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Spiritual Guidance in the Zoroastrian Religion

Ervad Soli P. Dastur

Zoroastrianism is an ancient faith that has deeply influenced world history, especially Western culture and religion. Ironically, despite its profound influence, few people are familiar with its tenets and teachings. Although Zoroastrians are not highly visible in contemporary society and are few in number, they are found in nearly every part of the world. Every major city has a Zoroastrian community, and psychotherapists, hospital chaplains, and other emergency and helping professionals will, on occasion, have the opportunity to encounter and assist Zoroastrians.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ZOROASTRIAN RELIGION

The founder of the Zoroastrian religion was Zarathushtra (or Zoroaster, in Greek). The exact date and place of his birth is highly contested, but most agree that he was born somewhere in eastern Iran between 1700 BCE and 1200 BCE.¹

According to the prophet Zarathushtra, an interesting celestial drama is being played out: the soul of the Mother Earth cries out to her creator, Ahura Mazda, complaining that the affairs on earth have been taken over by evil people. She fervently beseeches Him to send a strong warrior to fight against these evil people and restore

truth and justice in the world. Ahura Mazda asks his two helpers if they know anyone who can help Mother Earth, but they do not have any suggestions. Then Ahura Mazda Himself says, “We know such a holy person, Zarathushtra Spitama, who has heard and followed our teachings and who will fulfill Mother Earth’s wishes!”² And, so, Zarathushtra was sent to this earth to fight evil and to help good people.

His mother’s name was Dughdova, and his father’s name was Pourushaspa. Legend has it that he laughed at his birth.³ There was an aura around him. According to the Zoroastrian scriptures, “The entire Nature cried out: ‘Hail to us, for us is born an *athravan* [priest], Zarathushtra Spitama!’”⁴ The wicked priests were worried about his birth because of all the signs, and they devised a number of ways to kill him, but to no avail.

At the age of twenty, Zarathushtra left his home and went to the Ushi Darena mountain (a place holding divine intellect) to meditate and be in communion with his God, Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord). After ten years on the mountain, he finally received the Divine Knowledge from Ahura Mazda and was instructed to spread his religion to the world.

He came back to his hometown and preached the new religion, but he was shunned by all, even his own family and friends. Finally, his first-cousin Maidhyoimanha became his first disciple. Zarathushtra was very dejected and cried out, “To what land shall I turn, whither shall I go? I am forsaken by kinsmen and nobles. Neither do my people like me, nor do the wicked rulers of the land. How then, shall I please Thee, Ahura Mazda?”⁵

Zarathushtra searched in vain for a king, governor, or a chief to be his sponsor. Finally, he traveled to Balkh (Bactria) whose king, Vishtaaspa, was known for his wisdom, justice, kingly glory, and hospitality to strangers. Vishtaaspa received Zarathushtra with admiration and respect. Zarathushtra was holding the Adar Burzin Fire in his right hand and a sapling of a cypress tree with a message inscribed on each leaf: “Vishtaaspa! Accept Zarathushtra’s religion!”

When Vishtaaspa asked him to explain his religion, Zarathushtra responded, “Believe *only* in one God, Ahura Mazda [Wise Lord]! He has sent you a messenger, his prophet. Forsake all other gods,

superstitions, and magicians. Live a life of *humata* [good thoughts], *hukhta* [good words], and *hvarshata* [good deeds]. Propagate the religion throughout your kingdom!" After many trials and tribulations, Vishtaaspa and his whole family and court accepted Zarathushtra's religion, and his eldest son, Asfandyaar, fought many battles to propagate Zarathushtra's religion all over his kingdom.

Zarathushtra married Havovi and had three sons and three daughters. When he was seventy-seven years old, he was killed by a Turanian enemy soldier while he was praying in the Balkh fire temple.

DEVELOPMENT OF ZOROASTRIANISM SINCE ZARATHUSHTRA

Not much is reported about the religion after Vishtaaspa. We next hear about the religion during the Achaemenid Empire established by Cyrus the Great (559–331 BCE). In the inscriptions at Persepolis and Behistoon, we find evidence of the Zoroastrian religion during this dynasty. However, Alexander of Macedonia defeated the dynasty in 330 BCE and suppressed the religion, first by torching the magnificent buildings of Persepolis and then by massacring the clergy, thus destroying much of the religion's oral tradition.

