

High Feasts & Holy Days

Lesson 7: Nowruz (pronounced *no-rooz*)

3.19.2017

Objectives: Explore Nowruz and its ritual observances celebrating spring and the new year.

Materials: flipchart, lesson attachment

- Cleaning rags, water; vacuum
- Poetry of Hafiz, from *The Gift*
- nice tablecloth and table
- sprouts growing in a dish
- cream of wheat
- dried fruit
- garlic
- apples
- sumac berries (or red berries)
- vinegar
- hyacinth, coins, candles, mirror, Easter eggs, a holy book (Qu'ran, Bible, Hafiz)

Time allotments suggested and meant to be adapted for **75 minute class**.

1. **Nametags and Graffiti Wall** (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ What is the best part of springtime?
 - ▶ What in your life really needs “spring cleaning”?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. **Silly Fun: “What would you take?”** (5 minutes max)

Divide youth into groups of 3 or 4. Taking turns, each youth respond to the following scenario: “You have been exiled to a deserted island for a year. In addition to survival essentials, you may take one piece of music, one book, and one luxury item you can carry with you. What would you take and why?” Everyone takes a moment to think before sharing their choices with others in the group.

3. **Chalice Lighting:** Light the chalice, saying these words together: *“We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”*

Teacher reads: (traditional greeting for Nowruz)

“May everyday of the new year glow with new cheer and happiness for you and your family. Nowruz Moobarak!” (literally, “blessed Nowruz!”)

4. **Joys and Sorrows** (10 minutes): Listening is a precious gift that we offer one another at church. Using the balance scale and the blue (sorrows) and yellow (joys) stones, invite youth to share a joy and/or a sorrow from the past week, as a way of *meeting* one another with our lives and *sharing* in community. You will want to set limits (e.g. two stones max per person) so that no one monopolizes sharing time.

Each Sunday, a copy of the congregation’s Embracing Meditation will be made available to your class, so that stones can be put in for those whose names are being spoken in the Sanctuary.

5. **Celebrating Nowruz, the Spring Equinox** (5 minutes)

Teacher summarizes:

- Nowruz is the Persian/Iranian 13-day feast of the start of spring and the historic start of the Iranian calendar year. *Now-ruz* means “new day.” This holiday is celebrated across Greater Asia and into Eastern Europe, in one form or another and has much in common with Jewish and Celtic Pagan celebrations of the vernal (spring) equinox.
- A legend celebrates the god-king Jamshid, who saved the earth from a killer winter designed to destroy all human and animal life.
- Nowruz likely has origins as an ancient earth-based holy day, but has been claimed by the Zoroastrian religion and the Baha’i faith.
- In 2017, Nowruz falls on March 20th.

6. **Our Ritual Observance** (40 minutes)

a) **Set a precedent for the new year:** Persians believe that whatever you do on this “new day” will dominate the rest of the year. If you are grumpy today, you will have a nasty year. If you are friendly and kind, it will be a friendly sort of year. The day sets a mystical pattern. So invite youth to take a moment to get into the right mindset.

b) **The first sacred task of Nowruz is spring cleaning:** People must clean their homes to prepare for the new year. Using cleaning supplies in your classroom, invite youth to perform the following tasks as a team:

- Take down all old signs/decorations that aren’t needed.
- Recycle any paper that’s not being used any more.

- Gather all trash into trash bins.
 - Organize all classroom materials, furniture.
 - Vacuum the rug.
 - Clean whiteboards, flipchart, etc.
 - Check and clean outside area in hallway.
- c) **Set the table of *Seven Things* using the extra table in the classroom:** The *Haft Sin* (*Seven Things* that all start with the letter “S” in the Farsi language) are symbols of good luck, life, and beauty. This table is like an altar and should be assembled with care.

Invite youth to put a tablecloth over the table provided. On it, youth take turns placing each of the following items, with teachers facilitating discussion about their symbolic meaning:

- *sabzeh*—wheat, barley, lentil, or other sprouts growing in a dish (symbolizing rebirth)
- *samanu*—a sweet pudding made from wheat germ (symbolizing affluence)
- *senjed*—sweet dried fruit of the oleaster tree (symbolizing love)
- *sīr*—garlic (symbolizing medicine)
- *sīb*—apples (symbolizing beauty and health)
- *somaq*—sumac berries (or other berries symbolizing sunrise in color)
- *serkeh*—vinegar (symbolizing age and patience)

Additional items on the table may include (we’ll include only some):

- *Sonbol* - Hyacinth (plant) – representing new life
- *Sekkeh* - Coins – representative of wealth
- traditional Iranian pastries such as baghlava, toot, naan-nokhodchi
- *Aajeel* – dried nuts, berries and raisins
- lit candles (enlightenment and happiness)
- a mirror (symbolizing cleanness and honesty)
- decorated eggs, sometimes one for each member of the family (fertility)
- a bowl of water with goldfish (life within life)
- rosewater, believed to have magical cleansing powers
- national colors for a patriotic touch
- a holy book (e.g. Qur’an, Bible, Torah, or poetry of Hafiz)

- d) **Read the poetry of Hafiz**, a 14th century mystic and Muslim poet whose writings about God are beloved among Unitarian Universalists. His name literally means “guardian,” a term used by modern Muslims to mean someone who has memorized the entire Qu’ran. Hafiz refers to God as a friend and a lover to all of humankind.
- Invite youth to read 3 of his poems quietly to themselves (see attached poems from *The Gift*.) Then invite youth volunteers to read aloud these poems of love in their best poetic voice.

7. Questions for Discussion (15 minutes)

- Like Nowruz and Imbolc, how might earth-based religions and seasonal holy days shape our understanding of the natural environment? (*Consider: Native traditions who regarded forests and rivers and animals as imbued with spirituality and living spirits. Of the Earth and elements as sacred and alive.*)
- Are there specific, meaningful points of connection for you between religions and environmentalism?
- Are there particular beliefs/values/practices that raise questions for you? (e.g., vegetarianism, living simply and close to nature, western medicine vs. alternative medicine, genetically modified foods.)
- How might climate change and the environmental crisis serve to further cooperation and friendship among the world’s religions?

8. Say goodbye until next time: Extinguish the chalice, saying together:

“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”

9. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- return blue/yellow stones to containers
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets