

that this festival be celebrated on whatever day the sun passes into the constellation of Aries—that is, the vernal equinox—Naw-Ruz could fall on March 19, 20, 21, or 22, depending on the precise time of the equinox (even should this occur one minute before sunset). It is expected that the precise timing of Naw-Ruz will require a designated spot on earth—to be decided by the Universal House of Justice (the governing international Baha’i council) in the future—to serve as the standard for astronomically determining the spring equinox. Since Naw-Ruz also falls on the first day of a Baha’i month, it coincides with the day on which a Nineteen-Day Feast is to be observed, but the two events must be kept separate. Baha’i communities typically observe Naw-Ruz and meetings that combine prayerful devotions with joyous fellowship. “Naw-Ruz is our New Year, a Feast of hospitality and rejoicing” (Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, 30). Baha’is from Iranian backgrounds may follow some traditions associated with the ancient Persian festival, but these cultural practices are kept distinct from the religious observance itself. To augment the festive joy, signal events are often

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scheduled to take place on Naw-Ruz, being an ideal time for momentous announcements as well.

The Bab (1819–1850), precursor and herald of Baha’u’llah, created a new calendar—called the Badi’ (“Wondrous”/“New”) calendar—which consists of 19 months of 19 days each, with four intercalary days (five in leap years) to round out the solar year. The only religious festival that the Bab had instituted was Naw-Ruz. The first day of the new year (i.e., the day of “Baha’ ”) was Naw-Ruz (March 21), which the Bab specifically set apart in honor of “Him Whom God shall make manifest,” whose advent the Bab foretold and whose appearance, as Baha’u’llah, the majority of the Bab’s followers accepted. The Bab wrote:

God hath called that month the month of Baha’ (Splendour, Glory), meaning that therein lieth the splendour and glory of all months, and He hath singled it out for Him Whom God shall make manifest. (The Bab, *Persian Bayan* 5:3;

provisional translation by Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 328)

Because this day was “singled it out for Him Whom God shall make manifest,” Naw-Ruz was highly symbolic and its observance pointed forward to that messianic

figure for whose imminent advent it was the Bab’s professed mission to prepare the

world (and whom the majority of Babis recognized as Baha’u’llah later on). The

Bab described Naw-Ruz as the Day of God on which goodly acts performed would

receive the recompense for same acts as though performed for an entire year, while

those who recite a special verse 361 times would be preserved from anything illfated during the course of the coming year (*The Bab, Persian Bayan* 5:3).

The Bab’s

laws, which were scarcely put into practice during the time of the Bab, were primarily

intended to prepare his followers for the coming of “Him Whom God shall make manifest” and would be abrogated, except as accepted, at his advent. Such

laws, as

Nader Saiedi points out, were “not meant to be taken literally but instead perform a

symbolic and profoundly transformative function” (*Saiedi, Gate of the Heart*, 343).

Even so, Baha’u’llah preserved and adapted several of the Bab’s major laws to

be observed by the Baha’is. Baha’u’llah formally ordained

Naw-Ruz as a festival

unto those who have observed the period of fasting that precedes Naw-Ruz:

O Pen of the Most High! Say: O people of the world! We have enjoined upon you fasting during a brief period, and at its close have designated for you Naw-Ruz as a feast. Thus hath the Day-Star of Utterance shone forth above the horizon of the Book as decreed by Him Who is the Lord of the beginning and the end. (*Baha’u’llah, The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, 25)

This Baha’i law refers to the nineteen-day Fast (March 2–20), a period of spiritual discipline and purification, during which Baha’is abstain from food and drink

from sunrise to sunset. (Baha’i days begin and end at sunset.) Since the Fast

ends on the sunset on which Naw-Ruz begins, Naw-Ruz celebrations are often combined with a dinner.

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Unlike the other Baha’i holy days, which commemorate historic events in Baha’i history, Naw-Ruz has religious significance primarily due to its symbolism

of renewal. As an Indo-European language, Persian is distantly related to English, which explains why the word “naw” (pronounced “no”) in Persian is similar to the English word “new.” Naw-Ruz not only heralds the advent of spring, but is also symbolic of a “spiritual springtime.” On a personal level, the Festival of Naw-Ruz is a time for renewal. On the occasion of Naw-Ruz in 1906, ‘Abdu’l-Baha (1844–1921), the successor to Baha’u’llah, wrote to the American Baha’is saying, in part:

It is New Year; . . . now is the beginning of a cycle of Reality, a New Cycle, a New Age, a New Century, a New Time and a New Year. . . . I wish this blessing to appear and become manifest in the faces and characteristics of the believers, so that they, too, may become a new people, and . . . may make the world a new world, to the end that . . . the sword be turned into the olive branch; the flash of hatred become the flame of the love of God . . . all races as one race; and all national anthems harmonized into one melody. (‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, 38–40)

Thus, this ancient Zoroastrian holy day and Persian springtime festival has been transformed into a Baha’i holy day, which has, as its animating purpose, the creation of a new world in which a new era of peace and prosperity may be brought about through the universal Baha’i principles of unity through diversity, famously expressed by Baha’u’llah in 1890 in a historic visit by Cambridge orientalist Edward G. Browne (*A Traveller’s Narrative*, xl), in these oft-quoted words:

That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled—what harm is there in this? . . . Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the “Most Great Peace” shall come.

Baha’is see this “New Day” as having transformed the vernal equinox into a universal celebration of the oneness of humankind.
Christopher Buck

See also ‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Ascension of; Ayyam-i-Ha* (Baha’i

Intercalary Days);
Bab, Festival of the Birth of the; Bab, Festival of the Declaration of the;
Bab, Martyrdom of the; Baha'i Calendar and Rhythms of Worship;
Baha'i Faith; Baha'i
Fast; Baha'u'llah, Ascension of; Baha'u'llah, Festival of the
Birth of; Covenant,
Day of the; Nineteen-Day Feast (Baha'i); Race Unity Day; Ridvan,
Festival of;
?
World Religion Day.
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Nehan

Many Buddhists believe that the birth, the day of enlightenment (at the age of 35), and death (in his 80s) of Gautama Buddha, the founder of the Buddhist movement, occurred on the same day of the year. That day, usually called Wesak, is the

night

of the full moon of the Hindu month of Vaisakha (usually in May on the Common Era calendar). Tibetans call it Sakya Dawa.

Other Buddhists, most notably those in Japan, hold their commemorations of those three events on separate days. Nehan, February 15, is the day Japanese Buddhists believe that Gautama Buddha died near the town of Kushinagara, almost due north of Calcutta near the border with Nepal, on the banks of the

Hiranyavati

River. The Buddha is often pictured in a reclining state, using his right hand as a

pillow, calling to memory the moments before his death. Early accounts of his death suggest that he was sleeping on a bed between two sala trees whose white flowers fell continuously during his last day.

In his last discourse, called the Yuikyogyo, the Last Teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha, he discussed the transitory state of life, noting that the physical body

(even his) dies, and that it is the Dharma (the teaching) that is eternal. He also

noted that he had withheld nothing from his teachings, that there were no secret

teachings, nor any teachings with a hidden meaning. He closed by saying that “In a moment, I shall be passing into Nirvana.” His death is popularly referred to

as the Mahanirvana or Parinirvana. In Japan, there are a variety of ways to

— Naw-Ruz, Festival of (March 21) (Used by permission of the curator)