

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Nowruz and Iranian Jews

The Persian New Year arrives with the first day of spring. For generations, Iranian Jews have welcomed it with fresh sprouts, open doors, and family picnics, right in the season of Purim and Passover.

WHEN

At the spring equinox, the first day of spring, around March 20 or 21. The celebrations last about two weeks.

THE NAME

Nowruz means “new day” in Persian. It celebrates renewal, gratitude, and hope.

WHO CELEBRATES

More than 300 million people across Central, West, and South Asia and beyond, including people of many faiths.

SPECIAL TO THIS EXPLAINER

How Iranian Jews in Iran, Los Angeles, New York, and Israel make Nowruz their own, alongside Purim and Passover.

Nowruz is the most festive holiday of the Iranian year. Its roots go back to ancient Persia and to Zoroastrian tradition, long before Judaism, Christianity, or Islam reached the region, and it is still celebrated by Iranians of every background. Jews have lived in Iran for well over two thousand years, and Nowruz is even mentioned in the Talmud. For Iranian Jews, the holiday arrives in the same weeks as Purim, whose story is set in ancient Persia, and Passover, the spring festival of freedom. Many families celebrate all three, blending Persian customs with Jewish meaning.

The Nowruz season, step by step

- **Shaking the house.** In the weeks before the holiday, families clean from top to bottom, air out carpets, buy new clothes, and bake treats such as chickpea and rosewater cookies. This spring cleaning is called *khaneh tekani*, and for Jewish families it blends naturally with cleaning for Passover.
- **Chaharshanbe Suri.** On the last Tuesday evening of the year, the eve of its final Wednesday, people light small bonfires and jump over them to say farewell to winter. A traditional saying asks the fire to take away the jumper's paleness and give its healthy redness in return. Children once went door to door banging spoons on bowls to collect nuts and sweets.
- **The new year arrives.** Families gather around the haft sin table and often stay up to mark the exact moment of the equinox. Then come days of visiting, as relatives and friends drop by one another's homes.
- **Sizdah Bedar.** On the thirteenth day of the new year, everyone heads outdoors for a picnic of games, food, and stories. The sprouts from the haft sin table, believed to carry away the past year's troubles, are tossed into running water.

The haft sin table

The heart of Nowruz is the *haft sin*, a table of seven items whose Persian names begin with the letter *sin* (s). Common choices include *sabzeh* (sprouts, for rebirth), *seeb* (apple, for health), *seer* (garlic), *serkeh* (vinegar, for patience), *senjed* (dried oleaster fruit), *somagh* (sumac), and *samanu* (a sweet wheat pudding). Families often add a mirror, candles, coins, painted eggs, flowers, and a goldfish.

Jewish touches. The table usually holds a meaningful book. Muslim families may choose a Quran, and others a book of poetry by Hafez. Iranian Jewish writers describe placing a *siddur* (prayer book), a book of Psalms, or a Torah. Some grow lentil sprouts instead of wheat when Passover is near.

Nowruz, Purim, and Passover

Nowruz follows the sun, while the Jewish calendar follows the moon, so the holidays shift against each other from year to year. Nowruz usually lands between Purim and Passover, and sometimes Passover falls during the Nowruz days. Iranian Jewish writers describe preparing for both at once.

The holidays share a great deal. Both Nowruz and Passover begin with a thorough cleaning. Both feature a symbolic table with greens, eggs, and vinegar or salt water. Some families have held their Nowruz visiting days during the week of Passover, and one Israeli family recalls setting a goldfish, a mirror, and candles on the seder table. Rabbi Tarlan Rabizadeh, who grew up in Los Angeles, compares Nowruz gifts of snacks to Purim's *mishloah manot*.

Scholars have also noted possible echoes of Nowruz in Persian Jewish Passover customs, such as the playful tapping of family members with green onions during the song "Dayenu." These links are intriguing, but researchers present them as possibilities rather than proven history.

Cultural or religious?

Iranian Jews have discussed how to relate to a holiday with Zoroastrian roots. Some feel it is not appropriate for Jews to observe it. Most see Nowruz as a national and cultural celebration of the Persian new year, much as many Americans celebrate New Year's Day.

Some families draw a clear line: Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish new year, and Nowruz is a beloved Persian tradition. As one Los Angeles writer puts it, she wants her children to identify as Jewish "first and foremost," while still sharing the joy of Nowruz.

