



## FEZANA Age-Appropriate Lesson Plan

**Subject Category (circle one):** Religion/Ceremony    History Prayer    Gathas **Comparative Religion**  
Shahnameh

**Age Group (circle one):** PreK-K    Grades 1-3    Grades 4-5    Grades 6-8    **Grades 9-12**

**Lesson # (if applicable):** 2

**Subject of the Lesson:** Zoroastrianism

**Background Knowledge for the Teacher:**

### Zoroastrianism

Acknowledged as one of the earliest monotheistic faiths, Zoroastrianism was revealed to Prophet Zarathushtra who lived somewhere around the Aral Sea circa 1800 BCE. Zarathushtra brought his divine message to humanity through his hymns – the *Gathas*. He called his religion “*Daena Vanguhi*” in his language, *Avesta*, which means to live with a “Good Conscience”. His religion embraces the worship of one Supreme God, whom he refers to as *Ahura Mazda* (Lord of Supreme Wisdom). Zarathushtra presents a view of our world that is evolving towards renovation and perfection through collective good acts of humanity.

For the first time in human history, Zarathushtra introduced to mankind the concepts of choice and free will. Man must think for himself before he can believe and act. His teachings gave rise to concepts of democracy, gender equality, brotherhood of mankind, and ethical principles of life; all of which are considered most important in the modern world.

Zarathushtra believed God to be the mightiest and strongest, though never to be feared; but to be seen as a friend and an ally. His greatest triumph seems to be in revealing to people that man can both serve and honor God through a rational, ethical structure, rather than through instinctive worship or blind faith. For him, religion is not an imposition or prescription. It is the presentation of a religious vision – a vision which is a response to the quest of the human spirit seeking significance of one’s existence.

He did not promote the ideas of renunciation, celibacy, and deprivation of any form. In fact, life, for Zarathushtra, was based on utter fulfillment and triumph of man. His thrust was for ‘Ushta’ – ‘happiness’ both within oneself and of promoting harmony in the environment. His teachings reflect a cheerful optimism grounded in the fact that rightful hard work always results in a reward, in both the physical and the spiritual worlds. He postulated an afterlife for the soul of man, for it gained merit or retribution in heaven or hell, depending upon one’s own thoughts, words, and deeds in one’s lifetime.

Zoroastrianism is a rational religion that believes in cause and effect. It teaches us that our every thought, word, and deed, has a consequence that we have to bear, be it good or bad. It teaches us that our world’s happiness or unhappiness depends on our own choices.



Life, for Zarathushtra, was a true celebration, and salvation was gained through making the right choices in life. He laid emphasis on how one's choices and actions can actually create a heaven or a hell for that person right here in this living world. Our collective actions in this life, here in our world, stemming from emulating Ahura Mazda's *Amesha Spentas* (His progressive everlasting qualities) will in effect, create the Kingdom of God, which we also refer to as Heaven, right here on Earth. Good actions, filled with the *Amesha Spentas*, will help lead our society/our world into becoming more peaceful, just and prosperous. Our bad choices or actions will have the opposite effect. Thus, how we choose to live our lives today will define our heaven or hell tomorrow. Zarathushtra believed in mankind's ability to become completely good and be able to annihilate all evil from our living world eventually. He used the term '*Frashokereti*' for this vision he had for mankind. How soon we want to achieve this heavenly state in our world, or how much we want to delay it, is in our hands.

Our religion also teaches us to be respectful of Mother Nature, of all of God's creation. Protecting our Earth and preventing its destruction is each Zoroastrian's responsibility.

We believe that praying to God is not the only way to worship God. Serving those in need, and helping to establish a peaceful, loving, just, and prosperous world, is the best way to worship God.

#### Regarding Zoroastrian scriptures:

The entire corpus of the Zoroastrian sacred literature is known as the '*Avesta*'. A smaller compilation of daily prayers used by Zoroastrians is called the *Khordeh Avesta*.

#### Regarding Zoroastrian initiation ceremony:

A child is initiated into the religion mostly between the ages of seven and nine years of age, especially among the Parsi Zoroastrians, in a ceremony called the '*Navjote*' (meaning a new life, on the spiritual path). The initiation ceremony is called *Sedreh Pushi* ("wearing of *sedreh/sudreh*") among Iranian Zoroastrians and this ceremony is usually performed when the initiate is ten years or older. At this time the child is invested with the sacred shirt, *sudreh*, and the sacred girdle, *kushti*. This clothing helps remind the wearer to remain pure in one's thoughts, words, and deeds, and to stay focused on the path of Asha – Righteousness, throughout one's life.

The general term for a Zoroastrian priest is '*Mobed*'. To be initiated into priesthood, one has to go through a period of 'studying the scriptures', then through a ceremony called the '*navar*' ceremony, at which time, the new priest earns the title of '*Ervad*' (term used in India), or '*Mobed*' (term used in Iran).

The worship places for Zoroastrians are called '*Atash Bahram*' or '*Agiary*' or a '*Dadgah*' (these terms are mainly used in India among the Parsi Zoroastrians), depending on how the fire maintained in that temple was consecrated. In Iran, our place of worship is called '*Atash-Kadeh*' meaning 'where the fire is kept'. Many people also refer to these temples as Fire Temples. Zoroastrians are not fire worshippers, but rather consider fire to be a symbol of *Ahura Mazda's* Supreme Righteousness. Fire is



the medium of meditation, or concentration for a Zoroastrian, when he/she is communing with *Ahura Mazda*.

