

Vegetarianism in Mazdayasni Zarathushti Religion:

Does the religion enjoin eating flesh foods?

Written especially for the Month of Bahman

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“The concept of vegetarianism since long has been an interesting subject for discussion in the Parsi community and the Zoroastrian Religion. As a majority of the members of the Parsi community are non-vegetarians, the general belief therefore prevails among several members of the community, as well as among the members of other communities, that the tenets of the Zoroastrian Religion themselves might be in support of the concept of non-vegetarianism. But this belief is then a serious blunder. In the past as well as in the present times, it has been explained threadbare, that even though the majority of the members of the community may be having non-vegetarian food, but according to the tenets of the Zoroastrian Religion, vegetarian is the only natural food for mankind.” Ervad Dr. Rooyintan Peshotan Peer writes these memorable words in the Preface of the book, “Vegetarianism – From Zoroastrian Religious Point of View”, written by - Ervad Dr. Peshotan Framarz Peer.

There is irrefutable proof that in the beginning, mankind only subsisted on vegetarian food. The Immortal Shayeran–e Shayer of Iran, Firdowsi Tusi, writes in the Shahnameh that it was Ahriman, disguised as a cook named Iblis, who first served the tyrannical King Zohak, dishes made of the flesh of birds and animals. Ahriman’s evil intent was to destroy all life on earth so the Divine Event of Frashogard will not be achieved. He started by killing animals and birds but then he proceeded to the killing of human beings to feed the two serpents that grew on both the shoulders of Zohak. The two snakes were fed two human brains daily. According to Firdowsi, this is the beginning of eating non-vegetarian food. Subsequently, humanity became habituated to eating animal flesh.

It is important to note that as humans, our teeth are not resembling the teeth of carnivorous (meat eating) animals, but we are still, by nature, herbivorous creatures possessing teeth similar to the herbivorous or plant eating creatures. This is indisputably pointed out by late Ervad Dr. Peshotan Framarz Peer in the 24 articles he wrote on vegetarianism for Jam-e Jamshed, first one being on Bahman roj and Bahman mah in the year 1983 A.C. The series ended abruptly in 1993 and it is imperative to draw attention to the fact that during the entire duration of these ten to eleven years, not a single point of reference stated by late Dr. Peshotan Peer was refuted by any member of the anti-vegetarian lobby! No one could deny the truths presented by Ervad Dr. Peshotan Framarz Peer! The series of articles printed in the issues of Jam-e were later published in this book, “Vegetarianism – From Zoroastrian Religious Point of View”, written by - Ervad Dr. Peshotan Framarz Peer, published by the The Parsi Vegetarian & Temperance Society, 2002.

The following references given below are given by Ervad Dr. Peshotan Framarz Peer in favour of vegetarianism in the above mentioned book, written in Gujarati, translated into English by Mr. Marzban Giara.

According to the Vendidad, which is the 19th Nask out of the Sacred 21 Nasks which comprise the Holy Avesta, any dead body, whether it is the corpse of a human or animal, is considered as

putrid. This decomposition is referred to as “*drij-e nasu*” which is harmful to the health of the living. Hence, when a Zarathushti dies, within a few hours, usually before the *geh* changes, *sachkar* is performed and the relatives are forbidden to touch the corpse thereafter. Therefore, from the viewpoint of hygiene, if a dead body is putrid, i.e. full of harmful bacteria, what must happen in the stomach of a person when this putrid food is eaten? Certainly, many diseases are caused by eating non-vegetarian food. In this regard, Ervad Dr. Peshotan Peer quotes Dr. J.H. Kellogg, M.D.: “To believe that a man despite eating non-vegetarian food can be considered righteous is to consider a man covered with layers of mud as clean. Bacteriologists clearly understand that the dust on the road is cleaner than a piece of flesh i.e. there are less bacteria in the dust on the street than in a corresponding pound of flesh.” (pp. 3-4, *ibid*)