Community by community

Iran

Nowruz brought about two weeks of celebration, with new clothes, family visits, and tables full of sweets. Iranian Jewish writers remember combining the holiday with Shabbat, saying *kiddush* before the Nowruz dinner, and placing a siddur and a book of Psalms on the haft sin.

Sources: Kveller (Aylin Sedighi-Gabbaizadeh); Jewish Journal (Tabby Refael)

Los Angeles

Nearly a third of the country's roughly 750,000 Iranian Americans live in the Los Angeles area, including a large Iranian Jewish community. Rabbi Tarlan Rabizadeh remembers Sizdah Bedar picnics with the Persian community as a highlight of her childhood.

Sources: AP; Be'chol Lashon (Rabbi Tarlan Rabizadeh)

New York

In 2026, the Museum of Jewish Heritage held its third annual Spring Equinox Festival, celebrating Nowruz and Purim together with a haft sin talk, Persian music and dance, and family activities. Partners included the American Sephardi Federation.

Sources: Museum of Jewish Heritage; JTA

Israel

Iranian Israelis set haft sin tables and cook Persian dishes such as *gondi*, a chicken and chickpea dumpling soup. Families with Iranian roots keep the custom alive across generations.

Source: Times of Israel (2026)

Bukharian Jews (Central Asia)

In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan the holiday is called *Navruz*. In New York and in Ramla, Israel, Bukharian Jewish community leaders have joined Navruz celebrations with music and traditional foods, alongside Uzbek and Tajik neighbors.

Source: The Bukharian Times (Rafael Nektalov)

Mountain Jews (Caucasus)

Jews of the Caucasus, where the holiday is called *Novruz*, had their own customs of jumping over bonfires to ward off the evil eye. In Ramla, Israel, Navruz has been celebrated with a concert in a community that includes Mountain and Bukharian Jews.

Sources: National Library of Israel; The Bukharian Times

Nowruz is also celebrated by Afghan, Kurdish, Azerbaijani, Turkish, and Central Asian communities, among many others. In 2009 UNESCO added Nowruz to its list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and in 2016 the listing grew to twelve countries.

Foods of the season

Nowruz foods celebrate fresh herbs, greens, and sweetness for the year ahead. Iranian Jewish families share many of these dishes with their neighbors of other faiths.

Herbs and fish

Sabzi polo, rice cooked with fresh herbs, is often served with fish. *Kuku sabzi* is a thick herb frittata packed with greens.

Source: Be'chol Lashon

Cookies and confections

Families bake cookies such as *nokhodchi*, small chickpea cookies, along with rosewater treats. Some make *toot*, marzipan sweets shaped like mulberries.

Sources: Jewish Journal; Kveller; Times of Israel

Tea and visiting

During the visiting days, families keep an open house, welcoming relatives and friends who drop by. One Persian Jewish food writer serves tea from her aunt's samovar.

Sources: Times of Israel; Jewish Journal

Common misconceptions

- **"Nowruz is an Islamic holiday."** It is far older than Islam, with roots in ancient Persia and Zoroastrian tradition, and people of many faiths celebrate it.
- **"Nowruz is only Iranian."** It is shared across Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Kurdish regions, Turkey, and beyond.
- **"Persian Jews treat Nowruz as a Jewish holiday."** Most see it as a cultural and national celebration. Rosh Hashanah remains the Jewish new year.
- **"Passover customs were copied from Nowruz."** Scholars point to shared themes and possible mutual influence, but they do not claim direct borrowing.

Words to know

- Nowruz** *Persian*
"New day." The Persian New Year at the spring equinox.
- Haft sin** *Persian*
"Seven S's." The table of seven symbolic items.
- Sabzeh** *Persian*
Sprouted wheat or lentils, a sign of rebirth.
- Samanu** *Persian*
A sweet pudding made from sprouted wheat.
- Khaneh tekani** *Persian*
"Shaking the house." Spring cleaning before Nowruz.

- Chaharshanbe Suri** *Persian*
The fire festival on the eve of the year's last Wednesday.
- Sizdah Bedar** *Persian*
The outdoor picnic on the thirteenth day of the new year.
- Farvardin** *Persian*
The first month of the Iranian calendar.
- Eid e shoma mobarak** *Persian*
"Happy holiday to you," a Nowruz greeting.
- Navruz, Novruz** *Central Asia, Caucasus*
Names for the same holiday in other languages.

