

The Importance of Making the Right Choice in the Gathas

- Dr. Kersey H. Antia

What are the Gathas? The Gathas are divine songs composed by our Prophet Zarathushtra (Z). The Gathas explain his religious views as poetic messages that stay in our consciousness. They are written in Old Avestan, which is older than any other Avestan language. This language is very similar to the Sanskrit language found in the earliest Hindu scripture, the Rig Veda. Up to the last century, we did not possess any knowledge of the Avestan language. However, the European scholars developed it in the 19th century almost entirely from their knowledge of the Sanskrit language. Basically, the Gathas consist of Manthras, meaning thought provokers. This is why they are so short and poetic. Scholars do not always agree as to the exact meaning of a particular verse, but all interpretations are highly spiritual and inspirational and are devised to actively, constantly, and consciously choose to worship Ahura Mazda in our thoughts, words, and actions.

Since the languages of the Gathas and the early Rig Vedas are so similar, it seems they were written more or less during the same period anywhere from 1000 to 1700 B.C.. Scholars do not seem to agree about a particular date of when that happened. We know the Gathas were composed in prehistoric times and when metals, such as bronze and iron, were just discovered: This was also a time when mankind was just settling down from a nomadic life to a settled agricultural life and when the chariot driven by horses was the only means of transportation. All these facts are evident in the Gathas. Yet what Z. said in the Gathas is as relevant and meaningful today as it was in his times.

Z. spent ten years by himself on the mountains communicating with God and learned God's Word so he could teach mankind "what was never heard before" (Yasna 31.1) and "what was the very best for the living." (Yasna 44.10) The Gathas consist of only 17 chapters. The art of writing was not even discovered by the Aryans in Z.'s times. So the Gathas survived only because our priests memorized them word for word, even when the knowledge of the Avestan language was totally lost to them. The priests knew in their heart that the Gathas formed the basis of Z.'s teachings and always had to be sung aloud – *Frasravayate*. Although we did not know the meaning of the Gathas until recently, we can find the teachings of the Gathas reflected in so many Jewish and Christian beliefs, such as the idea of God and Satan, heaven and hell, life after death, importance of ethics, Resurrection, etc. Even the Vedanta philosophy of the Hindus seems to echo the Gathic teachings of One Supreme Being.

Many writers including myself, have described these influences in detail. I would like you to study them and share your knowledge with your own children when you grow up so you be proud about your unique heritage.

The Importance of Right Choice

What do the Gathas teach about the Right Choice? According to the second chapter of the Gathas (Yasna 29) the earth was full of violence, fury and spitefulness before Z. was born. Does not it sound familiar even today? It seems it could have been written for our times. Therefore, Geush Urvan, the soul of the Universe, complained to God: “For whom did you shape me? Who created me?” It urged God to send a savior. But at first the Wise Lord says “No one (has /been) really found by the world – no Ratu (the judge) , no judge in accordance with truth itself.” (29.6) Later (29.8), however, the Wise One says: “There is only one (savior) found by me who has listened to our teachings and (he is) Z.” It seems to me that only when Z. made his own choice to align himself fully with Mazda that he was chosen by Mazda as a prophet. This explains why Mazda first said he did not know of any savior he could send to earth, because even Z. had to make a choice first. He chose Ahura before he, in turn, was chosen as a prophet, by Mazda. The soul of the Universe, however, started weeping on hearing this. It wanted God to send a strong-armed, heavy-weight fighter with unlimited physical strength to get rid of all the evil and evildoers in the world. It cried out to God that Z. is “powerless, (he is merely) the voice of a man without might, although I wish him to be one who possesses rule through power.” (29.9). But it finally realized that once a strong-armed man is gone from the scene, the evil-doers will come back to power. But if Z. transforms the very heart and soul of the evil doers and inspires them to make the right choice, there will be no evil even after Z. passes away.

Yatha Ahu Vairyo, which is our most important prayer, emphasizes that “Just as God is to be chosen (by us), so is the Ratu (Prophet) because of his righteousness.” In other words, we have to opt for the ways of God as expounded by Asho Z.