After Alexander and his Selucid generals, the Parthian Empire came to prominence and ruled for almost five hundred years (250 BCE–226 CE). They were the main force to stop the eastward spread of the mighty Roman Empire. The Zoroastrian religion was in shambles at this point, but the later kings tried to gather all the available remnants of the religious books.⁶

The last Iranian dynasty, the Sassanian (226–641 CE), revived the Zoroastrian religion and established it as the court religion. Under this dynasty, the religion reached its zenith, and most of its current extant literature was compiled during this time. The dynasty was ruthlessly overthrown by the Arabs in 641 CE, destroying much of the tradition.

Some Zoroastrians left Iran around the tenth century and settled on the west coast of India. Known as Parsis (originally from the province of "Pars" in southern Iran), they prospered over the centuries and played a very prominent role in Indian history. Currently, however, there are fewer than one hundred thousand Parsis left in India.

There are three major sects of Parsis in India, each of which follow different religious calendars. Apart from this, however, their beliefs, prayers, and rituals have remained identical over the years. Mumbai (formerly Bombay) is still the major city for the Parsi population (around sixty-five thousand). Parsis have migrated in recent decades to Pakistan, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and nearly every part of the world. There are still around thirty-five thousand Zoroastrians living in the original country, Iran. Ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union, many groups in newly formed independent countries like Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia have claimed to have Zoroastrian lineage and profess to follow the Zoroastrian religion.

ZOROASTRIAN SCRIPTURES

Zarathushtra is traditionally acknowledged as the author of seventeen hymns called the Gathas, written in the old Avestan language, which has been extinct for many centuries. They were composed in poetic form so that they could be easily memorized, and thus they were kept intact by the Zoroastrian *mobeds* (priests) over many centuries. Eventually, they were written down using diverse scripts. The Gathas present Zarathushtra's teachings about how a human being should follow the path of *Asha* (righteousness, truth) using his or her God-given precious gift of *Vohu Manah* (good mind) to discern good and evil in this material world.⁷

Zarathushtra's followers wrote many other scriptures, including Yasna, Visperad, Vendidad, and Yashts. Later religious books report that there were twenty-one volumes of knowledge compiled by the later Zoroastrian scholars.

During the Sassanian times, most of the extant Avestan literature was translated in the Pahlavi language, which was the language of the court. We have some pieces of this Pahlavi literature, as well as others written in later centuries after the Arab conquest. These are the only remaining scriptures of the religion.⁸

BASIC TEACHINGS OF THE ZOROASTRIAN RELIGION

The most important teachings of the Zoroastrian religion are the principle of *Asha* and the proper use of the God-given ability for

humans to discern good from evil, right from wrong, known as *Vohu Mana* (good mind).

The Principle of *Asha*

The Gathic term *Asha* is related to the term *Rta* in Vedic Sanskrit, and to the term *Arta* in Old Persian. It has traditionally been given the meaning “truth,” but equally often “right.” *Rta*, which is under the control of the divinity Varuna in the Rig Veda, has quite frequently been translated as “order,” that is, the underlying scheme of existence. In Iranian thought, *Asha*, and later *Arta*, was also viewed as the principle of justice. We have, therefore, at least four meanings justifiably associated with *Asha*: *truth*, the *order* underlying the universe, *right* as the most general term of moral correctness, and *justice* as the moral principle of the social system.⁹

Asha is a sublime attribute of Ahura Mazda, next to *Vohu Mana* in hierarchy. Ahura Mazda, *Vohu Mana*, and *Asha* are the divine triad.

In his Gathas, Zarathushtra presents two worlds: the ideal world (the *mainyu* world), and the material or physical world (the *gaetha* world). First, Ahura Mazda created the ideal existence and then created the material world, which could evolve toward the perfection already envisioned.

Within this material world, there are two spiritual mentalities (*mainyus* in the Gathas), sometimes thought of as dynamic forces, particularly in the later literature, and endowed with personalities. These are the good and the evil. The good is called *Spenta Mainyu*, the benevolent mentality. The evil (not actually named in the Gathas) is *Angra Mainyu*.¹⁰

The conflict between the two spirits can only be understood in terms of *Asha*. In the material world, the good spirit is good precisely because it promotes *Asha*, that is, it brings the world toward the state of ideal perfection. The evil spirit is evil precisely because it attempts to frustrate the progressive realization of *Asha*.