Asadi Toosi who wrote the “Kersasp Nameh” was a disciple of Firdowsi Toosi. Asadi writes that the hero Kersasp once met a Brahmin sage and inquired as to why he sits alone on a mountain, why does he cover his body with leaves of a tree and what does he eat? The sage replied that our stay in this world is of a few days, the innocent diet of vegetables and a simple dress is sufficient to cover the body. He added, why kill innocent, dumb animals and make this stomach a graveyard of ‘animals’? Instead of caring for the body, one should take greater care of the soul. For this body will ultimately perish, how long will you struggle for the body? Ervad Peshotan Peer observes that a pious man treading the path of God can never praise the value of dead and putrid items! (p. 42, *ibid*)

From the religious point of view, it is unquestionably ascertained the Holy Avesta is full of references prohibiting the killing of innocent, domesticated animals.

Dasturji Saheb Erachji of Navsari, states in his book, *Rehbar-e-Din-e Zarthoshti* writes: “eating meat seems improper according to our sacred religion. He adds, “In the ceremony of *afriangan*, it is required to offer dry fruits, flowers, milk and water ... whereas our people offer meat, fish, chicken, etc.; such things are not valid. This is mentioned in the book ‘*Behram Firoz Nameh*’.” (P. 4, *ibid*)

About 300 years ago, there lived in Navsari a Dastur Darab who was very well versed in Avesta, Pahlavi and the Persian languages. He wrote in Persian verses a book on Zoroastrianism called ‘*Faraziyat Nameh*’. He writes, one who eats meat is worthy of punishment and (after death) he will be tormented by evil spirits in hell. In every offering (i.e. *myazad* or *chashni*) and *gahambar* ceremony if you eat flesh foods, that action will bring hardships on you. (p. 4, *ibid*)

Dastur Kaikobad Dastur Darab MeherjiRana, “According to our religious books, there is no direction to offer flesh, wine, etc. in rituals. It is clear that our sacred religion can never advocate offering decaying items like flesh, wine in sacred rituals.” (P. 4, *ibid*)

A Scholar of our Religion, Mr. Faredoon K. Dadachanji writes, “Where there is putrid or decaying matter, where dead matters and fish are offered in rituals, and an item like liquor which is harmful, intoxicating and destabilising one’s balance over mind and body is offered, there the Holy Amesha Spentas, Yazatas and souls of righteous men and women cannot approach; such is my opinion.” (p. 5, *ibid*)

Dastur Peshotan Dastur Burjorji Mirza, “Your inquiry whether in the ceremonies of afringan, satum, etc. meat, fish, eggs, liquor made by non-Zoroastrians can be offered or not. According to our humble opinion there is no directive to use such items continue in religious ceremonies, but the usage of such items continue as per the old tradition. Looking in depth in Zoroastrianism, not using such items in religious ceremonies would be more satisfying.” (p. 6, *ibid*)

Ervad Saheb Khurshedji Behram Sahiyar, “In our Sacred Zoroastrian religion, there are frequent writings about the welfare of innocent domestic animals. Our religion teaches us to progress in every respect. If we were to stop the progress of innocent and useful animals (by slaughtering them), then that would be considered quite contrary to the religion.” (p. 6, *ibid*)

Dastur Khodayar Shehriar Irani, “You enquire about offering meat and wine in satum rituals. No reference in such matters is found in Asho Zarathushtra’s teachings. Hence there is no special direction to offer meat in satum rituals.” (p. 6, *ibid*)

Mr. Khudabux Edulji Punegar, “it would be adequate to offer the milk of living animals (Jivam). It would be more worthwhile if the athravans holding the bareshnum, abstain from flesh foods.” (p.6, *ibid*)

