

Special Edition



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Yalda: Celebration of Winter Solstice

Traditions and rituals of Iranians on the night of Yalda



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## ORIGINS: WHERE DOES YALDA COME FROM?



### Celebrate the longest night of the year

Yalda is an ancient celebration whereby the brilliance of the sun along with the warmth of life are cherished. This event coincides with an increase in day-length in the region. The winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere corresponds to Dey 1st (December 22nd) in the Iranian calendar.

All people from Iran celebrate this ritual festivity. However, those Iranians who, due to a variety of reasons have to live far away from their homelands, also uphold “Yalda/Chelleh” based on their homeland calendars, exactly as it is practiced by their own family members and indigenous individuals back home.

### End of the Dark Night

In public belief, the night of the last day of the Persian calendar month of Azar – this year it falls on December 21st – harbors the eventual victory of light over darkness. After Yalda, the days will grow longer and the nights will fall shorter. As per tradition, Iranian families get together in the houses of their elderly relatives, most often grandfathers and grandmothers, and spend the better part of the night socializing and feasting on the occasion’s special delicacies.

### Other names of Yalda

Yalda extends on the longitude from the west of the Indian Sub-continent to Mesopotamia as well as the latitude from the Caucasus Mountains to the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea and to the Persian Gulf and Oman Sea.