It is in this aspect of Gathic theology that we can see why *Asha* is interpreted as “truth.” It is the true picture of the form of ideal existence and also the ideal toward which the conflicted world evolves. It is the ideal truth underlying all existence. In this same framework, we can see how *Asha* is interpreted as “right.” That action is right which is in accordance with *Asha*, and which furthers the realization of *Asha*.

This is the doctrine of natural law that provides the basis for moral life and moral judgment. In that sense the ethics of Zarathushtra is founded on a natural-law theory of apprehending and applying *Asha*, and not a prescriptivist theory that gives a set of moral rules to obey.

To the extent that the physical world is comprehensible and harmonious, it is in accordance with *Asha*. This is why *Asha* is interpreted as “order.” This is what we come to understand progressively in the advance of scientific knowledge. For the comprehension of this process, we must now refer to the faculty of understanding—that is, the good mind (*Vohu Mana*).

***Vohu Mana* (Good Mind)**

The good mind is a divine attribute that is possessed by human beings. In contemporary language, we might say that it is the rational capacity to grasp both facts and ideals: to understand, to discriminate, and to judge. The mind, in understanding nature, grasps its laws—that is, the order (*Asha*) underlying the facts of experience. The mind through its power to discriminate can recognize when *Asha* has been violated because it can grasp *Asha* in the abstract.¹¹ Then the mind can judge what is true (i.e., in accordance with *Asha*) and promote it, thereby dispelling evil, which is called falsehood (the opposite of *Asha*). It is the good mind that enables us to be moral and vanquish falsehood—“to deliver Falsehood into the hands of Truth.”¹² Moral responsibility demands individual reflection (including consideration of the implications of one’s intended actions) and discriminating judgment, all operations of the good mind.

In performance of action, discrimination between right and wrong is not entirely enough. Gathic theology introduces the concept of the good will, more accurately put as the spirit of benevolence, called *Spenta-Armaiti*. It is a divine attribute that, with varying degrees of zeal, inclines humans toward doing good, that is, actualizing *Asha*. *Spenta Armaiti* has two aspects. One is what we have just seen: benevolence, goodwill, or even kindness. The other is the inner consciousness of being required to do the right, an aspect that is usually articulated by the word *piety*. Both these conceptions have their content in *Asha*.¹³

The opposite of *Asha* is *Druj*, which is not just translated as “falsehood,” but also as “deceit,” the activity of perpetrating falsehood. The deceivers violate *Asha*, which in the social context is

a disturbance of the principle of just recompense, and thus generate disharmony and conflict. It is in this context that *Asha* is interpreted as “justice.” The ideal social structure where *Asha* prevails (in its interpretation as justice) is the worthy or holy society. In Gathic, it is *Khshathra Vairya*, which may be interpreted as “ideal dominion.”

The individual whose life is inspired by the realization and the will to live according to *Asha* is not only morally vindicated, but is free of malice and free of regret, thereby reaching a state of justified contentment and well-being. This state is *Haurvatat*, “well-being,” or in its exalted form, “perfection.” As individuals live this form of life, a good society approaches the ideal state (with progressively reduced coercion).

Zoroastrian scripture views the immortal soul of the individual who has realized *Asha* in thought, word, and deed as reaching a state of eternal bliss.¹⁴ The Gathic term for this is *Ameretat*. This state is sometimes called the state of best consciousness.

The relationship of *Asha* to the other five significant concepts (*Vohu Mana*, *Spenta Armaiti*, *Khshathra Vairya*, *Haurvatat*, and *Ameretat*) is a pivotal aspect of the philosophical theology of the Gathas and hence of the Zoroastrian religion.¹⁵

VOHU MANA (GOOD MIND) AND ASHA IN DAILY LIFE

Based on the principle of *Asha* and *Vohu Mana*, Zoroastrians strive to live by the following principles in their daily life.