Apparently, in his very first lecture (Yasna 30 and 45), Z. declares that there are two *Mainyus* (mentalities or spirits), *Spenta* and *Angra*. They differ in their thoughts, words and actions – one is better (*Vahyo*) than the other, the other being evil. The good souls chose rightly but not the evil ones – Yasna 30.3. The more beneficent spirit (Mainyu) told the evil one: “Neither our thoughts, nor our statements, nor our intellects, nor our choices, nor our words, nor our actions, nor our conscience, nor our souls, agree,” (Yasna 45.2). The word for religion in the Gathas is *Daena* which means “conscience.” If we always make the right choice, we can follow our Daena. Z. therefore advises us never to compromise with our conscience and choose very carefully between good and

evil. Z. emphasized “This is equally true for men and for women” (Yasna 53.6). Thus, from the ancient most times, man and woman share an equal status in Z.’s ideology. Women have an equal right to choose as man. As a result, Z repeatedly urges both men and women to make the right choice. Therefore, we can safely call his religion, “The religion of the right choice!” The idea of right choice implies the idea of moral responsibility but the idea of moral responsibility cannot exist without the existence of free will.

Z. was the first religious teacher and philosopher in the world to realize and preach that man has free will. Man cannot be scared or compelled even by the threat of hell- fire, and brimstone to do good all the time. Free Will is the very cornerstone of Z.’s theology. Neither angels nor man can always do good under compulsion. Now you can see why God did not want to send a strong-armed warrior or superman to root out evil from the world. Z. says God may plead us to be good but won't force us to be good (Yasna 31.12).

Choice is the fact of life ever since the world was created. Man cannot escape from his responsibility to make a choice one way or the other. Z. says this so well and so clearly in Yasna 31.11: “O Mazda, since the very beginning of existence. You through Your mind, fashioned for us the physical world, religious views, and intellect, and put breath of life into mortal bodies, and established actions and counsels, (You did all these) indeed so that one could make his choice through Free Will.”¹

Z advises us to use our Free Will wisely. In his very first sermon, he declares: “Hear with your ears the best things (I say) and think it over with the light of your mind. Each man and woman has to select either of the two. Awaken to this Doctrine of ours before the Great Event of Choices begins,” (Yasna 30.2). In Yasna 45.3, Z. says that the Wise Lord Himself has told him that those who will not follow this formula of the Right Choice, “for them ‘Woe’ will be the last (word) of (their) existence.” Z. repeatedly says that he has seen Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, in his eyes, e.g., Yasna 45.8, and has conversed with Him so often. He also tells us that if we follow his advise, we become “an ally, a brother or a father of Wise Lord,” (Yasna 45.11). Please wait a minute here and just think what a novel and thought-provoking statement (Manthra) Z. makes here. He does not say God will be our ally, brother, or father. But, we ourselves will be /an ally, brother, or father to God if

1 There are many philosophers, even in our times, who argue that there is no such thing as free-will and everything is predetermined by God or Nature. However, one philosopher, Peter Van Inwagen, has reviewed all such arguments in his book *An Essay on Free Will* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1983, 162,223.1) and came to the same conclusion that Z. did long ago without even being aware of Z.’s Gathas: “Without free will there is no moral responsibility; if moral responsibility exists, then (only) someone is morally responsible for something he has done or for something he has left undone. (This idea is present even in the latest of our prayers, e.g. the sixth and seventh chapters of Patet). To deny the free-will thesis is to deny the existence of moral responsibility, which would be absurd.” Now you can see why Z. made free will the very basis of his teachings and why this choice on his part makes his message so eternal.

we make the right choice in everything we do. Just think how beautiful our whole world would have been if man had made the right choices throughout the ages of not going to wars, not engaging in violence with fellow human beings, not destroying the environment, etc. God did not bring these calamities on us, but we brought them on to ourselves by making the wrong choice: .

