



Healing the Zoroastrian Diaspora Community – Part 3

Sousan Abadian, for *Chehreh Nama*, Issue 198, June 2021

In the last two issues of the *Chehreh Nama Magazine*, Dr. Sousan Abadian talked about individual and collective trauma within Iranian and Zoroastrian culture. In this third and last part we continue benefiting from her knowledge and gain insight into how as a community we can heal from the discussed trauma and pave the path towards a healthy productive diaspora community outside Iran and India. Some of the material for this three-part article was obtained from an online interview with Dr. Abadian as well as her interviews with the Council of Persian Culture.

How do you think our Zoroastrian culture and beliefs can help us heal from trauma?

Particularly in Iran, but also in India, Zoroastrians have lived for centuries as minorities within sociocultural contexts characterized by a great deal of domination, control, and manipulation, particularly of women and children—the antithesis of Ashu Zartosht’s (Zarathushtra’s) original teachings. This has adversely affected us, and to some extent, distorted our ways. Those of us in the diaspora finally have the opportunity and the responsibility to question the effects that centuries of immersion in patriarchy have had on us. We can now redress the dysfunctions—to restore ourselves to emotional and relational health and to the essential teachings of our faith.

For example, we need to re-examine the fundamentals: what does it mean to be an emotionally healthy man? An emotionally healthy woman? What does an equitable relationship between a man and woman look like? How do we raise healthy, happy children? What do healthy boundaries look like for our community now that we are no longer in mortal danger?

Traditionally, our Persian-Zoroastrian belief system did not emphasize humanity as being fundamentally flawed and “sinful.” Zarathushtra was a lover of humanity and taught that human beings have the *freedom to choose*, to make free will choices in order to learn, progress, and evolve. It’s not surprising that ancient Persians never supported the practice of slavery in a time when most peoples did—every single human being was to have the freedom to choose. Nor did we subjugate women or oppress people of different faiths but allowed for pluralism.

Of course, with great freedom comes great responsibility—to be discerning, to make our choices after a period of inquiry and reflection—to access higher awareness, reaching always for equanimity, truth,

fairness, love. Zoroastrianism encourages us to choose to align our thoughts, our words, and our actions toward the more progressive and generative path, for the highest good of all. Originally, Zoroastrians were not handed a list of “thou shalt nots” or commandments; instead, we are *trusted* to learn our way to wholeness, guided by our good minds, hearts, and souls. Spiritual enlightenment emerges out of self-development. Self-development is not only about training our minds in universities, but also social-emotional and spiritual development.

The belief in every being’s innate nobility is in stark contrast with beliefs that see humans as needing to be controlled and manipulated to get them to act a certain way—the prevailing paradigm under which many Iranians lived. Living under a system of domination, control, and manipulation has affected us in fundamental ways, including how we treat and raise our children.

For example, are we guiding our children, giving them the reflective tools necessary to develop their mental-emotional-spiritual muscles to make wise choices? Or are we telling them what they must do, what we tell them to do? Are we willing to respect the decisions that our young adult children make, even if what they decide is not our preference (and we’re afraid they will make us “look bad” or ashamed in front of others)? Have we threatened them in some way—with beatings, criticism, with pulling back our love or our funds— if they don’t do what we say or want? Do we treat them with respect or are we treating them as inferior, needing to be controlled and manipulated?

Zoroastrianism not only considers each individual worthy of respect and endowed with the freedom to choose their own path, but our faith teaches that human beings are powerful. We are considered partners with the Divine in establishing the right rule and paradise here on Earth. This paradise comes about as we humans evolved emotionally and spiritually, as we learn to allow our thoughts, words, and actions to align with *Asha*, a word that many have tried to define but which can only be experienced. Ashu Zartosht foresaw the evolution of humanity from Homo sapiens to Homo *luminous* and taught that the Earth’s fate was up to us, and not some single, distant messiah promised to the desperate and the disempowered.

