

Mehrgan.

by

Dina G. McIntyre.

In a time of myth and legend, before recorded history, we are told that there was a cruel tyrant called Zohak, under whose rule, the people suffered greatly and lived in fear as to what terrors each new day might bring. Zohak's cruelty and injustice became so intolerable, that he was finally overthrown under the leadership of Kaveh the blacksmith, and the legendary hero Faridoon, who became king in his place.

Upon the defeat of Zohak, Faridoon decreed that a great festival be held, and, according to Zoroastrian tradition, this is the festival which came to be known as Mehrgan.

It is widely held, however, that the origins of Mehrgan pre-dated Zoroastrianism and the feast was originally celebrated to honor Mithra, a pre-Zoroastrian deity of the Indo-European tribes. It is interesting that in the centuries following Zarathushtra, instead of persecuting this religion, the Zoroastrians simply absorbed it, Zoroastrianized it, and included it within the tradition.

The word mithra means contract, keeping one's word. It governs relationships. In later Sasanian times, the word evolved into *mehr*.¹ In addition to contracts and keeping one's word, the meaning of *mehr* included good relationship or friendship.² And its symbol was light. So in essence, Mehrgan is a festival to celebrate the victory of goodness, and is also a festival of friendship and light.

While it is interesting to know how Mehrgan originated, the question I have is: Why has it survived for so many thousands of years? Why was this festival embraced by our monotheistic Zoroastrian ancestors before recorded history, as the celebration of goodness over evil. Why is this festival still remembered and celebrated today, when the ancient Indo-European deity who started it all has been forgotten for centuries? Why has it survived?

I think the answer to that question is that there is, and always will be, a hunger in human hearts for the good guys to win. This is what Mehrgan represents – that darkness and evil will be overcome, that goodness, integrity, friendship, and light will win – all fundamentals of the Zoroastrian religion – small wonder that ancient Zoroastrians embraced this festival and made it their own.

Today, we tend to intellectualize our religion – to concentrate on the fact that it values intelligence and righteousness, which it does, and it is good that we should remember that. But we tend to forget the central role that goodness and friendship play in our religion. In ancient times, our religion was called the Good Religion, because a commitment to goodness is at its very core. Even the divine characteristic, *vohu manah*, is not just intelligence, but **good** thinking (*vohu mano*) – intelligence committed to goodness. And the ways in which Zarathushtra uses 'good mind' in the Gathas encompasses all aspects of good conscious activity, including creativity, the good emotions, et cetera.

Friendship also is a central concept of our religion. Zarathushtra describes the relationship between man and God, not as that of a father to a child, or a master to a servant, but as that of a friend to a friend, or a beloved to a beloved.

And we all know the role that light plays in our religion. Being human, it is easier to remember abstract things when we tie them to material symbols. But, as human beings tend to do, we sometimes fixate on the symbol, and forget the meaning behind it.

In the Gathas, Zarathushtra uses light as an adjective, or symbol, to describe *Ahura Mazda* and His divine values – truth and good thinking. For example, he speaks of “sunlike truth” Y32.2,³ and “the sunlike gain of good thinking” Y53.4.⁴ He describes *Ahura Mazda* as sunlike and glorious:

“...I shall declare to you in verse...the glories of Him who offers solicitude, the Wise Lord.....” Y46.17.

“...May the Wise Lord listen, in whose glory I have taken counsel with good thinking.....” Y45.6.

“...Him who has the appearance of the sun...” Y43.16.

And the later Avestan texts also frequently speaks of the Wise Lord as radiant and glorious.⁵

So well known was this symbolism in the ancient world, that the philosopher, Porphyry, who lived around 300 AD described the 'God' worshipped by the Iranians as follows. He said:

“The body of Oromazdes is like light and his soul like truth.”⁶

In short, Zarathushtra uses light as a symbol to describe the divine. If you think about it, this is a very lovely idea. Because Zarathushtra’s idea of the divine, is not some patriarch with a long beard, sitting up in the clouds somewhere. He teaches that the divine lives within each one of us. So as we increase the divine in ourselves, by bringing 'God's' attributes, the amesha spenta, to life with our thoughts, words and actions, we become more filled with light. In ancient Iranian paintings, this idea was depicted as a flaming halo, or glory around the head of such a person.

And the Persian poet, Jami, expresses the same thought, but in a different way. He says:

“The essences are each a separate glass,
Through which the Sun of Being’s Light is passed,
Each tinted fragment sparkles with the Sun,
A thousand colors, but the Light is One.”⁷

If the light of our Beloved Friend lives in each one of us, we begin to understand why, in Zarathushtra's view, we must treat each other with friendship, with respect, with goodness, with love, in short, with *mehr*.⁸

It is interesting how this symbolism has found expression in different ways in Zoroastrian traditions. For example, the fire for an *atash behram* is created by mixing many different fires – the household fire, the fires from many different trades, a shepherd's fire, a military fire, fire from lightning, fire from a neighbor's hearth, fire from a burning corpse, and fire from burning trash.⁹ What does this tell us? It tells me that the person who invented this ritual was trying to demonstrate that the sacred comes from all aspects of life. I find that incredibly beautiful. Indeed, this idea is reflected in ancient texts, which state that there is a fire in all things -- in man, in animals, in plants, in the clouds, in the world itself.¹⁰

That beautiful symbolism is worth re-creating in our lives, to remind us of its meaning. I hope that some day, our community centers will do a mini-adaptation of that ancient symbolism, by having each family that attends a celebration, contribute a flame to create a community fire. As we do, I hope we will look behind the symbolism to what it represents, that we are using the divine within each of us to create a community of friendship and goodness and light.

