



FEZANA Age-Appropriate Lesson Plan Template

Subject Category (circle one): Religion/Ceremony Celebration **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): Post-Sassanid Empire-Lesson 3

Subject of the Lesson: Persecution of Zoroastrians in Iran

Background knowledge for the Teacher:

Background:

Following the Islamic Arab conquest of Iran in 636 CE, many Zoroastrians fled to other countries such as India to escape persecution. Other Zoroastrians decided to stay in Iran and re-located to the desert cities of Yazd and Kerman.

Zoroastrians in Iran

In 1850, the population of Zoroastrians in Iran had declined to about 7000. The French Ambassador to Persia at the time stated, “Only a miracle may save them (Iranian Zoroastrians) from extinction”. Two conditions were central to this decline. Inferior designation given to Zoroastrian religion after the fall of the Sassanid empire and rise of the Shi’ite Islam in Iran.

The Abrahamic faiths were considered “People of the Book”. They could practice their faith within limits, have security and safety and in return they had to pay tribute and acknowledge Islam as superior. Zoroastrians, although initially also categorized as “People of the Book” were accorded inferior status due to their lack of shared religious history with Islam. Under Abbasid rule (9th century) Zoroastrians lost their “People of the Book” status and were downgraded to “non-believers” or “heretics”. As such Zoroastrians were considered impure, were barred from appearing at the royal court or entering many public places, bathhouses, mosques, and bazaars. Many of their institutions were destroyed or confiscated. Around that time, between the 8-10th century the first Zoroastrian exodus to South Asia took place.

The rise of Shi’ite Islam during the Safavid Dynasty (16-18th century) led to further erosion of religious freedoms for minorities. As its influence grew, the religious freedom of minorities was further diminished. The Zoroastrian population in Iran at the time, numbering 3-4 million, was among the most harshly treated minorities. Under Shah Abbas (1588-1629) and then Sultan Husayn (18th century) the forcible conversion of the Zoroastrians to Shi’ite Islam escalated. Zoroastrians who resisted conversion were either killed or severely punished. Those who publicly converted had their punishment cancelled or postponed. Some converted but maintained their Zoroastrian customs behind closed doors.



Mobeds in Iran, wrote to Mobeds in India, “no period, not even that of Alexander, had been more grievous or troublesome for the faithful (Zoroastrians)”. Such injustice includes, destruction of knowledge and institutions, assault, abductions, economic discrimination, and systemic extermination.

During Umayyad rule, some fire temples were converted to mosques, fire temples built after the Arab conquest were destroyed, religious books were destroyed, and lives were at risk. After the Arab conquest about 130,000 Persian men, women and children were enslaved and sold in the Arabian markets. Women were at risk of assault, kidnapping, and forced marriage to Muslim men. Many young women protected themselves by coloring their faces with pomegranate and walnut skins to appear diseased. Boys were kidnapped and sold.

Zoroastrians could not hold any professions other than low-paying manual labor such as farming or weaving. Merchants were not allowed to trade in bazaars, due to inferior social status, their goods were considered impure making it difficult for them to sell. To encourage conversion of family members under severe economic pressure, if one sibling converted to Islam, that sibling was entitled to receiving all the inheritance.

The greatest enforced pressure was due to Jizyeh, a religious tax that had to be paid by all minorities including Zoroastrians. Jizyeh was first implemented during the Umayyads (661-750) and continued until the Qajar rule (19th century). To humiliate Zoroastrians, the tax could be requested by the tax collector at any time and those who could not pay were severely beaten.

Zoroastrians were restricted in where they could live and travel. During Safavid Dynasty, Zoroastrians were forced out of urban centers to live in religious ghettos. This limited their economic prospects. They were the first to lose their lives due to attacks and being situated outside the city walls. The roof of a Zoroastrian’s house had to be low enough for a Muslim to touch its roof with his stretched hand, and a maximum of two windows per room were allowed among other such restrictions. As late as the 1900’s Zoroastrians were not allowed to have air-cooling towers in their houses.