Mr. Behramgor Tehmuras Anklesaria, (as reported in Jam-e Jamshad of 12-2-1909): “Zarathushtra’s parents did not partake meat of any kind. They subsisted only on milk and vegetarian diet, and in this manner, Zarathushtra’s own body was not made of the flesh of any animals. We can ask those who term this as false myth to cite any paragraph from the gathas where you are permitted to eat meat. On the other hand a clear direction is given ‘not to kill any animals’. Further, he adds, “From several of our present customs we can observe that ancient Zoroastrians were not partaking of non-vegetarian food. We too at present, in the name of religion, do not eat flesh food for many days in a year. What is the reason for this? The reason is this, in such times that the Zoroastrians started partaking flesh food after coming in contact with other communities, prior to that time they did not eat flesh at all; and for this reason some high priests, observing the spirit of the religion, might have given a directive to the Zoroastrians to abstain from eating flesh on certain occasions, and hence we observe some days as meatless days. For three days after death, flesh is not eaten because according to Vendidad flesh is putrid and it cannot be taken in the houses of worship where ceremonies are being performed. The ancient Zoroastrians never ate flesh foods. This is a fact. But a Zoroastrian who has not studied religion will jump into citing the 72nd chapter of Vendidad (although Vendidad has only 22 Chapters) that Zoroastrianism enjoins eating flesh.” (pp. 6-7, *ibid*)

Ervad Faramji Rabadi of Surat who was the first to translate Avesta into Gujarati has stated that such items are entirely forbidden for use in our ceremonies. Such questions also arose in the Pahlavi Sassanian times about 1280 years ago. At times, the people of Iran were divided into two groups – one group wanted to include flesh, wine, etc., in the ceremonies, whereas the other group considered these things as absolutely forbidden. (p. 7, *ibid*)

Ervad Saheb Mahiyar Navroji Kutar, one of the renowned Kutar brothers, celebrated for the translation of the Shah Nameh, writes: “Please note that there is no directive anywhere in Avesta to include such items (flesh, eggs, wine, etc.) in our sacred rituals. The ‘Shah Nameh’ states that

our foremost diet was vegetarian. Our people did not eat anything other than plants (vegetables and fruits); also they used matters grown only from the soil. According to the Shah Nameh, flesh was for the first time served by the devil to King Zohak.” (p. 7, *ibid*) The main reason to serve non-vegetarian diet to Zohak was to rid the world of men so that Frashgard would not take place as divinely planned!

As a minimum requirement to adhere to the spirit of the Religion wherein meat eating is considered to be unhygienic and an offence perpetrated against Bahman Ameshaspand, as per the advice given by our wise Dasturs, we are at least asked to refrain from eating flesh foods during certain days every month, i.e. on Bahman, Mohor, Gosh and Ram, as also during the whole month of Bahman. This is because Bahman Ameshaspand is in charge of the entire animal Kingdom which includes birds (chicken) and fish. **Gatha ha 34.3 states:** “O Ahura Mazda! With humble adoration we offer votive offerings unto Thee and Asha. Within (Thy) Dominion (O Ahura Mazda) all living creatures are nourished on account of Vohu Manah. That person is fully sagacious who in every respect offers prayers to Thee and to those belonging to Thee (i.e. the Yazatas).” Bahman Ameshaspand is Vohu Manah; Asha is Ardibehesht who resides in all living things, including plants and animals – further, **ha 34.4** reveals Asha Vahishta is the punisher of the evil doers; conversely, Asha Vahishta is the mighty, swiftest, courageous, ever giving delight, giving help in various ways (or miraculously), the giver of courage to the righteous.

Even in Iran, staunch Zarathushtis still observe these four days of abstinence from meat, calling these days ‘Nabor’ days when animals are not slaughtered. Manechji Limji Hataria who lived in Iran for many years, studied the life-style of our community members living there and has written many books pertaining to our religious and social customs. He writes that when a vegetarian Irani Zarathushti died, his after-death ceremonies would ordinarily be performed for twelve years; but when a non-vegetarian Zarathushti died, his after-death ceremonies would be performed over a period of thirty years! This is because it is believed that when a non-meat eating person dies, he has done no sin towards Bahman Ameshaspand and whereas a meat eating person dies, he has committed sins towards the creation under the protection and care of Bahman Ameshaspand and therefore, his ceremonies after death are to be performed for a greater number of years. In Vendidad, *fargard* 12, there is an indirect reference to this belief. Also, **Vendidad, fargard 5.20:** “I who am Ahura Mazda, bring rainfall towards the plants, for the sake of food for the righteous persons, and for the grass and fodder for the cattle of the good creations; (so that) my men may eat cereal food and the cattle of the good creations may eat grass and fodder.” (Ervad Kavasji E. Kanga’s Gujarati translation of Vendidad, *fargard* 5.20.)