I used to live in Pennsylvania, where the winters are long, and dark, and cold, not unlike the winters in Iran. I like to think of Mehrgan as an act of defiance. In the face of winter, with its long nights, we celebrate a festival of light, an affirmation of belief that the darkness will not win.

Is it worth keeping this festival of Mehrgan alive today? Well, the ways in which ancient Zoroastrians dressed, their language, their diets, their habits, their sports, their institutions, all are very different from the way we live our lives today. But the values they cherished, the things of the spirit that flamed their souls, and gave meaning to their lives, are equally relevant to us. We just need to re-invent the material expressions of these things of the spirit, to inspire and delight us, and in the process enjoy the experience.

If you think the festival of Mehrgan is worth keeping alive to remind us of these spiritual values, I'd like to make a suggestion. Zarathushtra was very wise. He taught that the material and the spiritual are inextricably linked. Material things, without the spiritual, are empty. By the same token, as wonderful as things of the spirit may be, how do they find expression except through the material – through thoughts, words and actions. The happiest outcome is when material things are infused with a good spirit. And when things of the spirit are effectively expressed in material words and actions.

So for our Mehrgan celebrations, I suggest the following: Several months before the festival, get all of your kids together as a group. Explain to them the values which the festival promotes. You may even tell them the activities with which Mehrgan has been practiced in the past, to give them ideas. Then ask them to come up with ways of celebrating it, which will symbolize or express the meaning of Mehrgan in ways that they can relate to, and also have a lot of fun with. Try to remember that our kids have in them the divine characteris-

tic, *vohu manah*, good thinking. Give them a chance to use it. You may be pleasantly surprised with the results.

Let the role of the adults be purely supportive. Resist the temptation to tell your kids how they should do it, or to impose your ideas on them.

And whatever the kids eventually come up with, in the spirit of Mehrgan, treat their views with respect. Even though you may feel that your ideas were a lot better. The objective here is meaningful participation. If the kids come up with something impractical, as kids sometimes do, show them the problems in a friendly way, and let them use their own good thinking (their *vohu manah*) to work around the problems.

Ancient Zoroastrian invented many beautiful symbols to express spiritual values -- symbols that we today have forgotten. If we want to preserve the spirit of Zarathushtra's teachings, if we want our religion to inspire and delight our souls, and bring joy to our lives, we need to bring back those ancient symbols that are lovely, (like creating a communal fire from many separate fires to celebrate Mehrgan the festival of light).

And we also need to re-invent ways of expressing Zarathushtra's beautiful teachings in ways that are meaningful in today's world -- just as our ancestors did in their world. Our children are the most valuable resource we have for that process. Who knows. Maybe the children of our communities will add new Mehrgan symbols and traditions to demonstrate the victory of light and friendship over darkness and enmity, and have a lot of fun doing it.

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¹ According to Dr. Esmail Nooriala, the word "mehr" is derived from the Aryan word "mei" meaning relationship. See Nooriala, *A Brief Description of Mithra, Mehr, Mehrgan and Yalda*, a talk given in Denver, and obtained from the Internet.

² Ibid.

³ "...He who is allied with good thinking and the good companion of sunlike truth....." Y32.2. All quotations from the Gathas are from Insler, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra*, (Brill, 1975).

⁴ "...the Wise Lord shall grant (to her) the sunlike gain of good thinking..." Y53.4.

⁵ Y1.1, Sirozah 1.1, Ormazd Yasht verse 12, to list a couple of examples.

⁶ Quoted in Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism*, Lecture 2, page 67 (AMS Press NY reprint). See also, T. R. Sethna, *Book of Instructions on Zoroastrian Religion*, page 17 (published by Informal Religious Meetings Trust Fund, Karachi, 1980).

⁷ I am indebted to Dr. Daryoush Jahanian for this translation by Dr. S. H. Nasr (whose translation I do not have access to).

⁸ A contemporary Iranian poet, Akhavan Saales, laments that: "We have surpassed the orbit of the moon, but we are yet far, far, from the domain of Mehr." Quoted from the paper of Dr. Esmail Nooriala, referred to above.

⁹ J. J. Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees*, 2d ed. 1986 reprint, pages 200-201.

¹⁰ Y17.11, a later text written in the Younger Avestan language, as translated by Mills and explained in his footnotes, in *Sacred Books of the East*, Volume 31, pages 258 to 259; and the Bundahishn, a much later text written in Pahlavi, as translated by E.W.West, in *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 5, pages 61 through 64.

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