



EREV **ערב** **ילדה** YALDA



An Iranian Jewish
guide to navigating the dark

By Rachel Sumekh
and Tannaz Sassooni

Produced in
partnership with
Reboot Studios



Even since hasplases
heard your name,
it has been running
through the streets
trying to find you.
-Hafiz

اسکت دعوت کرد و گذشت و رفت
از نوافت باز دم که خستم
خورد شیر نم خورد و یک
در چشمی به سیر و اندر دار

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Hello and خوش آمدید
/khosh amadid
(Welcome!). We are
Rachel Sumekh and
Tannaz Sassooni,
and we created Erev
Yalda as a way to
explore the shared
themes of Yalda and
Hanukkah, the two
winter celebrations
we observe as
Iranian Jews.

Yalda is an ancient festival in Iran and greater Persia that marks the winter solstice – the first night of winter and the longest night of the year. Friends and loved ones gather and stay up all night to eat, drink, and read poetry in harmony with the night sky.

Hanukkah, often falling on or very close to Yalda, is the Jewish winter holiday, known as the Festival of Lights. Lasting eight nights, we light candles, each night adding one more, bringing more and more light as we go deeper into the darkness of winter.

In Persian, we refer to the Yalda celebration as شب یلدا “Shab-e Yalda,” the night or eve of

Yalda. In Hebrew, the word for eve is “erev,” and all Jewish holidays actually start the night before. We have our Passover seder on Erev Pesach, and dip apples and honey on Erev Rosh Hashana. Erev Yalda is the fusion of these two traditions: on the eve of the year’s longest night, we explore the dark with loved ones and friends.

Reading
from a deck
of Hafez’s
poetry.
Still from film





Fruit platter featuring red fruits and sour cherry sufganiyot.

Photo by Candice Navi

THE HISTORY OF EREV YALDA

Since ancient times, Persians have marked four annual transition moments: the spring equinox نوروز (Nowruz), summer solstice تیرگان (Tirgān), fall equinox مهرگان (Mehregān), and winter solstice یلدا (Yaldā). Each one marks a change in sunlight and our trees.

Yalda, which means “birth” in Syriac, marks the birth of Mithrā, the ancient Iranian deity of all covenants (including friendships and romantic partnerships) and light, symbolized by the sun. As our friend Dr. Sahba Shayani shared, the annual re-birth of Mithrā is a reminder of the ancient Iranian belief that no matter how long and dark the night of evil and tyranny may seem, goodness and light will always conquer it and day will follow night.

PERSIAN POETRY AND FĀL-E HĀFEZ

Persian poetry has a history that spans over a millennia, and Iranians revere their ancient poets, such as Rumi, Saadi, Ferdowsi, and Hafez. Our poets are not merely poets but philosophers, sages, and preservers of history and culture. Persian poets, similar to ancient Jewish ones, composed poetry not only as an art form, but also to pass down the wisdom of our ancestors to us to guide us through life. The 14th century poet Hafez is especially beloved, and on Yalda night, it's customary to use his poems as a form of fortune telling. Bibliomancy is the term for fortune telling with a book. People use books or cards and pick a poem at random and apply it to the questions of their lives.

Students study for years to understand and decipher the sophisticated metaphors, imagery, symbolism, and language of a poet like Hāfez. As you compile your books (see recommendations below), here are a few tips to get the most as you dive in.

Look to the last
few lines

Often, Hāfez keeps the greatest lessons in the last few lines or stanzas. If there's too much to unpack in the entire poem, read and reflect on what he shares at the end.

Gender

Persian, the original language of Hāfez's poems, is genderless. If "he" or "she" is used in the translations, consider what the poem would read like if it was gender neutral!

Look for symbols
of unity with the Divine

Common themes in Hāfez's work include wine, the cup, the tavern, and the beloved. While no one knows exactly his intention with each use, it is said that these are often not literal but symbolic of spiritual states:

- + **Wine** often represents divine ecstasy.
- + **The Beloved** symbolizes God or the ultimate truth.
- + **The Tavern** may signify the place where one can lose oneself in divine love.

Poems by Hafez

#93

We have not come to this place for pomp and ranks!

We seek refuge from the evil of the event!

Travelers of the path of love, from the borders of
not-being

we traveled this long thoroughfare—to the state
of being.

We saw the tract of the fruit; from Eden

we came, demanding this miracle weed¹.

With such treasures, the ward of The Holy Spirit,
as beggars, we've come to the door of our King.

Oh Ship of Grace, where is the charity of your anchor:
born sinful—we come to this sea, filled with
caritas.

O clouds, wash away with your rains our misdeeds,
we have arrived for judgment with blackened
sheets².