In **Ijeshne ha 62** (which is also known as Atash Niyayesh), mention is made of the ‘Glowing Fire’ which resides in the body: “O atash, you are worthy of consecration and worthy of reverence; may you be worthy of consecration and reverence in the homes of men.” Mystically, the Atash residing in the ‘homes’ of men refers to the Atash which resides in the ‘bodies’ of men because our body is the ‘home’ of the Soul; it is a sacred Temple where the Divinity resides; His Throne is the Heart and His Devotee is the Soul. (p. 31, *ibid*) Further, the same Niyayesh reveals, “(O fire or soul) that gives courage, may you keep burning (glowing) in this house (or body) till the time of Resurrection! May you always burn in this house (or body)! May you glow in this house (or body), (and) may you progress in this house (or body)”! In the Zarathushti religion, when the purity of a man’s body has been given such high importance, how then, can we

consume dead food, such as meat, fish, etc. in such a sacred object? Therefore, to maintain a body of the purest elements, our diet too ought to be free from meat of animals, fish and chicken or other birds.

On p. 40 (ibid), Ervad Saheb Dr. Peshotan Framarz Peer writes, “Seth Sorabji Jamshedji Jeejeebhoy of the revered memory (who was a staunch vegetarian, and was the son of the benevolent Sir Jamshedji Jeejeebhoy, 1st Baronat) has published in 1853, an excellent book called ‘Raahe Paarsa’ (i.e. path of piety), in which from beginning to end, he has emphatically shown that a man’s diet ought to be vegetarian according to the Zoroastrian religion.”

Gatha ha 34.11 (similar teaching is also given in Zamyad Yasht, para 96): “Both Khordad and Amardad (are) for thy food. Devotion (or Perfect Mentality) increases through the sovereignty of Vohu Manah and through Asha’s Truth. Through them (are) strength and vigour. O Ahura Mazda! Thou art the expeller of malice and harm.” **Gatha ha 32.12** where the words “*geush morenden*” appear, Kangaji translate as: “Ahura Mazda regards them as wicked who through (false) teachings prevent men from (doing) best actions, (and) destroy the life of cattle in jokes and jests (i.e. without any reason) (and) who by forsaking truth prefer wealth obtained through deceitful means, (and who) (are) the Karapans (i.e. those who do not accept the commandments of the Zoroastrian Religion) and (are) the desirers of the authority of the Druj (i.e. the liar).” It is to be noted that Bahman’s adversary is ‘akoman’, evil thoughts, which tempt mankind to take the life of innocent animals and eat their flesh.

Yasna ha 11, also known as the part of Hom Yasht, its relevant Avesta text is: “As per the directive of my father Asho Hormuzd (the Zoti), i.e. the officiating priest, offered the tongue, left eye and both the ears with the ‘darun’ to Hom.” (p. 46, ibid) Further, Ervad Saheb Dr. Peshotan Framarz Peer writes: “This will convince one that in the original Avesta there is no word for gospand (animal). In 1848, Mobed Aspandiarji Faramji Rabadi had translated the entire Yazashne from Avesta into Gujarati. While commenting on the translation of *ha 11*, this scholar priest states in the footnote: ‘From the above text several dasturs have tried to interpret that when an animal is killed, then they should take care to consecrate these items along with ‘darun’ of Hom. But kindly note that in Avesta, no directive is given anywhere to kill the animal. Hence at this place, the desire from the tongue is to abstain from speaking unworthy words, and the two ears mean that one should abstain from hearing evil words, and the left eye means that one’s sight is protected from evil. From this we learn that after keeping the abovementioned parts of the body pure and clean, get engrossed in revering Dadaar Hormuzd through ‘eejashne’ and Hom’s ‘setayush’ i.e. (praise); and one who performs the ‘eejashne’ in this manner or in a contradictory manner and consecrates the ‘darun’ of Hom, then the Hom Yazad accordingly blesses him or curses him.” (Mobed Aspandiarji Faramji Rabadi, Eejashne Baa Maani – p. 101)

