



**FEDERATION OF ZOROASTRIAN ASSOCIATIONS  
OF NORTH AMERICA**

*Representing 25 Zoroastrian Associations in the USA and Canada*

***HAPPY HOLIDAYS!***

**The Secular Holiday Season**

In the USA, Thanksgiving is celebrated on the third Thursday each November. In Canada, Thanksgiving comes one month earlier. It is a day set aside to give thanks for our blessings, and to bless others through giving and love. Thanksgiving is also the beginning of the secular holiday season, which runs through Christmas.

The cooler weather and shorter days are compensated by the festivity, lights, and a celebration of the spirit of giving. Even snowy, dreary days are cherished with haunting melodies of "I'll be home for Christmas", and "I am dreaming of a white Christmas." As Christmas nears, office parties begin. The more prosperous the business, the more opulent the parties. Country clubs and restaurants do a booming business. Retailers have special promotions and continuous "sales". Schools and colleges recess for winter break.

Scenes of Nativity tell us of the Three Wise Men, the Magi who bore wonderful gifts for the Babe in the Manger. Lighted Christmas trees are set up in homes, with beautifully wrapped gifts. The spirit of Christmas giving is exemplified in O. Henry's famous short story: "The Gift of the Magi" [if you haven't read it, go to [http://www.online-literature.com/o\\_henry/1014](http://www.online-literature.com/o_henry/1014)]. These are the carefree days of family togetherness and love and friendship.

But these holidays are not just Christian religious festivals. Obviously, there is a connection between wisdom, charity and gift-giving and the Magi. During this time, Jews celebrate Hanukkah, African-Americans celebrate Quanzaa, and we Zarathushtis celebrate Yalda.

**The Meaning of Christmas**

The celebration of Christmas owes much more to the ancient traditions of the Persians and the Egyptians than most people realize.

Luke's account of the shepherds and the "Light of Glory" at the time of Christ's birth suggest Zoroastrian influences. Matthew's account adds the visit of the wise men from the East led by a star. The bright star Sirius rising on the horizon had been for millennia the watched-for sign that announced the rising of the flood waters of the Nile. It was the custom to spend the night in singing and attending to the images of the gods on the eve of that night. Today, this "Day of the Magi" is celebrated on January 6 in the Greek Orthodox Church.

The present custom of celebrating the Nativity on December 25 was instituted in 353 or 354 in Rome, under Pope Liberius, possibly to absorb the festival of Mithra. According to legend, Mithra had a virgin birth from the mother rock. Christ, like Mithra, was recognized as the risen sun, the renovator of the world.

Jews had enjoyed complete freedom to observe their religious practices under the Achaemenians. After Judea became a province of the Seleucid empire, Antiochus ordered the Jews to install Greek statues in their temples. Hanukkah (or Chanukah) celebrates the victorious struggle of the Jews to drive out the Greeks. They rededicated their temple by lighting a perpetual oil lamp on the 25th day of Kislev, which falls on Dec 15 this year. Hanukkah is observed by decorating homes, gift-giving, and entertainment of friends and family. Some Jews erect a Hanukkah bush during the holidays.

During first century BC, the Essene tribe of pious Jews retreated to the desert of Qumran near the Dead Sea to await the arrival of the Messiah. The Qumran texts give detailed accounts of the preparations for the coming Armageddon between the sons of light and the sons of darkness – clearly influenced by Zoroastrian belief in the arrival of the Saoshyant, who will lead us to finally remove the forces of evil from the physical world.

### **The Celebration of Yalda**

Yalda, a Syriac word imported into the Persian language by Syriac Christians during Sasanian times, means birth. “Shab e Yalda” or “Shab e Cheleh” is the celebration of Winter solstice on December 21<sup>st</sup>, the last day of the month of *Azar*, and the longest night of the year. The next day, the first day of the month of *Dayh*, is known as *Khore rooz* (the day of the sun). Since the days will now be getting longer and the nights shorter, this day marks the victory of the sun over darkness.

Shab e Yalda is a social occasion, when family and friends get together for fun and merriment, reading of poetry and the Shah Nama. Children are allowed to stay up all night. Dried fruits, nuts, seeds and fresh winter fruits are offered. As the sun rises in the morning, Mithra (Mehr) is welcomed as "the light of the early morning" with communal recitation of *Havan gah*.

***Do enjoy the Holidays with your family and friends, give to charities, invite students who may be alone into your homes. We Zarathushtis have much to be thankful for.***

***Yasmin & I send you our best wishes for peace and joy throughout the year.***

*Rustom Kevala*  
FEZANA President

December 2006, Dayh 1376 YZ