Righteousness Is the Watchword

Zoroastrianism teaches a universal morality. Rightness of deeds is grounded both in good mind (*Vohu Mana*) and in truth-with-justice (*Asha*). Righteous deeds should be performed selflessly and with love (*Armaiti*), for right action, mind, and heart operate in unison. This is well expounded by Zarathushtra, when he wrote:

*Such are, indeed, the Saviors of the Earth.
They follow Duty's call, the call of Love;
Mazda, they listen unto Vohu Mana;
They do what Asha bids, and Thy commands;
Surely, they are the Vanquishers of Hate.*¹⁶

Thus, in Zoroastrian ethics, rightness and wrongness are determined by *Vohu Mana* and *Asha* as the yardsticks. To simplify the matter,

Zarathushtra formulated the oft-quoted maxim: “Good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.” This maxim describes the principle of *Asha* in action and the Zoroastrian creed in daily life.

One of our most important prayers, the Yatha Ahu Vairyo, states:

*Just as an Elected Leader acts according to her/his will,
So does a Religious Leader, due to her/his righteousness.
The gift of Vohu Mana (Good Mind) is for those working for
Ahura Mazda in this world;
He who acts to be the protector and nourisher of the poor, accepts
Ahura Mazda as the sovereign ruler.*¹⁷

This prayer has three main points:

1. Elected leaders and religious leaders act according to their own wills, depicting the principle of the separation of state and religion.
2. Those who work for Ahura Mazda receive the gift of *Vohu Mana* (good mind).
3. Those who protect and nourish the poor enhance the sovereignty of Ahura Mazda.

The last one, helping the poor, is the hallmark of Zoroastrians all over the world. In India, the tiny Parsi (Zoroastrian) community is so famous for their charitable deeds that it is often said of them, “Parsi! Thy name is Charity!”

Justice Shall Be Done to All

The law of *Asha* ensures that happy consequences accrue to good acts.¹⁸ An individual reaps what he or she sows. Everybody receives his or her *Mizhdem* (accrued consequences). “Reward” and “punishment,” although freely used in translations of the Gathas and in common parlance, are not appropriate substitutes for *Mizhdem*. Ahura Mazda stands beyond revenge and punishment. He is, exclusively, goodness. *Mizhda*, or consequences, denote the accrued fruitions of one’s acts, earned by performances: the best existence for the righteous and the worst for the wicked.¹⁹ *Asha* also guarantees the final victory of righteousness over falsehood that evokes God’s omnipotence.

Righteousness is the best of all that is good and is the radiant goal of life on earth. One must live righteously and for the sake of righteousness alone. Worldly rewards should not be our motivation, but duty for the sake of duty constitutes selfless service.

In another very important prayer, Ashem Vohu, we pray:

Righteousness is good!

It is the best!

It is happiness!

Happiness to him/her

*who is righteous for the sake of the best righteousness!*²⁰

The realization process of good's triumph over evil is gradual and not abrupt. A dutiful human being, as a co-worker of God, should spread righteousness and eradicate falsehood for the advancement of the world and the progress of human beings toward perfection. Sometimes the good feel that there is no justice of God. However, we have a saying: "God's cane has no sound!" He acts unseen, and justice is eventually delivered by Him! In Zoroastrian tradition, truth is justice, and justice is in *Asha*.

The final aim of all Zoroastrians is well presented in the last paragraph of another beautiful prayer, Hosh Baam:

Through the best Righteousness!

Through the excellent Righteousness!

May we see Thee!

May we surround Thee!

*May we become one unto Thee!*²¹

What a wonderful way to express the final wish of all of us!

Divine or Natural Law of *Asha*

The divine or natural law of *Asha* connotes the eternal, immutable law that governs the universe. It regulates both the spiritual and the corporal worlds. In Zoroastrianism, natural law and divine law are the same. The law of *Asha* is as changeless as God, yet it regulates change in the world and determines world dynamism. It organizes the gradual refreshment or renovation (*fresho kereti*) of the world.

Asha represents the causative law—the relation between an individual's actions and their consequences (*Mizhda*). In Zoroastrianism, it is one's actions that determine the direction of one's life and one's fortune. An individual is free to choose his or her course of action and set its consequences in motion. Thus, the consequences of each action are predetermined, but the choice of action for people is not. Thus, the fate of human beings is not

preordained. Once the choice is made, the direction of life is set. The consequences of an individual's acts—thoughts, words, and deeds—will follow in accordance with the law of *Asha*. This is God's will and God's justice.