Bringing Nowruz to life

In the public school classroom

- Nowruz is celebrated by Iranian, Afghan, Kurdish, Azerbaijani, and Central Asian families, so it is a natural fit for a multicultural classroom.
- Build a classroom display about the haft sin, with students researching what each item symbolizes.
- Compare spring festivals across cultures and discuss why so many peoples celebrate renewal at this time of year.
- Keep the focus on culture and history, and avoid current politics. Present the table and customs as subjects of study, and do not have students perform religious rituals or prayers.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Set up a haft sin with a siddur or Tanakh, and talk about how Iranian Jews joined Persian and Jewish traditions.
- Plan a Sizdah Bedar picnic or a spring cleaning project before Passover.
- Compare the haft sin and the seder plate: what symbols do they share?
- Invite Iranian, Bukharian, or Mountain Jewish families to share their memories.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: Did your family set a haft sin? What book did you place on it?
- Grow *sabzeh* together from wheat or lentils, and watch it sprout over two weeks.
- Try a Nowruz dish such as *sabzi polo* (herbed rice) or *kuku sabzi* (herb frittata).
- Record an elder's Nowruz memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- How can a family take part in a national or cultural holiday while keeping its own religious identity?
- Nowruz, Purim, and Passover all arrive in spring. What themes do they share, and how are they different?
- Why do you think so many cultures celebrate renewal at the start of spring?

Learn more

Watch and listen

[The Jews of Iran, Past and Present, with Matthew Nouriel](#) (JIMENA, 2025)

vimeo.com/1136990773

[The Iranian Jewish Experience with Tabby Refael](#) (JIMENA, 2025)

vimeo.com/1067519972

[The Bukharian Jewish Community: History and Culture](#) (JIMENA, 2021)

youtube.com/watch?v=DcH7_nKWxu0

[Persian Jewish Music with Galeet Dardashti](#) (JIMENA, 2020)

youtube.com/watch?v=Dzzl918VZ5k

Read

[Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews](#), edited by Houshan Sarshar (Jewish Publication Society and the Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002).

sdjewishworld.com/?p=58361

[A Persian Princess](#), by Barbara Diamond Goldin, illustrated by Steliyana Doneva (Apples & Honey Press, 2020). Picture book about a Persian grandmother's Purim traditions.

jewishbookcouncil.org/book/a-persian-princess

From JIMENA

[JIMENA's Jewish Iranian Resource Guide](#) (includes JIMENA posts on Nowruz and Purim)

sepharditoolkit.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/JIMENAs-Jewish-Iranian-Resource-Guide.pdf

[Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit](#) (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)

sepharditoolkit.org

[Culture and Holidays video collection](#)

jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

[JIMENA Oral History](#)

jimena.org/oral-history

Explore online

[A Rabbi's Reflections on the Persian New Year](#) (Be'chol Lashon) jewishdiversitystories.org/identity/rabbitarlannowruz

[How Can I Be So in Love with a Non Jewish Holiday?](#) (Jewish Journal, Tabby Refael)

jewishjournal.com/commentary/columnist/346257/how-can-i-be-so-in-love-with-a-non-jewish-holiday

[For Persian Jews, Passover Isn't the Only Major Spring Holiday](#) (Kveller)

kveller.com/?p=92605

[My Exodus: A Very Persian Passover](#) (Jewish Journal, illustrated memoir by Shirin Raban)

jewishjournal.com/judaism/holidays/217634/exodus-persian-passover

[Did We Borrow the Passover Seder From the Persians?](#) (National Library of Israel)

blog.nli.org.il/en/nowruz_passover

[Passover in the Persian Tradition](#) (World Jewish Congress)

worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/pessah-in-the-persian-tradition--efrat-sopher-member-of-the-wjc-jewish-diplomatic-corps-uk?print=true

[Spring Equinox Festival](#) (Museum of Jewish Heritage, New York)

mjhnyc.org/?p=28960

[Nowruz on the Representative List](#) (UNESCO)

ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/11.COM/10.b.1

[21 March, the International Day of Nowruz](#) (UNESCO)

ich.unesco.org/en/news/21-march-the-international-day-of-nowruz-13299



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include UNESCO; the National Library of Israel; Be'chol Lashon (Rabbi Tarlan Rabizadeh); Jewish Journal (Tabby Refael, Shirin Raban, Stuart Halpern); Kveller; the World Jewish Congress; the Museum of Jewish Heritage; JTA; the Associated Press; the Times of Israel; and The Bukharian Times. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.