(Central Iran): Shab-e Yalda, Jashn-e Yalda, Shab-e Chelleh

(North of Iran): Show Chelleh

(North West of Iran): Chilla Gejasi, Chelleh Gijasi

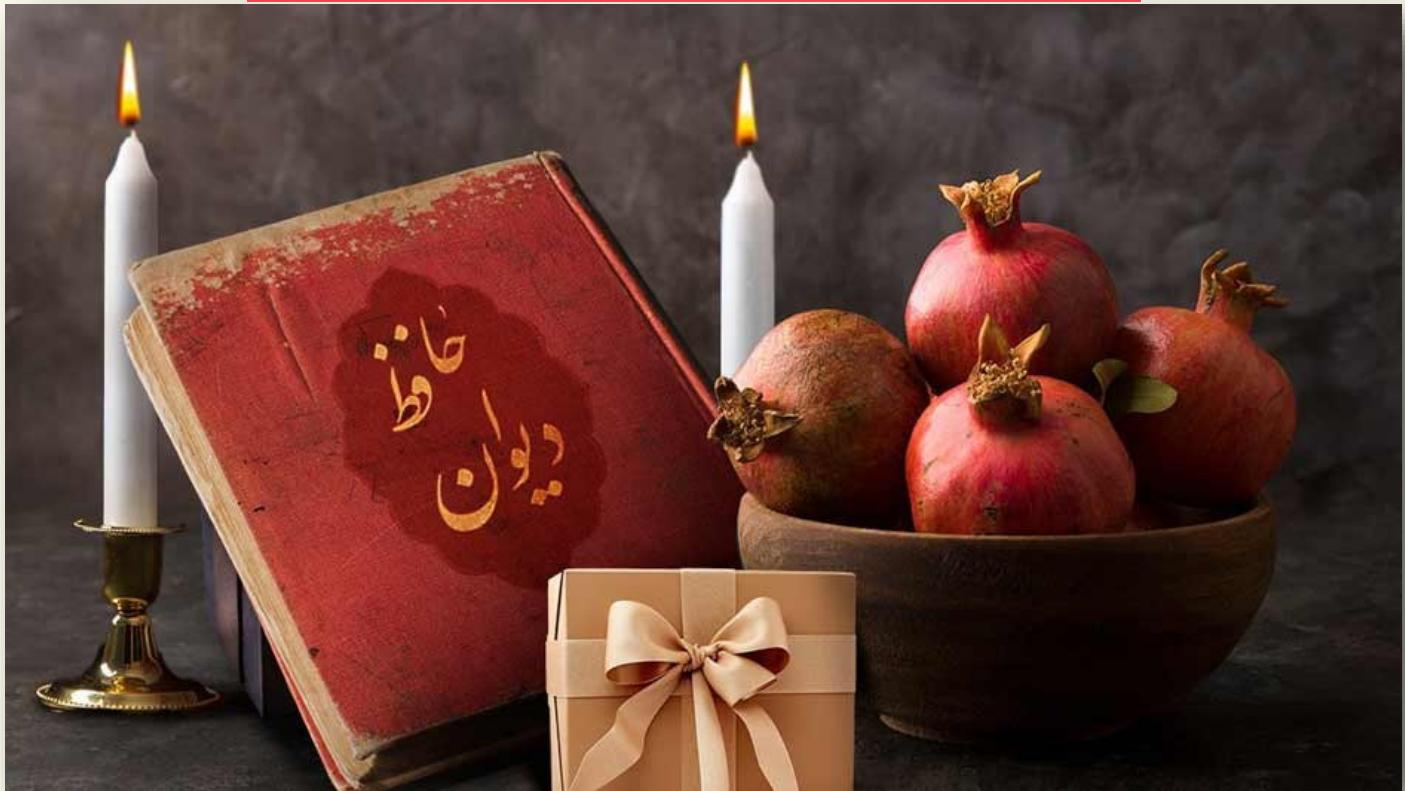
(West of Iran): Shew vi Yeldā

(South and South West of Iran): Sho-e Chelleh, Sho-e Yeldā

(South East, East and North East of Iran): Shaw-e Chelleh, Shab-e Yalda



## ORIGINS: WHERE DOES YALDA COME FROM?



### Historical backgrounds and resources

“Yalda/Chelleh” is regarded as one of the deeply-rooted and festive rituals amongst its bearers and practitioners in Iran, which depict many concepts, historical backgrounds and resources in view of its bearers and practitioners, most noticeable of which could be the following:

- Due to its nature-based characteristics, human creativity has been formed and diversified through centuries among generations.
- Respecting the diversity of expressions among communities, groups and individuals within its territory.
- Dominance of light over darkness symbolized by the rising of Sun on the day following Yalda/Chelleh, to defeat the devil (darkness).
- Yalda/Chelleh further reshapes mindset of local communities/groups and individuals in appreciating the beauty (positive aspect: Sun, light and warmth) hidden in a seemingly unpleasant condition (negative aspect: coldness of winter and darkness).
- Promoting a culture of peace, friendship, kindness and tolerance, fulfillment of promises and commitments are all celebrated in “Yalda/Chelleh” celebration. Solidarity in public participation in this celebration irrespective of gender, age, religion and ethnic differences.
- Promoting a culture of reading literary works and storytelling as well as listening to traditional music among the youth as executed by the elders. Paying more attention to shared rituals as ICH elements of the region, such as “Nowrouz” and Yalda/Chelleh would result in the establishment of mutual respect and peace amongst different ethnic groups, communities and individuals in the region.
- Paying attention to the spirit of the element, which enjoys abundance, light and warmth of life leads to more hope and increasing life expectancy amongst the bearers and practitioners.



## CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS



### What happens on Yalda?

On the occasion of the last night of autumn, families get together. This family reunion often takes place at the houses of elders where people meet around a table called "Yalda/Chelleh Night Sofre".

"Yalda/Chelleh Night Sofre" consists of a lamp that symbolizes light, water that represents cleanliness, red fruits such as pomegranates, watermelons, beetroots, jujube and red and green grapes that demonstrate warmth along with serving broth (Ash), sweets, dried fruits and nuts special to this occasion, all set on "Yalda/Chelleh Night Sofre" and consumed during the nightly gathering. The Sofre usually comes in red and is traditionally spread on the floor or on Korsi/chairs. The red color used in various components of the Sofre refer to the reddish sky after the dusk and before the dawn.

### The Special Appearance of Yalda Night Celebration

The type of activities in this celebration ranges from reciting poems, storytelling, reciting Hafiz's poems or referring to them for pleasure omens, reciting verses from the epic poetic masterpiece of Shahnameh, listening to or playing music, singing and giving gifts to new in-laws/brides and children, indoor games and enjoying "Yalda/Chelleh Night Sofre" goodies and items.



## CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS



### **Yalda and red; the color of the celebration**

The dominant color of the night is red. It is not only the pomegranates or the watermelon, which are red; most of the guests are also wearing the color. Red is considered to be the color of the crimson hues of dawn and glow of life. And the celebration of Shab-e Chelleh is the celebration of the victory of light over darkness. To magnify the importance of light, usually lots of candles and light decorations are used in houses and gardens on this night. In some places, the festival is held with fireworks.



## CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS



### **Yalda Night, fun-filled heritage for kids**

Women play a key role in this ceremony. Children are also considered as the future bearers/practitioners of the element. The elders are valued as its bearers.

While observing “Yalda/Chelleh” items such as cultural identity, attention to nature, and respect for women, friendship, hospitality, cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence are manifested and respected.

The remarkable point about the participation of children is the fact that while performing the ceremonial stages of this festive event such as storytelling, reading books, reciting poetry and preparation of festive dishes and table of “Yalda/Chelleh” all in all could enhance the kids’ self-esteem and internalize their learning.



## CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS



### Food and fruits of Yalda night

It is widely believed among Iranians that if they consume summer fruits on this night, it is less likely that they will get ill in the coming cold season. Hence, an abundance of fruits, particularly watermelon and pomegranates, are served at the gathering. A bowl of special nuts is also a must on the Yalda night. Often, a traditional dinner is offered to the guests present at the event.

Broth, sweets, dried fruits and nuts that are used specifically for the occasion are also set on the table and consumed during the gathering. Activities range from reciting poetry and storytelling to playing games and music and giving gifts to new in-laws, brides and children. The event celebrates cultural identity, nature, respect for women, friendship, hospitality, cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence. It is transmitted informally within families, although radio and television programs, publications, social media and educational materials have also played an important role in transmitting the practice in recent years.



## CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS: HAFEZ-KHAANI



### Hafez-Khaani (reciting Hafez poems) on Yalda

Shams Al-din Mohammad Hafez Shirazi is one of the most famous Iranian poets of the fourteenth century. He is highly valued and much loved by Iranians. Almost all Iranians keep a copy of Hafez's book of poems called *Divan* at their homes.

A significant book read on this occasion is the poetry book of Hafez, the celebrated Iranian poet of the 14th century AD. Usually, each family member makes a wish and randomly opens the book of Hafez and reads it aloud. That specific poem is known to express the interpretation of the wisher's hopes and beliefs. This is believed to link the aesthetic side of this night to a more religious side, when people pray and hope for fruitful days in the coming winter.

You may be wondering why Hafez is so much loved and what does he do with the celebration of *Shabe Chellehh*? Well, the answer is quite easy. Most of the Iranians believe that Hafiz answers back if you ask him a question from the bottom of your heart, or wish something. During *Shabeh Chellehh*, when everyone has eaten their food they would go one by one to the elder of the family, and he or she would do a Hafez Khaani for them. They would make a wish or ask a question and open the *Divan*, and the elder of the family would read Hafez's answer and interpret it for them.



## YALDA POMEGRANATES



### Intense red color of pomegranates

Pomegranate is native to Iran and eastward up to north India. It is widely cultivated in most provinces of Iran, with different colors, sizes, and flavors. It is impressive to see the variety of pomegranates in the country. The ancient land is well-known for the quality of pomegranates and is the largest exporter of pomegranates in the world.

When it comes to Persian literature, pomegranate (Anaar) is there bearing metaphor or symbol. Some say pomegranates can be used to manifest a range of metaphors in Persian poetry due to its intense red color, round shape, and numerous seeds.

Every autumn, many pomegranate growers in Iran hold festivals to thank God and celebrate the harvest season. Alongside the grape and the fig, the pomegranate has played an important role throughout the Orient since the earliest times.

Ancient Iranians believed that the pomegranate was a sign of fertility due to its abundant seeds. It is a high pillar of festivities on Yalda Night. Narratives say the presence of pomegranates symbolizes blessings for a new life. The number of seeds scattered indicates how many children a young woman may give birth to!

By tradition, Zoroastrians offer pomegranates to their daughters and sons when they get married, wishing them fertility. Moreover, they used to burn pomegranate sticks during religious rites.

Around 2000 BC, the Lur ethnic communities living in the west of Iran created amazing crafts which are known as Luristan bronzes today, and on some of the Luristan bronze objects, the pomegranate tree is recognizable.

Also, the pomegranate is seen in some bas-relief carvings inside the UNESCO-designated Persepolis, which was once the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid kings. Moreover, some Sassanid bas-reliefs depict pomegranates as a symbol of fertility and productivity.

The pomegranate has long been one of the essential ingredients for Persian cuisine to bring a kind of balance, taste, and flavor.