Nothing can change the operation of the law of *Asha*. No mediation is possible. Nobody, not even the prophet, can intervene or mediate. Each action generates its consequence. There can be no addition or subtraction of the consequences. Repentance cannot alter the course of justice, either.

Although the Gathas state only the principle, the later Avesta defines in detail the character of certain types of behavior. Certain norms of conduct are highly recommended, and some acts are strictly forbidden. Wrath (*aeshma*), violence (*rama*), falsehood (*drauga*), lie (*druj*), are evil acts. Honesty (*Arsh Manangha*), fulfillment of promises (*mitra*), compassion (*merzehdika*), and charity (*rata*) are acts of piety.

Conceptualization of the moral norms set out in the Gathas helps to provide a better understanding of the ethical contents of the law of *Asha*.

Liberty

A human being's liberty is the most precious of God's bounties. It is the natural right of every person. Human liberty is so sacrosanct that God does not curtail our freedom even with regard to our choice of religion. In the Gathas we read:

*Hearken with your ears to these best counsels:
Gaze at the beams of fire and contemplate with your best judgment.
Let each person choose his creed, with that freedom of choice which
each must have at great events:
O ye, awake to these my announcements!*²²

Few prophets have invited believers to weigh the tenets of the faith with reason and good mind.

The right of liberty is also reflected in the Zoroastrian concept of the God-human relationship. In Zoroastrianism, the human being is God's co-worker, and not a slave, nor a child. Hence, neither the owner's right nor paternal authority can constrain a person's freedom of choice. The restraining forces are an individual's moral convictions or conscience (*daena*), and good mind (*Vohu Mana*).

Equality

The equality of males and females is unreservedly admitted. In all his sermons, Zarathushtra addresses man (*naa*) and woman (*naairi*) separately and on equal footing. In a sermon addressed to his daughter Pouruchista, Zarathushtra teaches young men and women to consult with their inner selves with wisdom and love (*armaiti*) before entering the uniting bond of marriage. No discrimination is allowed. Human beings—irrespective of sex, race, or color—are equal. The only superiority of individuals to each other relates to their righteousness. That is the only test for distinction.

Human Rights

In the words of Professor John R. Hinnells, “Zoroastrianism is the first religion that has taken a doctrinal and political stand on the subject of human rights and has condemned limitations or curtailment of those rights under any pretext.”²³

Although “human rights” is a modern phrase and idea, the concept of human rights as a system of values and ideas is engrained in Zoroastrianism. The Gathas condemn tyrannical and unjust rule and advise the faithful not to submit to oppressive rulers.

Body (*tanu*) and soul (*urvan*) are inviolable, and their integrity should be respected. Physical and mental assaults are repugnant acts. Nothing should be done in contravention of this law. The Gathas state:

*In full accord with law shall all men act,
The law that forms the basis of all life,
With strictest justice shall the Ratu judge,
Whether it be the true man or the false;
Against the false in him he shall with care
Weigh all the truth that with it has been misled.*²⁴

The concept of slavery is alien to Zarathushtra’s teachings and no caste system or class privilege is recognized in the Gathas. The best evidence of this is provided by Zarathushtra’s prayer for Kavi (Gushtasp), wherein he hopes that some of the king’s sons would go into agriculture, some into the military, and some work for the religion. The class privileges that existed in the time of the Sassanians were contrary to Zarathushtra’s teachings.

Protection of the Environment

Concern for creation is an aspect of *Asha*. The later Avesta states that defilement of soil, water, air, and fire in any form or degree is considered a trespass against nature and a transgression of the law of *Asha*. This protective attitude has its origins in the Gathic understanding of life and the material world. Matter and life are blessings from God and as such are worthy of reverence. This joy-producing world is being sustained by Ahura Mazda, and as His co-workers, human beings have a responsibility to act wisely and gratefully in preservation of the world. Zoroastrians acknowledge the importance of keeping nature free from pollution. The natural elements are essential for existence and progress, and human beings must act as the guardians of nature. Anybody who acts in breach of this trust encroaches upon the law of *Asha* and will encounter misery.