Gatha ha46.4 states: “The man of evil strength, a sinful person, destroying the life through his wicked deeds prevents the supporters of righteousness and the cattle of the province as well as of the land from movements. O Ahura Mazda! Whoso overthrows such a (wicked person) from (his) power or from life, that man will open widely the paths to them (i.e.) to the cattle and of good wisdom.” (Kangaji’s translation) Here, cattle and good wisdom are taken together. One who liberates the cattle from the evil man, frees the paths of wisdom! Ervad Saheb Phiroze Masani translates this *ha* as: “One of evil strength and one who ruins his life by one’s evil deeds,

a sinner obstructs the helpers of righteousness and cattle of the city and the country from free movement (and prevents free movement of animals, such person harms his life)". (Vegetarianism – From Zoroastrian Religious Point of View, p. 47) In short, the sinners who ruin or take someone's life, prevent the progress of life. The animals too are given a number of years of life predetermined by God. By killing them before their time, is a grave sin. These animals, wailing at the time of their death, curse their killers/tormentors.

Ustad Saheb Behranshah Navroji Shroff himself has penned a very informative article on vegetarianism from the point of view of our religion in the Frashogard magazine. This article was translated into English and a separate booklet was published by the Parsi Vegetarian and Temperance Society. Ustad Saheb writes: "Ultimately, while ending this subject, as mankind, we ought to remember, that this vegetarianism is not a modern discovery but this exalted rule on the subject of diet is permanent since the beginning of the creation. Zoroastrianism which is known as the science of sciences and knowledge of knowledges, in that splendid religion, this concept of vegetarianism has been accepted as a great infallible rule of nature and as an essential tarikat (practice). Firm commands have been given to observe this practice truthfully. Hence the false notion that vegetarianism has become popular because of study of other religions or by teachings of science from the West, then this mistaken thought should be driven out of our mind, and hereafter let us remember that the lesson of vegetarianism is for all mankind. (As per the infallible natural law)". Frashogard, p. 14, Mankind's Natural Diet – according to Zoroastrian IIm-e-Kshnoom; author, Mr. Behramshah Navroji Shroff, 1924, p. 172. (Ervad Dr. Peshotan Framarz Peer, Vegetarianism – From Zoroastrian Religious Point of View, pp. 48-9.)

In The Pahlavi Text, Dadistan-I Dinik, SBE Vol. 18, it states; "and near to the time of renovation the bodily existences desist from eating, and live without food; and the offspring who are born from them are those of an immortal, for they possess durable and blood-exhausted bodies. (P. 77.) "The material food in the world that which is the product of cattle is said to be the best, among the products in use as food is the butter of milk, and among butters that is extolled as to goodness which they shall make in the second month of the year." The "month" referred to is the Zaremeya, when the seasonal festival of Maidyo-Zarem Gahambar (mid-spring) is celebrated.

To conclude: From the point of view of health also, today's science proves a vegetarian diet is far healthier than eating meat. Most medicines are also produced from plants. New graduates from medical schools/universities, such as Harvard, are sent to the forests of Amazon to learn the effects plants have on our holistic health. Therefore, a vegetarian diet is, in fact, good for all mankind.

Staunch but meat eating Zarathushtis used to abstain from eating a non-vegetarian diet to observe "perheji" for at least four days every month as also the entire Bahman mahino. It is a sincere request to all our co-religionists, to please refrain from eating a non-vegetarian diet for at least 4 days every month and for the entire month of Bahman! Besides following a vegetarian diet for these prescribed few days for religious reasons, it is also self-discipline and test of self-determination to control one's taste buds for these "perheji" (abstinence for the sake of piety) days. Surely, by exercising our "right to choose", by choosing the correct discipline, we can abstain from meat for these few days! May wiser counsel prevail! If possible, giving up eating meat completely is only good for us as well as for the gosponds who are being killed only to

satisfy our taste buds! Do remember that it was Iblis, the Ahriman, who started killing animals, and later also men, to feed Zohak so that Frashogard will not take place!

May wiser counsel prevail!

Atha Jamyat Yatha Afrinami!

Courtesy: Hushang Vakil