



Food, Faith and the Zoroastrian Community

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

The author explores food, faith and community from the Zoroastrian perspective, drawing on her experience of festivals at the Zoroastrian Centre and talking to members. She uses the contemporary Harrow community of Zoroastrians to give an historical perspective on food while also providing a great deal of information about Zoroastrianism itself. She highlights how all food is sacred and therefore plays a significant role in all social aspects of Zoroastrianism.

Introducing the Zoroastrians

Come out of Rayners Lane Underground Station in north-west London and you face a striking building, which enjoyed popularity as an opulent 1930s cinema. Its status attains great significance these days as the home of the Zoroastrian Trust Fund of Europe, the European Centre of the ancient Zoroastrian religion. Its daily inhabitants derive from the ancient lands of Zoroastrianism: Iran, the land of the Prophet Zarathustra, and India, where refugees from religious persecution landed in Gujerat nearly 1000 years ago and acquired the name of Parsis (or Persians). The chief priest in the party, on meeting with King Jadi Rana, emphasized that Zoroastrians in the land would enhance the community of Gujerat. He asked for a cup of milk and stirred in a spoonful of sugar, observing the milk did not overflow. Thus he explained the Zoroastrians would bring sweetness like sugar to the wholesome goodness of Gujerat and it was so in the ensuing years. Now, in the 21st century, the significant Zoroastrian population of Harrow, the nation's most religiously diverse borough, provides zest and sweetness, inspiration, joy and insight to enhance local community cohesion. Spices and fruit added in cooking bring about the sweet and sour taste favoured by Zoroastrians and add to Harrow's store of culinary delights.

The Function of Food in Religious and Social Aspects of Zoroastrianism

Food is an integral part of Zoroastrian worship. Mary Boyce points out that Zarathustra laid down a strict obligation to his followers to celebrate annually seven high feasts dedicated to Ahura Mazda, (God) the Amesha Spentas, (the guardians of creation) and to the seven creations, (sky, water, earth, plants, cattle, human beings and fire).¹ Zoroastrian scriptures state that the purpose of human creation is to work with Ahura Mazda to entice the manifestation of evil (which they believe comes from an independent source), and to ally with

¹ Jamva Chalo (2002) 'The Eating Habits of the Parsis', in Pheroza J. Godrej and Firoza Punthakey Mistree (ed.) *A Zoroastrian Tapestry*, p531, India: MaplinPublishing



the Creator to defeat it. Ahura Mazda is transparent and asks human beings if they wish to be born into an atmosphere where they will be under attack and die in their participation in the battle. Their reward, if they agree, is an immortal soul and the promise that in the end, all evil in the earth will be annihilated. This being the case, the feasts are understood as important opportunities to fuel the soldiers to continue the fight, and Zoroastrians do not shy away from eating well. Meals in every season are enjoyed with remembrance of the good and beneficent Creator, who has created 'fruitful trees of many kinds, fresh and green, whereby there is maintenance and living for every creature of the world, for the glory, happiness and wealth' of all.² A fasting soldier is deemed deficient. Edward Terry, chaplain to Sir Thomas Roe, the 17th century ambassador to the court of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jehan, noted 'No-one who does not eat has strength to do works of holiness'.³

Zoroastrians believe that food sanctified for worship is consumed by Ahura Mazda, Zarathustra and the 'fravashis' (guardian spirits). In the feasts spiritual and physical beings eat together. Indeed it is believed that the very aroma of well cooked food attracts the spiritual beings, who are propitiated in the ritual, while eggs in the menu represent immortality.

During the 'gahambars' (feasts), financed by wealthy members of the community, rich and poor eat together happily. The Reverend F. Ovington noted at Surat in 1689, that 'at their solemn festivals, whither a hundred or two sometimes resort, each man according to his fancy and ability, brings with him his victuals, which is equally distributed, and eat in common by all that are present, for they show a firm affection to all of their own sentiments in religion, assist the poor and are very ready to provide for the Sustenance and Comfort of such as want it'.⁴ The notion of equality is strong in the community.

Feasting

Let us visit the Zoroastrian Centre in Harrow during the month of March, a month of celebration with the climax of 'NoRuz' (New Year) on 21st March. Each gahambar (festival) begins with Jashan performed by the 'mobeds' (priests), seated around the sacred fire, reciting passages from the Holy Avesta to consecrate food for the ceremony. An appetizing smell permeates the hall from the kitchen. Sprays of cypress, flower buds and rose blooms combine with incense from the 'aftrinagan' (incense burner), sprinkled traditionally with frankincense and wild rue, creating fragrance associated with the world of Ahura Mazda. Foul stench is banished immediately, believed to be the work of Ahriman, the evil spirit.

The 'Mukhtads' (the last days of the old year) are festivals when Zoroastrians believe that the souls and spirits of their ancestors visit the earth for ten days along with their 'fravashis' (guardian spirits). Silver platters bearing flowers, milk, fruit, a huge variety of savoury and especially sweet dishes are prepared on a daily basis to welcome the departed. Traditional recipes from Iran and India grace the thalers (platters) laid out for the priests to pray over. The living eat and drink with the souls and spirits of their ancestors.

