

FESTIVAL OF ZAYESHMEHR (YALDA)

The Birth of God Mithra & Significance of Winter Solstice in Iranian Culture & Heritage

Zayeshmehr which is known as Yalda and Shab-e Cheleh in Persian is celebrated on the eve of the first day of the winter. Winter solstice 2019 in northern hemisphere will be at 11:19 PM ET on Saturday, December 21.

Iranians around the world celebrate Yalda, which is one of the most ancient Persian festivals. The festival dates to the time Zoroastrians who lived in the 10th century BCE on the Iranian plateau.

On Yalda festival, Iranians celebrate the arrival of winter, the renewal of the sun and the victory of light over darkness. Yalda is the longest night of the year, and Yalda eve is the night when ancient Iranians celebrated the birth of Mithra, the goddess of light.

Yalda, which means birth, is a Syriac word adopted into the Persian language. Ancient Persians believed that evil forces were dominant on the longest night of the year and that the next day belonged to the Lord of Wisdom, Ahura Mazda.

In addition to Iran, Central Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and some Caucasian states such as Azerbaijan and Armenia share the same tradition and celebrate Yalda Night annually at this time of the year.

On this night, family members get together (most often in the house of the eldest member) and stay awake all night long. Dried nuts, watermelon and pomegranate are served, as classic poetry and old mythologies are read aloud.

By eating watermelons and pomegranates, Iranians believe, they would not fall ill during the cold season. Therefore, eating watermelons is one of the most important traditions on this night. Pomegranates symbolize the cycle of life and the rebirth and revival of generations.

Fires would be burnt all night on Yalda to ensure the defeat of the forces of evil. There would be prayers to Mithra (Mehr) and feasts in his honor, since Mithra is the Eyzad responsible for protecting "the light of the early morning", known as 'Havangah'. It was also assumed that Ahura Mazda would grant people's wishes.

One of the themes of the festival was the temporary subversion of order. Masters and servants reversed roles. The king dressed in white would change place with ordinary people. A mock king was crowned, and masquerades spilled into the streets. As the old year died, rules of ordinary living were relaxed. This tradition persisted till the Sassanian rule and is mentioned by Birouni, the eminent scientist and traveler, and others in their recordings of Persian festivals.

Early Christians linked this very ancient Persian celebration to Mithra, goddess of light, and to the birth anniversary of Prophet Jesus. The Iranian Jews, who are amongst the

oldest inhabitants of the country, in addition to Shab-e Chelleh, also celebrate the festival of Illanout (tree festival) at around the same time. The celebration of Illanout is very similar to Yalda. Candles are lit and a variety of dried and fresh winter fruits are eaten. Special meals are prepared, and prayers are performed. Comparisons and detailed studies of all these celebrations will shed more light on the forgotten aspects of this wonderful and ancient festival, where merriment was the main theme of the festival.

One of the other traditions of Yalda night, which has been added in recent centuries, is the recitation of the classic poetry of Hafez, the Iranian poet of 14th century AD. Each member of the family makes a wish and randomly opens the book and asks the eldest member of the family to read it aloud. What is expressed in that poem is believed to be the interpretation of the wish and whether and how it will come true. This is called Faal-e Hafez (Hafez Omen).

Because Shab-e Yalda is the longest and darkest night, it has become to symbolize many things in Persian poetry; separation from a beloved one, loneliness and waiting. After Shab-e Yalda a transformation takes place - the waiting is over, light shines and goodness prevails.

***O pious of the heart, I am lost in a love so great
O pain the hidden secrets will become open debate.
Shipwrecked we just float, O favorable wind arise,
may we one more gaze upon that familiar trait.
Passage of time and the stars, are but what we fantasize
for compassion and kindness, it's never too late.
In the circle of wine and roses, nightingale's song is prize
with the aroma and the wine your senses satiate.
O Thou compassionate one, life giver and the wise
one day bestow thy grace upon this mendicant's state.
For peace of this world and the next, understand what I advise
magnanimity the lot of friends, and wise foes try to relate.
In the land of repute, our passage they will dispute
if this will not suit, don't stay mute, and transmute distastes of fate.
When destitute and in need, let your love and passion breed
life's alchemy, essence and seed, unimagined wealth shall create.
If unruly with pride, with a candle's zeal your flame will rise
Beloved turns stone to lava, and molten wax manipulate.
The Grail contains but wine, if only you realize
then the Kingdom of the world, at your but prostrate.
The good and wise magi, forgivers of lives and lies
bearer bring good news, drunkards' wine consecrate.
With this wine stained robe, Hafiz would never disguise
o untainted pure master exempts us from this fate.***

Poem by Hafez