Zarathushtra did not teach the notion of an end-of-time Savior, though it was eventually adopted as part of our belief system after our people had undergone extensive collective traumas. What hurting and oppressed peoples wouldn’t want to believe that some merciful entity will come and save them? Zarathushtra taught that while we have bountiful assistance from the invisible realms, ultimately, we are the saviors we’ve been waiting for. We have the potential to become *saoshyants*, those who bring benefit to Humanity and the Earth. To become saoshyants, we need to first engage in healing our wounds, shed any disempowering and shame-filled thinking, and take positive action in the world.

A last observation in response to your question of how our faith can help us heal: healing is made easier when we have a lighter, more optimistic heart. Traditionally, our ancestors honored the material world—the beauty, color, the sensual delights of material life on Earth as it was considered something good and wholesome. The natural world, the Earth, is considered sacred. Traditionally our ceremonies and our community gatherings were celebratory and emphasized gratitude for the abundance provided us: we always found ways to rejoice and savor the gifts of the seasons, the natural world, our connection to it and to one another. Engaging with the world, with each other, with a joyful, grateful heart supports our healing.

For a while now, Iranian culture seems to have a kind of split personality, if I can use that term. It has within it, elements of two kinds of belief systems—the more ancient, hereditary cultural DNA I just described and one that is trauma-based.

You discussed the ancient side of Iranian culture. Please share more about the other side of this “split personality.”

There are elements in our culture that tend to keep sorrow alive—almost like relishing stories of betrayal and victimization. There’s an ever-present underlying tone of tragedy. The elements in our culture that glorify death or are fixated on martyrdom don’t easily allow people to feel they can celebrate the joy of being alive. In Iran, this is most obvious, for example, in the continuous memorialization of so-called martyrs, the somber insignia of women in their black chadors evokes a sense of perpetual mourning. Rituals of self-flagellation like Ashura commemorating the killing of Husayn—all these potentially keep Iranians stuck in a depressive and pessimistic view of life. To be pious really becomes confused with suffering. Iranian Zoroastrian immigrants also have an element of this, having lived under those conditions for so long.

Now, don’t get me wrong: It’s important to be able to grieve actual loss in our lives, but the process of healthy grieving allows us to eventually find liberation and release from deep pain and to gain wisdom from it. But when suffering is elevated and habitual, when people are made to believe that to be connected to the Divine, to be religious means you have to hurt and endure pain, or when grieving is manipulated and continuously evoked, first, it doesn’t give people permission to have real joy. And second, it can keep them stuck in the past instead of being in the here and now. They often miss opportunities to make the most out of their lives in the here and now.

As a newly migrated minority to the United States how do we compare to other minorities, for example, the Jewish community?

Let me begin by saying that when we make comparisons, we must be careful not to look at others and think they are better than we are, that we are falling short in some way and feel ashamed. This is part of our trauma, particularly for Iranians who have been subjected to generational prejudice and made to feel inferior in the homeland. Because the shame is so painful, we may try to hide from it, and we might even make the other wrong so that we can feel better. Instead, if we hold ourselves in love, we can look to others with the intention to learn what they may have to teach us.

In that spirit, if I were to compare us with the Jewish community, the first thing I would note is that we are far smaller in numbers than they are. This can be a handicap in terms of resources for the community. Also, they have been in the US far longer than Zoroastrians have. Most North American Zoroastrians were born elsewhere. In other words, most of us aren’t even first-generation. Why does this matter? Because first-generation immigrants of any variety typically spend a lot of their lives just adjusting to a changed environment and working to create a solid financial footing. It’s generally the next generations that have the luxury to move beyond survival needs to begin thinking socially-politically. We’re just beginning to get there.