Active and Constructive Life

Idleness begets evil. Divine wisdom, righteousness, and moral courage flourish in an active life. The prophet teaches his disciples to be both active and productive:

*O Wise Jaamaaspa Hvogva, I have taught
That action, not inaction, higher stands.
Obeying then His will, worship through deeds;
The Great Lord and Guardian of the Worlds,
Through His Eternal Law discriminates
Who are truly wise and who unwise.²⁵*

Monasticism, celibacy, asceticism, and self-mortification have no place in Zoroastrianism. The function of *Ahu* (the Lord) is to preserve life and vitality, to give human beings an opportunity to enhance their moral apprehension. The aim of life is happiness—*ushta*. Life is the battlefield between good and evil, and human beings should act as warriors of good. This activism of life is well illustrated in our Visperad prayer:

*O Zoroastrian Mazdayasnans!
Hold your feet, hands, and understanding in readiness,
For the purpose of doing proper, timely, charitable works, and
For the purpose of avoiding improper, untimely, and uncharitable
works.*

*Practice good industry here.
Help the needy and relieve them from their needs.*²⁶

This has been fondly called the Zoroastrian Creed.

Progress and Modernity

Asha is the law of progress. It is an organic law and capable of accommodating modernity without any change in its essence. The Gathic principles are general. For instance, these principles guide humans to respect the environment. In disposing of the dead, Zoroastrians are free to use the method that is least harmful to the environment, meeting the exigencies of time and place.

The Gathas teach humans to be mindful of their physical and mental health. With acquired knowledge and advances in health sciences and technology, one must make decisions as to one's diet and the type of meat or drink one consumes.

The Gathas recommend against submission to unjust and despotic rulers. With the experiences and the knowledge acquired by social scientists, a Zoroastrian should be able to decide on the best system of government. *Asha* is the law of progress and is consistent with modernity. Zoroastrians in diaspora will succeed if they exercise good thinking, *Vohu Mana*, and tread the path of *Asha*, as our ancestors did and our co-religionists are doing in Iran, India, and Pakistan.

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE IN THE ZOROASTRIAN RELIGION

Religious guidance, for typical Zoroastrians, in the form of monthly consultation (or weekly confession to a priest, as is practiced in the Roman Catholic tradition) is a very foreign idea. The main principle of the religion—using your God-given good mind (*Vohu Mana*) with the principles of *Asha* (righteousness, truthfulness)—places a personal responsibility on each Zoroastrian to be a good person, and he or she is accountable for all his or her actions and cannot be absolved from them by confessing to someone.

Understanding this, how does a Zoroastrian obtain spiritual guidance? Before we address this question, let us look at the daily life of a typical Zoroastrian in her home, Mumbai, in the Parsi/Irani community.²⁷ Her name is Anaahitaa, and she lives with her family in a *baug* (a Zoroastrian colony or neighborhood), which has an *agiyaari*

(fire temple) nearby. All over Mumbai there are more than forty such fire temples, and so they are in easy reach for most Parsis and Iranis.

Anaahitaa will visit her nearest *agiyaari* at least four or five times a month on special holy days; her very devout relatives may visit daily before going to work. Usually, a *mobed* (priest) is present to take care of people's religious needs. Anaahitaa washes her face and hands and performs the Kushti prayer before entering the prayer hall. She then brings a piece of sandalwood as an offering to the holy fire in the sanctum sanctorum, places it on the threshold, and takes a pinch of holy ash from a ladle and places it on her forehead. The sandalwood is taken by the *mobed* and is offered to the fire.

Inside Anaahitaa's home there is a sacred nook lighted by a floating candle, which burns perpetually. The nook is adorned by photos of Zarathushtra, *Farohar* (or *Faravahar*)—a Zoroastrian symbol depicting a winged human figure that represents the guardian spirit—and departed relatives of the family. This is the place where Anaahitaa and her family do their prayers each day, usually by themselves, each fulfilling his or her religious duties.

On holy days, Anaahitaa and her family will go to the *agiyaari* to attend a special ceremony, performed by the *mobeds*. This is followed by a short *hum bandagi* (congregational prayer) recited by all present.

Six times a year, Anaahitaa and her family attend special *gahambar* (seasonal) celebrations performed in outdoor *baugs* (celebration halls) where a *Jashan* ceremony is performed, followed by a community feast. These are the occasions to commemorate the six creations of Ahura Mazda, and every Zoroastrian is required to celebrate them in community.

