

Iranian New Year

Nowruz, Origins & Rituals, a Summary

by: **Massoume Price**

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Nowruz is a celebration of the spring Equinox. It has been celebrated for almost 3000 years, and is deeply rooted in the rituals and traditions of the ancient Iranian religion, Zoroastrianism, particularly from the Sasanian period, 7th century AD. In their ancient text, 'Bundahishn' (foundation of creation) it is said that The Lord of Wisdom (Ahura Mazda) created all that was good and became God. The Lord of Darkness, Angra Mainyu (Ahriman) created all that was evil and became the Hostile Spirit. The two worlds that were created did not have a material form and only existed in essence. The two worlds existed side-by-side but were separate. Next, the material world was created. The first creation in this world was the sky, a big chunk of stone encompassing earth. The second was the first ocean at the bottom. The earth a big flat dish sitting on the ocean was the third. Then the three prototypes of all life forms, the first plant, the first animal (bull) and the first human (Kiomarh) were created. The seventh creation was fire/sun.

To protect his creations from the Hostile Spirit, the Lord of Wisdom also created six guardians or holy immortals. These are personifications of the natural forces created. They are called 'Amesha Spenta' and there is one for each creation. The first three were deities: Shahrivar, Ordibehesht and Bahman—protectors of sky, fire and animals. The other three were; Khordad, Esphand and Amرداد—protectors of water, mother earth and all plants. Ahura Mazda himself became the protector of all humans and the holy fire. The six immortals are the names of six of the months in the current Iranian calendar and are celebrated in the "Haft Sin" (New Year ceremonial spread) tradition during Nowruz.

This newly created world did not have a life cycle, so there were no days, nights or seasons. Once the material world had been created, the Hostile Spirit saw the light and wanted it, and attacked the good world. He crashed in through the sky, plunged down into the waters and then burst up through the centre of the earth. With the hostile spirits invading, help was needed to fight back. The three prototypes of life were sacrificed. From the plant came the seeds of all plants. The bull produced all the animals, and from the human came the first male and female (*mashi & mashiyaneh*). With the triple sacrifices the cycle of life was started, and this was the beginning of time. The sun moved, and there was day, night and the seasons. This day was called Nowruz, meaning "new day" symbolizing the beginning of the cycle of life.

Zoroastrians introduced many feasts, festivals and rituals to pay homage to the seven creations, the holy immortals and Ahura Mazda. Amongst the most important, seven were the feasts of obligation. The last and the most elaborate of these was Nowruz, celebrating the Lord of Wisdom and the holy fire, at the time of the spring equinox. Over time the festival incorporated other aspects of the religion such as the feast celebrating Faravashi (human's guardian angels). These eventually represented the soul of the dead returning to visit the living during the last few nights of the old year. Pre-Islamic celebrations started ten days prior to the New Year. A major spring-cleaning was carried out to welcome the spirits with feasts, wine, dance and music. Bonfires were set on rooftops at night to protect and indicate to the spirits and that they were ready to receive them. This was called "Suri Festival". Modern Iranians still carry out the spring-cleaning and celebrate 'Chahar Shanbeh Suri' (Wednesday Suri). Bonfires are made, and people jump over the fire on the last Tuesday of the year. This is a purification ritual and Iranians believe by leaping over the fire they will eliminate all their illnesses and misfortunes. Over 1,000 years ago, the scholar Biruni

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mentioned that Piruz, the angel of the dead, is present at these festivities. Piruz still is present and is known as Haji Firuz, a black-faced troubadour dressed in bright red who shows up a few days before Nowruz.

The New Year is celebrated for 13 days. New garments are worn to emphasize newness and freshness. Families stay home and wait for the start of the New Year, at the exact time of the spring equinox. The start time for the New Year changes every year and is called 'Tahvil' (the time of transformation), and the day is around 20th of March. The first few minutes are spent around an elaborately prepared spread with several items and objects known as 'Haft Sin' (seven 's'). Some people may read or recite verses from their holy books just before the start of the New Year. Once the New Year starts the young will pay respect to the elders by wishing them a merry New Year. Relatives kiss and hug and gifts are exchanged. Sweets are offered to symbolically sweeten their lives. A small mirror is passed around, rose water is sprinkled into the air, and the popular incense *espan*d (wild rue) is burned to keep the evil eye away and ritually purify the space.

The first few days are spent visiting friends and family. A major part of the New Year ritual is the "Haft Sin". In the past, each one of the seven items corresponded to one of the seven creations, and the immortals. Today, they are modified but most have kept their symbolism. The seven items present all start with the letter 'S' (though this was not the case in ancient times). Wheat or barley is grown in a flat dish a few days before the New Year and is called 'sabzeh' (meaning green shoots) representing new growth. It is decorated with colourful ribbons and is kept until the last day to be thrown away in running waters on 'Sizdeh be dar', the 13th day, during the outdoor celebrations. In the ancient times this was part of making an offering to the deities protecting the waters. Live gold fish are placed in a fish bowl representing the mythical fish *Kara Mahi*, which swims in the mythical Vourukæa Sea and wards off harmful creatures. Mirrors are placed on the spread with lit candles as a symbol of light and fire. Wine was always present, but it has been replaced by vinegar (*serkeh*) since alcohol is banned in Islam. Still present is the egg as a universal symbol of fertility corresponding to the mother earth Sepandarmaz. The eggs are hard-boiled and traditionally are coloured in red, green or yellow, colours favoured by Zoroastrians. Fresh garlic (*seer*) is used to ward off bad omens. In ancient times, it was one of the seven herbs grown for the occasion. *Samano* is a thick brownish paste also present on the spread. It is a nutritious meal made with wheat and was assumed to induce fertility; coins (*sekeh*) symbolize wealth and prosperity. Apples (*seeb*), special sweets, baked goods and the spice *somagh* (sumac) are all present as well. For our ancestors Nowruz was a celebration of life with all its glory. For modern Iranians it is a feast of renewal and freshness and a time to cherish and renew friendships and family ties.

Happy Nowruz to all.

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