Keep in mind, “the Jewish community” is very complex and not monolithic! There are very different factions that might not consider each other part of “the community.” The community I know is exemplary in a number of ways. For example, I deeply admire Jewish social activism. After the Holocaust in which six million Jews perished, the battle cry for many Jews became “Never again!” In the US, influenced by the Vietnam War era and the progressiveness of the 1960s, “never again will this happen to Jews” became “never again will we tolerate any kind of atrocity—including racism—happening against *any* people.” That’s when we saw a number of Jewish Rabbi’s walking hand-in-hand with Martin Luther King Jr. in civil rights marches. Many Jews continue to be very active in the world of social justice.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, we Zoroastrians have not had a recent Holocaust to speak of. We've not had that level of suffering that is required sometimes to awaken people to deep compassion. Alternatively, perhaps, we may just be numb and haven't had enough healing to awaken us to our own suffering, let alone the suffering of others. What we do have already is an ethic of social responsibility. My hope is that as we heal, feel safer and more resourceful, our collective heart will awaken to action on behalf of all.

Considering the Jewish community in the U.S. as an example, what can we learn from them to build a positive and beneficial future for Zoroastrians outside Iran and India specifically within the United States?

Jews have invested resources in themselves before they did anything for anyone else. For example, they built various institutions, have various foundations that were instrumental in helping Jewish immigrants settle here in North America, and some of these foundations have expanded their mission statement to include the needs of non-Jews. But this wasn't always the case. I think Zoroastrians might do well to invest in our own community—to care for ourselves so that we can be strong enough to care for others responsibly.

Over time, we can join forces with elements in the Jewish community and/or develop a niche uniquely our own that's complementary and where we can be helpful to the larger world. But really, I think some of our energies need to be devoted to educating, *healing*, and strengthening ourselves and our community—helping some of our immigrants from Iran, for example to feel more secure in a new land. Some Iranian immigrants are stuck in far-flung places and without support. We have no institutions that advocate on their behalf.

Regarding the need to heal collective trauma... from my perspective, some Zoroastrians understandably come from a “lack” consciousness—meaning that they believe there's not enough to go around, and so they compete for what they consider to be limited resources, instead of being generous, sharing, and helpful. We need to have open conversations about this and do the necessary healing to get beyond these limitations.

Also, the passivity of some Iranian Zoroastrian is a form of “learned helplessness” resulting from years of oppression. They don't think they can make a difference (or will be punished for stepping out), so why try? In some ways, we have lost our confidence and our belief in our worthiness, and we must heal that. The Jewish people have the notion of themselves as God's “chosen people” and that has, in part, inspired them onward. I think any notion of being more “special” to God than anyone else is dysfunctional, but still, we Zoroastrians would do well to regain a healthy sense of self-worth.

You spoke of “learned helplessness”, how can we as individuals and as a community use what we now consciously know and turn “learned helplessness” into “learned healing and renewed health?”

First, we must be willing to invest in good counseling and coaching to help us understand our emotions and evolve our patterns of thinking and behaving. We need to have honest conversations as a community about the basics—emotional health, the health of our relationships, and raising our children. We need to develop spiritual competencies and meaningful community gatherings beyond rote prayer and ceremony.

Part of the antidote is individual renewal, but another is cultural renewal. No culture is static. All vibrant cultures are alive and changing. As we evolve, we must decide which elements in our culture to keep—what cultural elements are precious and to be held close. But also, we must be willing to get rid of those

elements, as hard as that may feel, that are not life-enhancing or constructive—that are trauma-based and traumatizing. We may also create *new* cultural elements.

These are the kinds of muscles I help people and communities build—the capacity to step out of stories of limitation and victimization, for people to see themselves as powerful creators in their lives and be able to help evolve their communities to serve the greater good.

Our gratitude to Dr. Sousan Abadian for her time and providing Chehreh Nama Magazine readers with valuable information. We hope to use her insights towards a journey of cultural healing and communal success. To connect with Dr. Abadian visit www.sousanabadian.com and subscribe to her newsletter to learn about upcoming opportunities to enhance your capacities.