The last ten days of the religious calendar are holy days for all Zoroastrians. Special ceremonies are performed in the *agiyaaris* for the departed souls of family members, and many devout Zoroastrians attend them, performing their own individual prayers during the ceremonies. The eleventh day is the Zoroastrian New Year, Navroze, celebrated with new clothes, prayers, food, visiting neighbors, and merrymaking.

Mobeds are not formally trained to provide spiritual guidance, as in other religions. However, they learn some skills from their elders by osmosis. It was a *mobed* who taught Anaahitaa her daily prayers,

and *mobeds* are the ones who prepare children for their *Navjote* (initiation) ceremonies.

RELIGIOUS LIVES OF ZOROASTRIANS IN DIASPORA

Most of the traditions Anaahitaa and her family follow in India are also followed by her distant relations in the diaspora, with a few major differences. Unless they live in big metropolitan cities in the United Kingdom, North America, Australia, or New Zealand, they do not have a formal *agiyaari* close by, such as those in India do. Usually, in major cities like New York, Chicago, Toronto, Houston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, a religious place usually referred to as *Dar-e-Mher* is set up similar to an *agiyaari*, but the fire is not kept burning continuously. Usually, such places are too far for many Zoroastrian families and hard to reach for all functions.

Because of that, the private nook in the home takes the place of the *agiyaari* for many families. The community gets together in the form of Sunday religious classes and for celebrations of holy days, usually in such big cities.

Zoroastrian Associations have been formed in many cities in North America, and the Federation of the Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA) has been formed to look after the needs of these individual associations, as well as all Zoroastrians in North America.²⁸ An annual FEZANA general meeting is hosted by different association cities, with a North American Zoroastrian Congress every two years in North America, and a World Zoroastrian Congress with all Zoroastrian groups of the world every four to five years.

OFFERING SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE TO ZOROASTRIANS

Though a very ancient and influential religion, Zoroastrianism is neither well known nor well understood. Whenever possible, it is best for Zoroastrians to seek spiritual guidance from a *mobed* in their own community. When, however, this is impossible—such as in crisis situations, hospital emergency rooms, or when a Zoroastrian is undergoing psychological counseling or is, perhaps, estranged from his or her community or religion—people of other faiths may find themselves in the position of offering care to Zoroastrians. In these circumstances, non-Zoroastrians may find it instructive to keep in mind the following:

Spiritual Discernment

Zoroastrianism is a religion that emphasizes spiritual discernment. A Zoroastrian is responsible for choosing between right and wrong, and she is solely responsible for the choice and its consequences. Discernment is the most important spiritual discipline in the Zoroastrian faith and is considered a holy act. A spiritual guide can listen to his Zoroastrian client as she processes the choices before her aloud and can hold sacred space as she seeks the divine will in discerning between the paths before her. He can hold the ideal of *Asha* before her and bear witness to the unfolding of *Vohu Mana* (good mind) as she discerns. A spiritual guide should expect to experience the Holy in such discernments, since good mind is one of the ways that Ahura Mazda manifests goodness in the world. A spiritual guide should remember that “good thoughts, good words, and good deeds” are foundational to Zoroastrian spirituality and have significant bearing on any act of discernment.

Partnership with God

Zoroastrians stand before God with dignity. Spiritual guides should keep in mind that Zoroastrians see themselves as partners with God in the work of creation, not as slaves or children. There is a dignity inherent in those who fully identify with their Zoroastrian faith. They approach Ahura Mazda as friends in a relationship of mutual respect and reciprocity. Spiritual guides can remind Zoroastrians who feel defeated of their partnership with God and their responsibility for the fate of the world. They can help clients refocus their energies from the small concerns of their own lives to Ahura Mazda’s project of resisting evil and moving the world toward perfection.

Individual Responsibility

Human beings are responsible for their own actions. Zoroastrians fully embrace their freedom of choice and understand the responsibility to choose what is right and good to be a primary discipline of their faith. A Zoroastrian believer is responsible to God alone for her actions. No other person is responsible for her actions in this life, nor can any person absolve her of her sins or intervene with God on her behalf. Judgment (rendered on the fourth day after death on the Chinvat Bridge) will be based on one’s actual actions, not on one’s intentions, and remorse cannot alter one’s destiny. However,

repentance that leads to good thoughts, good words, and good seeds can, given time, shift the balance of one's life and eternal destiny. Spiritual guides can remind Zoroastrian clients that their decisions matter in the grand scheme of things.