The *Jashan* is the most commonly performed Zoroastrian ceremony. It is performed to commemorate any important personal or communal event, solemn or joyous, such as a new home, temple, or business, a marriage, or an anniversary, to honor the departed, or any of the many holy days or seasonal festivals (called the *Gahambars*) in the Zoroastrian calendar.

Death in Zoroastrianism is seen as a transformation and not total destruction. It is the passing away of spiritual elements of the human being from its physical body. The dead body is considered to be the greatest source of contagion and putrefaction and has to be disposed of in such a way that it causes the least harm to human beings and the least pollution to other creations. Hence the Zoroastrian scriptures have recognized only one mode of disposal of the dead – *dokhme nashini*, which involves placing the corpse on a hilltop or elevated place exposed to sunlight and scavenging birds. In India, a vast majority of Zoroastrians use this mode of disposal for the dead, wherein they place the body in a *dakhma*, also known as the Towers of Silence – a circular, walled-in stone enclosure built on a hilltop. In Iran, the Zoroastrians have been using the cemetery much more than the Towers of Silence, over the last fifty years. Those Zoroastrians living in the West, are left with little choice, hence they choose either burial or cremation. Prayer ceremonies are performed for several days after death for the benefit of the soul and to bring solace and peace to the family.

Among faiths practiced in the world today, the religion of Zarathushtra is little known. Yet at one time, it was the state religion of the Persian Empires (Achaemenians, Parthians, and Sassanians) that stretched across Central Asia for a thousand years (558 BCE to 652 CE). The great Persian kings, Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great, were both *Mazdayasnis* (worshippers of *Mazda*, the Supreme Wisdom). Around 700 CE, Persia fell into the hands of the Arabs who wanted to spread their new religion of Islam among the people of the vast Persian Empire. Around 900 CE, some Zoroastrian groups fled Iran for religious freedom, and sought refuge in India. There they came to be known as the 'Parsees' (people from Pars or Persia). The Parsees became part of the 'melting pot' society of India and contributed greatly to India's progress in the fields of education, business, social work, and even in India's freedom movement. Today, Zoroastrianism is very much a living religion for over 200,000 Zoroastrians in the world. Numbers are growing as more people are converting into the religion.

Zarathushtra's contribution should not be seen only in his own life and times, but in terms of the profound effect his teachings have had upon some of the other major faiths of the world. He not only gave a new religion to his own people but left a legacy of beliefs and practices which were to influence the religious and philosophical precepts and paradigms of the larger world.

Finally, the most fundamental aspect of our religion, and also the purpose of life for a Zoroastrian, is that through our good and selfless actions, we should continuously further the progress of our world; continuously contribute towards establishing peace, prosperity, and brotherhood of mankind in our



world so that we leave this world a better place than when we came into it!

### **Lesson for students:**

1. Make a PowerPoint of the Material for teacher. Use PowerPoint to teach the lesson and to stop at appropriate sections to start a discussion.
2. Make a printout of the Material for teacher for each student or use a projector to display it on classroom wall (in a virtual class share screen the information). Have each student read a section before discussing it as a class.
3. Enhance the lesson by following up using a YouTube video.
  1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zq8pknT011w>
  2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-xouHIQdTg>

### **Activity for Students:**

1. Further discuss the lesson as a continuation of lesson 1 (Introduction to Studies in Comparative Religion).
  - a. We learned in lesson 1 that religion is a set of organized practices and beliefs, and that religion teaches a spiritual dimension of life.
    - i. Have students discuss some Zoroastrian practices and beliefs.
    - ii. What do you think is the spiritual dimension in Zoroastrianism?
    - iii. Will sharing the above information in an interfaith gathering bring more understanding and a better relationship between different faiths? How?
2. Fill out the comparative religion chart for Zoroastrianism and discuss the results with class.
3. Break the class into groups of 2-4 students. Have them imagine that they will be talking about Zoroastrianism at an interfaith gathering. Give each group about 10-15 minutes to prepare a 5-minute talk about Zoroastrianism. Then each group should present their talk to the class.
4. Ask students to write 3 facts they found to be of contemporary relevance, modern and practical, about the teachings of Zarathushtra and share with class. Then ask if any of the discussed facts can help them connect with people of different faiths or beliefs, and how.
5. Have each student write one thing they found interesting about Zoroastrianism on a small sheet of paper along with their name, fold it and place it in a jar. Then have each student take out one of the folded sheets of paper, read the content, and ask the person whose name is on the sheet of paper why they found what they have written interesting and discuss with class.



**Sources:**

1. **The Zarathushtrian Religion - A Chronological Perspective - Volume I The Avesta Period**, Ali A. Jafarey, Books N Bits Publications.
2. **Zoroastrianism - An Ethnic Perspective**, Khojeste Mistree, Zoroastrian Studies, Bombay, printed by Good Impressions, Bombay.
3. **Zoroastrians - Their Religious Beliefs and Practices**, Mary Boyce, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 2006.
4. **The Legacy of Zarathushtra**, edited by Roshan Rivetna, FEZANA

**Prepared by:** Bakhtavar Desai

**Lesson for student, activity, and accompanying PowerPoint by:** Artemis Javanshir

**Lesson and PowerPoint edited by:** Nina Kalianivala

**Crossword puzzle by:** Nina Kalianivala

**Date:** 4/2022