Hāfez, toss away your woolen sack with
equanimity;

we have followed the caravan—with the fire
of sighs.

1
Perhaps
referencing
forbidden
fruit.

2
A list of a
person's sins
and
transgressions.

#159

Do you know what is the pleasure in seeing the rise of a friend?

Preferring beggary in the lover's lane to accepting a crown!

To cut out any hope of living is easy to come, yet it's hard to cut out a dear friend from your life.

To the garden I come, like a blossom, wearied; there, in good reputation, will I rend my shirt:

At times, like the breeze to the rose I tell my secrets, at times, hear, from the nightingale, love-making songs.

You cannot neglect kissing the lips of your beloved, lest at last you become tired of biting your lips and hand!

Value the conversation of your friends: once, from this forked road we pass, there is no returning:

Perhaps, Shah Yahyaa³ has forgotten Hafez. O God, remind him to care for the Darvishes⁴.

3

In Arabic, this verse alludes to Moses at Mount Sinai, reflecting a small portion of God's luminosity from his face.

4

A spiritual seeker. Symbolizes someone at the threshold between the material and spiritual worlds, embodying humility, devotion, and poverty in favor of spiritual richness.

HANUKKAH AS A SOLSTICE CELEBRATION

While some refer to Hanukkah merely as Jewish Christmas, there is more to the story.

For generations, Jews have retold the story of Hanukkah as one of miracles. We tell about a battle of religious freedom with the Jewish Maccabees triumphing over the Greek Empire. After the triumph, the Jews had only enough oil to light the Temple for one night, but remarkably, it lasted eight, allowing them to rededicate the Temple. **But in Jewish history, there's always another story.** The Talmud offers us a radical reimagining of even our most central narratives. As always, the Talmud offers us a radical reimagining of even our most traditional narratives.

The Talmud, the second most important Jewish text after the Torah, tells the story of Adam approaching a darkening world just before the winter solstice. We thank Rabbi Dev Noily for sharing this teaching with us.

So, our Rabbinic scholars actually date the festival of Hanukkah to year one, and understand it as a festival of gratitude for the winter solstice, the lengthening of days, and our ability to learn from the unfolding rhythms of the earth.

PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION

- + Have you noticed that we've had less sunlight with each passing day? Adam's instinct was to fast and pray for light to return. Are there any habits or changes you've observed in yourself with the darkening of days?
- + Adam held his celebratory festival for just as many days as he fasted. How do you celebrate when you overcome big moments of darkness or the unknown?
- + What parallels can we draw between the story of the Maccabees (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Maccabees>) and the story of Adam above?



1970s-era Iranian Fal-e Hafez card.
Photo by Candice Navi

"When Adam the first man saw that the day was progressively diminishing, [as the days become shorter from the autumnal equinox until the winter solstice, he did not yet know that this is a normal phenomenon, and therefore] he said: Woe is me; perhaps because I sinned the world is becoming dark around me and will ultimately return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder. [And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven], as it is written: 'And to dust shall you return.' (Genesis 3:19)

He arose and spent eight days in fasting and in prayer. Once he saw that the season of Tevet, [i.e., the winter solstice] had arrived, and saw that the day was progressively lengthening after the solstice, he said: Clearly, the days become shorter and then longer, and this is the order of the world. **He went and observed a festival for eight days.** Upon the next year, he observed both these eight days on which he had fasted on the previous year, and these eight days of his celebration, as days of festivities."

(Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 8a)

Hosting Your Own Erev Yalda

عرت یلدا



STEP 1
INVITE PEOPLE

If it's your first time, you may want to start small with five to ten people. If you're well versed, the sky's the limit: we've hosted up to 40 people!

Our best hosting tip is to think back to a gathering you attended that you loved. Make a list of what made it so wonderful. See how you can bring those intentions and designs into your gathering.

Here's a text invite you can use as a starting point:

Dec 20 is the winter solstice, the beautifully dark longest night of the year. You're invited to an Erev Yalda celebration at X's place. We'll read Hafez, drink wine, and light Hanukkah candles to bring in more fire. Would love to see you there!

STEP 2
GATHER YOUR BOOKS

A key element of Erev Yalda is reading fal-e Hāfez (Hāfez' fortune telling). With this in mind, below are several books to bring into your night.

Poems of Hafez, translated by Reza Ordoubadian

Reza Oroubadian directly translates the magic of Hāfez while maintaining its poetic melody. Some of the poems are dense but include brief interpretations for the reader. His introduction captures more on the difficult art of translating Hāfez.

The Gift, translated by Daniel Ladinsky

Ladinsky's poems are the most popular of Hāfez's in the US. They are stunning poems, but many Persian poets will tell you that his translations are often heavily interpreted. With that said, they are beautiful and accessible. We also love I Heard God Laughing.