Therefore, God wants us to help Him make this world beautiful and fresh which Z. calls *Frashokereti*. The idea of Frashokereti can be compared with the idea of Resurrection in Christianity and Kyamat in Islam. We should ask ourselves every day “What did we do today to further the cause of Frashokereti?” Therefore, we have *giroban* (“the pocket”) in our sudreh to remind us constantly of this religious obligation to “pocket” good deeds constantly. You can now see how religious symbols such as sudreh and kusti play such an important role in reminding us to follow our religion day and night. Z. himself seems to have changed the older Aryan practice of *Janoi* to the sudreh and kusti and enjoin it among priests and non-priests, as well as men and women. Even the Jews did not have a similar initiation ceremony for women until very recently. In no other religious tradition have women enjoyed such a privilege for nearly 3000 years. It is only when we become allies and little helpers of God that God will be able to destroy all evil from this world. But, He can not do it without our help, nor does he have any need to do it for Himself because he is already perfect. He wants to do it for us because he wants to see us become perfect like him: “By whatever action, word, and worship, O Mazda! You obtained for yourself Immortality, righteousness, and perfection, let us give these very things to You, O Mazda! In the very greatest number,” (Yasna 34.1). It seems we almost owe a loving debt to All-Loving Mazda to be one like Him in every way as he has gone out of his way to create us and the entire universe from his Spenta (beneficent love) aspect.

Ahura Mazda could have easily devised a world in which he could coerce us into making the right choice, but He loved us too much to force anything that won't be Spenta down our throats and that is what Z's. religion is all about. God Loves us and wants us to be like him and “be ever united in friendship with him” (Avesta – *Hamem Thwa Hakhma* – Hoshbam Prayer). Thus, it is not correct to say that there is no concept of Divine Love in the Gathas, or in Zoroastrianism, as it may unnecessarily attract our youth to those faiths that, do claim it and make much of it. However, instead of putting himself on a pinnacle and calling himself a savior, Z. makes it clear that no one, not even he, could save us if we do not choose to save ourselves. We must be united with Mazda forever, because God has not only made us in his holy image, but the material world itself was first conceived and created in the spiritual world. Therefore, man is not born of Sin, but. out of God's love for him. Z. did not come to this earth as God's representative to remove any sinfulness from us, but to encourage us to use the Godly essence already dwelling in us -often represented by Fravashi, literally meaning *progressive* or *forthright* choice.

Thus we are not born of Sin, but of Godly essence; we do not need a redeemer to forgive us of our sinfulness, but we simply need to unleash the Spenta forces the Good Lord has endowed us with and resist the Angra (evil) in every way. The sinfulness comes only when we do not do so and as such is self-invited and consequently does not require a savior but only self-effort for salvation. Any sin could be expiated by doing at least, an equal amount of good deeds (*sawah*), but an easy way out of sin by forgiveness alone is not compatible with free will. We do have the concept of Repentance in the form of the Patet prayer which was obviously composed in response to the spread of Christianity in Iran and Armenia, but even here forgiveness is assured only when one turns away (*Pai-ti-ta*) from committing the sin and becomes Spenta again in his thought, words and deeds. Nothing is thus taken away from the dignity and importance of man, and man could not possibly be born of sin if man is really conceived of the same divine essence as God Himself per Z.

Again we read in the Gathas: “And may we be among those who make this World fresh” (by constantly working for Frashokereti), (Yasna 30.9). Just take a minute’s break here and ask yourself what have you done so far in your life to bring about Frashokereti? What are you going to do for it in future? You do not necessarily have to be a priest to do so; you can be an engineer, physician, lawyer, businessman, musician, clerk, or anything else and still do it, because it because God in his infinite wisdom and love has created us out of his own divine essence and bestowed upon us control over his other creatures and creations as well as our own volition, so that we can represent Him faithfully on this earth by making the right choice. Our ultimate aim, as explained in the Hoshbam prayer which is to be recited at dawn, even before the day begins, is to be one with God forever through choosing truth and righteousness. To choose rightly is our way of showing our love for God. And how much Z. loves those who love God by choosing rightly in life? In Yasna 51.22, (which seems to represent the very essence of the Gathas as also our third most important prayer) Z says God knows these loving souls best and says. “I shall, on my own part, worship them (calling them out loud) by their names and will encircle them with love whether they are living or dead.” So great was the impact of Z’s love for such souls that to this day we worship such souls by their individual name, in our religious ceremonies and all those souls who choose Right “will be (God’s) beloved to all eternity” (Yasna 49.8). Z advises: “The persons who speak the truth shall not approve of any association with those who chose *Druj*, the lie! (Yasna 49.9). [Z is very clear about the fate of those who would not choose right: “Now, the souls of the deceitful ones (who chose) bad rule, bad action, bad word, bad Conscience (Religion) and bad thought, will continue to encounter foul food as they will be welcome guests in the House of lie” (Yasna 49.11).]