During the rule of Nadir Shah (18th century) travel was forbidden for Zoroastrians. This cut the ties between Zoroastrians in Iran and British India. Another social restriction enforced on Zoroastrians was on how they could dress. Women could not buy full length cloth; they had to buy scraps and sew them together. Men had to wear unbleached garments of brown, grey, and yellow woven at home by the women. They were required to wear a patch on their shoulders to show they were Zoroastrian. Their footwear was broad with a turned-up toe, and they had to wear headgear that was meant to cause discomfort.

Zoroastrian interaction with the Muslim society were also restricted. Zoroastrians were forbidden from traveling by horse and had to dismount their donkey when passing a Muslim. Since Zoroastrians were considered unclean, they were not allowed outdoors when it rained as not to pollute the water. They had to carry a cloth to sit on when entering a Muslim’s house so as not to dirty their floor. Zoroastrian children were not allowed to receive formal education.



Once respected community with influence across Asia and the Mediterranean, Zoroastrians were reduced to poverty and illiteracy, living in harsh desert conditions. A community that once priests in India sought guidance from were now barely clinging to their faith. Zoroastrian population in mid-1800's fell by 98% to under 7,000.

Around 1779, Kai Khusrau Yazdyar, a Zoroastrians living in Yazd had a beautiful daughter named Gulistan Banu. When a wealthy Muslim became interested in Gulistan Banu, her father took his family and fled to Bombay where Gulistan married a Parsi and became a well-loved member of the community. She encouraged her family and others to help Iranian Zoroastrians who sought refuge in India. In 1834, her eldest son and later her third son initiated a fund that became the Society of Amelioration of the Condition of Zoroastrians in Persia. This society funded the expedition by Maneckji Limji Hataria to Iran to evaluate the condition of Zoroastrians in Iran.

Lesson for students:

- Lesson Objectives / Learning Targets:

To get a historical perspective of the extreme persecution suffered by Zoroastrians after the 636 CE Islamic Arab invasion of Iran and how can this knowledge make us a stronger community.

- Essential Questions:

- Why do you think Zoroastrians were persecuted in Iran? Why is it important for us to learn about this period in our history? How would learning about our community's successes as well as sufferings benefit us?
- How are beliefs being changed in modern times? EX. social media

- Materials Needed:

- White board

- Introduction / Anticipatory Set:

- Today we will be exploring the hardships our ancestors suffered after the Islamic Arab invasion of Iran. We will learn about their perseverance in keeping their ancestral culture, tradition, and beliefs alive. How can this knowledge provide us with stronger communal roots?

- Vocabulary: People of the Book, Shi'i Islam, Jizya

- Lesson Procedure:

1. Use the provided PowerPoint to present the lesson to students and follow up with the activity section.

2. Combine the lesson with the activity.
 - Direct Instruction: 15 minutes
 - Discuss the lesson as provided in the background knowledge for teacher.
 - Guided Practice (10 minutes)
 - Make a circle on the white board and write persecutions suffered by Zoroastrians in Iran inside the circle. Then ask students to name some of the different persecutions they remember from the lesson. Write each one that is being called out by students on the board connecting it with a line to the main circle (students can come to the board and write it themselves).
 - Independent Practice:
 - Break students into groups and ask them to use the information on the white board and put the mentioned different persecutions into categories such as social, economic, educational, and religious persecutions.
 - Have them discuss questions such as why would someone tolerate such extreme persecution? If they were in such a situation, would they convert to Islam? Escape?
 - Sharing findings: Have students share their findings with the class and together put the written persecutions on board into their social, economic, educational, etc. categories. Then have them share their thoughts about the proposed questions.
 - Summary/closing activity: (5 minutes)
 - Reflection: Ask students to share how today's lesson changed their opinion about our religious history. What was one new fact they learned? How does this knowledge strengthen their religious ties? How does today's lesson make our community connected?
 - Assessment: Was the lesson presentation effective for students' understanding of this portion of our history? Were they engaged? How can the lesson be improved?

Activity for Students:

Discussion:

- a. What do you think about the presented lesson? How do you feel?
- b. Is it important to learn about the hard time in Zoroastrian history? Why?
- c. Why do you think some of our ancestors tolerated such extreme persecutions? Why do you think some changed their religion? What would you do? Why?
- d. How did today's lesson change your perspective about our religious history?
- e. Why do you think Zoroastrians in India sent Maneckji to find out about the Zoroastrian situation in Iran?



Sources:

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5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mm9oKXZVn8>
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