21 of March) to the end of the month of Mehr (about 22 of October) is summer, and from the beginning of the month of Aban (about 23 of October) to the end of the month of Esfand (about 19 of March) is winter, from Zoroastrian's calendar. Therefore ten days after the winter is 10<sup>th</sup> of Bahman (about 29 of January) a festival celebrated by Zoroastrian.

Stick on the fact that the coldness of winter would decrease gradually. So they would go to the desert and plains, and would gather firewood and thorns,

and when it grows dark they would build a big fire to celebrate until morning with the hope for the light, which is a manifestation of God. The wood gathered, would be taken to the local shrine. So Before the sunset all would gather outside the temple to torch the wood with prayers and chants remembering the great ones of the faith and the deceased.

This festival is most of the time referred to a celebration of mankind's discovery of generating fire. According to O'shihan there is a legend that King Hooshang one cold day, with his party were returning from a hunting expedition. They saw a snake coiled in their path. Hushang aimed his flint axe at it. He missed and the snake slithered away. But the axe hit another stone, also a flint and produced a bright spark .The curious king took hold of the two flints and struck more sparks. And he learned to produce enough sparks to ignite a fire. He discovered how to make fire! "This spark," he proclaimed, "is God's gift. Hold it high in regard." He thanked God for the gift and made fire his altar. He held a great feast. Every person sang, danced, drank, and feasted around the bonfire. For the first time, Hushang and his people could light their dark caves and feel cozy and warm in their beds. They passed a wonderful winter. Hushang never forgot his revolutionary discovery. He held a great feast every year on that eventful day. It is called "Sadeh." He was the first to separate iron from ore and established the profession of smithery. He fashioned axes, saws, and adzes. Hushang's reign introduced peace, prosperity, plenty, and happiness.

To put it in short: Fire was accidentally discovered when a flint-axe, thrown by King Hushang to kill a snake, missed and struck a rock and threw a spark. That sparked the idea to kindle fire by striking two pieces of flint together.

# Esfandgan

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In order to hold fast to Truth (O Ahura Mazda!)  
I verily ask of Thee  
that ( health and vigour). Owing to Armaiti (O Ahura Mazda)  
do  
thou grant me wealth  
good blessings  
and the life of good mind.  
(Ushtavada 43.1)

The word "esfand" appears in Avesta in the form of Spentâ Ārmaiti, which means humility and forbearance.

This feast is celebrating the lofty status of women their kindness and self-sacrifice was held on Sepandarmaz Day in Esfand, the last month of the Iranian calendar. It is the day of love and humility in the spiritual world and the guardian of the earth in the material world. (Press TV, 2007)In the ancient tradition, women set aside their household chores and put that responsibility on the shoulders of their men for just one day. The men were also supposed to present gifts to their women.

Today Zoroastrians gather together and celebrate this feast in a totally splendid and magnificent manner. There are also some poems composed for women's purity and humanitarian soul.

## Conclusion

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These festivals are significant because each held in one season, and possesses their own values and history which lay behind it. There are also other ceremonies according to Zoroastrians religion, but these five are considered as the main and major ones, which are very important.

As we all know, each religion has its special rules and law. So human being based on his religion should obey all these traditions which derived from their ancestors and downgrade it, and also try to keep those values forever and transfer them to the new generation.

This is all these religions customs and tradition which link generations together. By these customs man can transfer his own idea and passion to others and this is the true way which can improve human being's life. 'Good Thoughts' , ' Good Words' , 'Good Deeds' are three cardinal principles of Zoroastrian's religion which cover all these messages and customs in order to full fill man's desire and wish to create a valuable life, and live in a path of truth.

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