Again, think of the great implications this teaching had for the development of religious thought, not only for us Zoroastrians, but for the whole mankind.

Z.'s teachings were studied very carefully by the Greeks and others Europeans. Z.'s teachings inspired them to realize the dignity of man which led to humanistic movement in Europe. This in turn led to the development of science and technology, which is to us a part and parcel of Frashokereti. [We find literal translations of Ashem Vohu, etc. in Plato's writings.] There is nothing in the Gathas that will stand in the way of Galileo's discoveries or Darwin's evolution theories as long as they lead us further on our path to Frashokereti, though they were not acceptable to Christianity. Rather the Gathas will condemn Galileo and Darwin if they procrastinated and did not choose to discover the truth (Asha) about the universe for the benefit of mankind.

[It is surprising that the best evidence to support this statement is from a Greek writer, Philo of Alexandria, who lived about 20 B.C.-40 A.D., "Among the Persians there is the order of the Magians, who investigated undisturbed the workings of nature in the attempt to acquire a full knowledge of the truth, and by clearly-stated rules order both themselves and others in the direction of the divine virtues." (*Passages in Greek and Latin literature Relating to Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism*, Translated into English by W. Sherwood Fox and R.E.K. Pemberton, D.B. Taraporevala and Sons, Bombay, 1928, 40). As a matter of fact, after reading what all the Greek writers had to say about Z. and his religion, (ibid), I was wondering whether they knew more about it than an average modern-day Zoroastrian except for their gross distortion of some of our customs which is natural as they regarded others as barbarians. For example, the Greeks knew about the two Spirits mentioned in the Gathas, "the one begotten of the purest light, the other of nether darkness, (who) are at war with each other." (Plutarch 46-120 A.D. Ibid 52) Again we find Porphyry (233-304 A.D.) saying that Pythagoras became an ardent follower of Zoroastrian religion and according to Pythagoras, Z. taught: "that men should, above all, observe the truth, as this was the only thing in which man could imitate God. For, ---- God whom they call Hormasdes (Hormazd), resemble light in his body form (& in his soul, truth," which looks like a sentence taken directly from the Gathas. (Ibid, 85-6) So do not give credit solely to the Greeks for being the architect of modern civilization. Give some credit to Z. and his Gathas also for it. Moreover, the Persian King Xerxes conquered Athens, of there were many places in Asia Minor such as Cappadocia, where Persians and Greeks lived together in large numbers for many centuries and "they transmitted to the Greeks the Zoroastrian tradition (and the legends about Zoroaster) and the religion of the Magi." The Iranians "believed that Greek wisdom was originally their own borrowed by the Greeks from their ancestors after Alexander's conquest of Persia." (E. Bickerman, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3 (1), 17 & 18). There may be some genuine truth in it though Bickerman views it differently. However, another historian, Margaret Root, asserts, the Greeks were more fascinated by the Persians than the Persians were by the Greeks. Let us then recognize the debt we owe to Z. for bringing about,

a sea-change in the esteem in which man was held in his times and emphasizing man's responsibility and potential for discovering the secrets of the universe through science and various natural resources created by God for the benefit of mankind.]