NOTES

1. Some scholars think he might have lived even earlier.
2. The Gathas, Yasna 29.
3. He was born on the sixth day Khordad and the first month Farvardin of the Zoroastrian calendar, which is known as the Khordad Sal.
4. Farvardin Yasht 94.
5. The Gathas, Yasna 46.1
6. Especially Vologases I (51–77 CE).
7. The Gathas are preserved within the Yasna scripture as chapters 28–34, 43–51, and 53.
8. A very good reference for all our scriptures can be found in the excellent website “Avesta–Zoroastrian Archives,” compiled by Joseph Peterson: www.avesta.org.
9. *An Introduction to the Gathas of Zarathushtra*, ed. Dina G. McIntyre. Available at <http://www.zarathushtra.com/z/article/dgm> (accessed January 20, 2014).
10. This term appears in post-Gathic Avesta and becomes *Ahriman* in the Pahlavi texts. The doctrine of the two spirits appears in Yasna 30, verses 3–5, with a reference to their followers in verse 6. Another reference to the two appears in Yasna 45, verse 2, where the personality interpretation is persuasive.
11. That *Asha* can be grasped by the good mind is indicated in Yasna 28, verse 6.
12. Yasna 30, verse 8.
13. This close connection finds expression in the following sections of the Gathas: Yasna 32, verse 2; Yasna 43, verses 1 and 10; Yasna 46, verse 16; Yasna 49, verse 2.
14. Yasna 46, verse 10.
15. Farhang Mehr and Kaikhosrov D. Irani, “Asha (God’s Will),” *An Introduction to the Gathas*, ed. McIntyre.
16. Gathas, Yasna 48.12, Taraporewala translation.
17. Ervad K. E. Kanga, *Khordeh Avesta* (1880), corrected English edition, 2013, trans. and ed., Ervad Maneck Furdoonji Kanga. Available at www.avesta.org/kanga/ka_english_kanga_epub.pdf.
18. Yasna 44.19, 51.15, 53.6.
19. Yasna 51.13
20. Ervad K. E. Kanga, *Khordeh Avesta*.
21. Hosh Baam, trans. Faramroze Patel, for the Avesta classes at M. F. Cama Athoranan Institute, Mumbai.
22. Gathas, Yasna 30.2, Dinshaw Irani translation.

23. John R. Hinnells, “Theory and Practice of Human Rights in Zoroastrianism” (presented at the Fourth World Zoroastrian Congress, Bombay, 1985).
24. Gathas, Yasna 33.1, Taraporewala translation.
25. The Gathas, Yasna 46.17, Taraporewala translation.
26. Chap. 15, verse 1.
27. The Parsi community consists of the Zoroastrians who migrated in the tenth century from Iran after the Arab conquest. They settled in the western state of Gujarat, finally concentrating in Mumbai later on. Iranis are Zoroastrians who migrated from Iran much later, during the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. Both communities follow essentially the same religious principles; however, they follow different religious calendars. From this main stronghold in Mumbai, as well as from Iran, many Zoroastrians migrated to Pakistan, England, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and almost all corners of the world. This is known as the second diaspora of the Zoroastrians. Zoroastrians in diaspora are very closely aligned with their co-religionists in India and Iran but have developed their own daily lifestyles to assimilate in their surroundings.
28. Please refer to www.fezana.org for more details.

RESOURCES

Many of the Zoroastrian dasturs (highly qualified *mobeds*) and scholars have written books offering guidance to Zoroastrians on how to live a faithful and productive life. One of the best of these is *Homage unto Ahura Mazda*. This excellent book, in the form of daily thoughts, was written meticulously by a great scholar, Dastur Dr. M. N. Dhalla, who was the head dastur of the Anjuman (Zoroastrian community) in Karachi, Pakistan, over a long period of time until his death. The full text of the book is available for free online at www.zarathushtra.com/z/article/dhalla/index.htm. For those who find themselves in the position of working with Zoroastrians on a regular basis or who are simply interested in exploring our historic faith further, I recommend this book with a whole heart. Its wisdom is such that I believe it would be inspirational to people of all religious traditions.