As 'NoRuz' (New Year) approaches a table is set with ritual purity, just it has been prepared throughout the ages on a 'sofreh' (traditional cloth), often laid on the floor in desert lands, providing the demarcation of the sacred and secular. Seeds have been germinating in a 'koozeh' (earthenware pot), proclaiming the coming of spring. The NoRuz table will be decorated with a hand-embroidered cloth on which is placed a mirror, the koozah, a glass of wine, jujubes, milk, sweets and a drink made from sugared rosewater and white basil seeds. These seven items signify the blessings of Ahura Mazda for nourishment throughout the year and are linked to the seven Ameshaspands or Holy Immortals created by Ahura Mazda for the

² Shirin Simmons (2002) 'Entertaining the Zoroastrian Way', in Pheroza J. Godrej and Firoza Punthakey Mistree (ed.) *A Zoroastrian Tapestry*, p518, India: MaplinPublishing

³ Jamva Chalo (2002) 'The Eating Habits of the Parsis', p526, *ibid.*

⁴ Jamva Chalo (2002) p531, *ibid.*



well-being and prosperity of humans in the physical world.⁵ Three candles placed on the table stand for the three central tenets of Zoroastrianism: Good Thoughts; Good Words; Good Deeds. Beside them will be 'Kordeh Avesta' (prayer book) and a picture of the Prophet Zarathustra. Dinner will consist of dishes with those wonderful sweet and sour flavours – white fondant eaten while making a new year wish, rice crumble, pistachio nuts, roasted almonds, dried pumpkin and sun-flower seeds followed maybe by 'Shirin pulav' (saffron rice garnished with orange zest and almonds) and 'Khoresh-e ghormeh sabsi' (chicken with herbs cooked in a lime sauce). Fruit drinks and 'paloodeh' (a rose-water drink) are consumed along with an alcoholic beverage of choice, a tradition linked with toddy, a Parsi drink made from fermented sap of the palmyra palm and enjoyed by spiritual and physical beings alike. NoRuz is special, since it is dedicated to fire, the last creation.

Ethical and Practical Issues

Zoroastrians consider all food sacred, because it comes from God and is a part of the sacred creations. They eat holistically, tending to favour fish and meat that comes from herbivores, particularly enjoying chicken, lamb and mutton. Dairy food is greatly appreciated, following a passage from scriptures, 'of material food in this world, that which is the product of cattle is the best'.⁶ There are no dietary taboos. The killing of animals for food is perceived as a religious act of sacrifice and follows a prescribed religious code giving due respect to the sacredness of life ('padyab busti'). Prayers are said over the chicken or goat before it is slaughtered in a demarcated place, covered by a thick bed of ash.

Edward Terry recorded in 1655 of Zoroastrians, that 'they use their liberty in meats and drinks, to take of them what they please; but because they would not give offence to either Mohametans or Banians or to other Hindoos amongst whom they live, they abstain from eating beef or swine's flesh'.⁷ For many of the older generation with their roots in Iran and India this is still the case, and pork and beef are avoided. The Zoroastrian diet in England overall consists of a blend of elements of Iranian, Parsi, Portuguese, European and multi-cultural British traditions.

With regard to food, waste and excess are unacceptable. Old Parsi houses used to have a 'gokhla', a large wooden basin at street level, into which left-overs were deposited for passing cattle and goats.

In conclusion

The Zoroastrians of Harrow, unique in their ancient traditions, render outstanding service to the Council, schools and the local community and are enthusiastic and leading members of the local inter-faith council. Neighbours of all traditions are invited to participate in their sacred feasts, which they do with reverence and respect.

Acknowledgment

I am very grateful to Mr Malcolm Deboo, secretary of the Zoroastrian Trust funds of Europe for his insights into Zoroastrian belief and customs and the development of the European Zoroastrian from roots in Iran and India. To match first-hand experiences with history and tradition, I explored the 44 essays and beautiful illustrations contained in *A Zoroastrian Tapestry*, edited by Pheroza J. Godrej and Firoza Punthakey Mistree, published in 2002, when

⁵ Shirin Simmons,(2002) 'Entertaining the Zoroastrian Way', in Pheroza J. Godrej and Firoza Punthakey Mistree (ed.) *A Zoroastrian Tapestry*, p511, India: MaplinPublishing

⁶ Jamva Chalo (2002)'The Eating Habits of the Parsis', p522, ibid.

⁷ Jamva Chalo (2002) p522, ibid.



it was said to be the largest and heaviest book ever printed. The text looks at food and feasting as an essential part of Zoroastrian belief, ritual and social function.

Resources

The Zoroastrian Centre may be visited by appointment. It has a large reference library, where resources may be examined and noted and orders taken for books. The contact details are:
The Zoroastrian Centre, 440, Alexandra Avenue, Rayners Lane, Harrow HA2 9TL
Tel: 020 8866 0765; Secretary: Mr Malcolm Deboo; E-mail Malcolm@fbrn.org.uk
malcolm_deboo@yahoo.co.uk

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