Z. says again and again in the Gathas that he has conversed with God, has beheld God himself. That does not mean God had made life easy for him. Even after God revealed the Good Religion (*Daenayao Vanghuhish*) to him, for ten long years he had no disciples, not a single one. Even his own relatives and friends turned against him, such as when he says in Yasna 46.1 and 2: "To what land should I turn? Which direction should I head toward? They keep me away from family and friends. Neither my community nor the bad rulers of the land satisfy me. How shall I satisfy Thee, O Ahura Mazda? I know, O Wise One, that I am powerless. I have (only) a few cattle and also (only) a few men, I appeal to you. Please, Lord, see to it (my appeal). (Please) lend me the help a friend gives a friend." These two passages are very important evidence for proving Z. lived and suffered as a real person, and he had his own choices to make like everybody else. He was not just a mythical character as some writers have alleged. They also indicate that whatever he said was so different from what his ancestors believed to be true that he had hard time changing their beliefs, even though God had blessed him with "the sweetness of tongue." But Z. kept fighting against all evil and evil doers until he breathed his last. Life is therefore, a constant battle against evil. If we choose right, we will choose to fight evil wherever we find it. This requirement is well represented in The Iranian epic, *Shahnameh*, the History of (Zoroastrian) Kings, though it was written by a Moslem poet, Firdausi Tusi. Even in India the Zoroastrians fought against the evil of British rule, dictatorship imposed by Indira Gandhi and even for the emancipation of Hindu women. This shows how deep the roots of Gathic teachings were among the true followers of Z. Thus, opting for the Good is not enough. We have to constantly fight the evil wherever we find it. One of the best compliments I ever read about the Zoroastrians was an editorial entitled "The Pioneers" by The Times of India (July 15, 1984) praising them "for their deep commitment to moral values. Think of half a dozen leading dissidents who have stood their ground whatever the temptations, blandishments and pressures, and if you like you can pick up all six from among the Zoroastrians. It is truly an extraordinary phenomenon," especially if you compare the total Zoroastrian population of 100,000 with the total Indian population of 1.3+ billion people. You can now see why God sent prophet Z. and not a warrior to fight the evil-doers in the world. Even 3 to 4000 years after he preached, Z.'s followers keep fighting against evil in every way they can and that too after migrating to another country.

Time and space do not permit me to explain other golden truths contained in the Gathas, but I hope this short introduction will inspire you to study them on your own. Here I have emphasized the importance of making the right

choice because it forms the crux of the Gathas. It is the very pivot of everything else Z says in the (Gathas. Therefore, our most sacred prayer is called the Ahunavar, the Principle of choice. It is not possible to have a compromise for the right and the wrong. Every man and woman has to choose one or the other (Yasna 30.2) knowing full well that all eternity depends on it. Z is not trying to discuss the origin of evil but. he is trying to root out all evil, just as a physician tries to remove all illness from a sick person.

As a psychologist I have found that it is more dangerous to make a wrong choice today than ever before in the entire history of mankind. There are more temptations today facing the youth than ever before. These temptations, to name only a few: drugs, alcohol, gambling, sexual license, preoccupation with television with its seemingly infinite number of channels, video games, casinos, credit cards, arcades, and above all choosing to marry outside the religion, which in the orthodox circles also means rejection of the religion. While in the West a more tolerant attitude towards intermarriages is increasingly becoming self-evident, such tolerance does not always ensure continuation of the religion because of various factors. Any such choice should ensure the continuity of our ancient and unique religion, especially in view of our dwindling numbers and microscopic size, and increase one's resolve and efforts to bring up his or her offspring in the religion at least in the West. Any choice that relegates us to history and wipes us out from the face of the Earth could hardly be Spenta. Responsibility follows choice and at least in North America a climate of acceptance allows no excuses for not raising the children in the fold after first making every effort to find a life partner from the fold itself and not meeting with any success for genuine reasons. In such a case one needs to educate oneself and the spouse thoroughly about our religion so that they can expose the kids to its beauty and enhance their choice to be fully and truly Zoroastrian. Indeed some of the best impetus in this regard has come from the non-Zoroastrian spouses who have thoroughly studied our religion in order to impart its knowledge to their children. Therefore it is much more important for your material and spiritual survival to make the right choice all the time. The youth of today also have many opportunities to realize their potential by making the right choice than ever before. You have more means at your command to do so than any generation before you. May Ahura Mazda and Z's Gathas inspire you to always make the right choice so you will always act as his agent on this earth and therefore never fail to rise and shine in your life and career! Amen!