The Selected Poems of Hafez, translated by Gertrude Bell

As a poet, scholar, traveler, political and intelligence officer, historian, and archaeologist who spent much of her life exploring and mapping the Middle East, Bell's translations of Hāfez are often considered the best in the English language. Her introductory biography of the poet is highly informative.

STEP 3
SET UP YOUR SPACE

Create a cozy, welcoming space with candles, music, rugs, or even blankets. We recommend gathering in a circle so folks can see one another as they share and exchange thoughts and ideas. Seating can be on couches, chairs, floor pillows, or a combination. Or go super authentic and set up a korsi!

KORSI

Long before the days of central heating, a crucial winter staple in the Persian home was the korsi, and it's still a classic element of the Yalda celebration. Traditionally, a brazier filled with hot coals was placed under a low table, and a large blanket covered the table. You'd set the table with nuts, fruit, and all your favorite Yalda snacks, and everyone would sit on the floor around the table, keeping warm and cozy under the blanket. You can create your own korsi with a small space heater and your favorite low table and blanket!



Erev Yalda
food
spread.
Still from film

STEP 4 FACILITATION

Either you or a guest can serve as a facilitator helping to keep the evening on track. The facilitator will:

1. Share a brief history of the tradition
2. Give instructions for reading fal-e Hafez.
3. Invite the reader to pose a question, intention, or desire they want to apply the poem to
4. Have the reader flip to a random page in the book
5. The reader reads the poem, which they can reread if they or others would like
6. The reader and other guests reflect on the poem
7. Share prompting questions to the group like "What stands out to you?" after someone reads a poem and prompting other guests to share their reaction to another person's poem.
8. Bring the group together for the Hanukkah candle-lighting
9. Share your own intention for what inspired you to host a gathering and anything you hope your guests take with them!

THE PERSIAN ART OF HOSTING

Iranians are known for their immense sense of hospitality. Here are a few simple but impactful tips as you design your gathering.

- + Make sure everyone is warmly greeted and comfortable as they enter the party. Offer them food or drink or introduce them to other guests.
- + Encourage people to take a second serving of food - and even take some home if there's extra.
- + Leave space for spontaneity - from bringing their own books to musical instruments, Persians welcome their guests to show up and help hold the space. It's not uncommon for a Persian party to break out into a dance party or singalong.

EREV YALDA SHABBAT
WITH ONETABLE

This year, 2024, Erev Yalda is on Friday night, which means it's also Shabbat! We've partnered with our friends at OneTable to help you host a Shabbat dinner that brings Erev Yalda to your table. Visit onetable.org/hosting to sign up as a host where you'll be able to post your Erev Yalda and future Shabbat dinners and to receive support and resources for your dinner.

For folks who are 21-39ish, OneTable empowers you to find, share, and enjoy Shabbat dinners, make the most of Friday nights, and build an enduring Shabbat practice as the foundation of a Jewish life informed by joy, meaning, and connection.

Every week, Shabbat dinner offers a chance to take a break and be fully present. Ritual and blessings might help carve out a moment to connect with yourself and others.

Light

Strike a match, create light, and take a breath. Tonight, the light within everyone and everything is revealed. We need only the will to see it.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר
קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל
שַׁבָּת

Blessed are You, Infinite
One, who makes us holy
through our actions and
honors us with the light of
Shabbat.

Sanctify Drink

How do you let go of the week that was? Let wine or juice do the work. Raise your glass and sanctify Friday night with a blessing and a toast.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא
פְּרֵי הַגֶּזֶן
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי מְקִדֵּשׁ הַשַּׁבָּת.

Blessed are You, Infinite
One, creator of the fruit of
the vine.

Nourish with Food

Slow down, savor good food. More than satisfying hunger, challah truly nourishes.

Challah is one of the three things for which the world was created.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם.
הַמוֹצֵיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ

Blessed are You, Infinite
One, who brings forth bread
from the earth.

STEP 5
THE FOOD

No Persian (or Jewish!) party is complete without ample food and drink. It's traditional on Yalda to eat red fruits, especially pomegranate and watermelon, which represent the crimson hues of dawn and the glow of life. Bowls of mixed roasted nuts – ājil in Persian – are on hand to get guests through the all nighter. On Hanukkah, we eat foods fried in oil, like latkes and sufganiyot, to commemorate the miracle of the oil. This menu combines some traditional Yalda flavors with some mashup recipes that merge Persian flavors with Hanukkah favorites. While we're sharing some delicious festive options below, unlike a seder, there is no mandatory food ritual or requirement. Get creative and serve what makes sense for you as a host and your guests.

Noon o panir

Get creative with a Persian-style cheese and herb board. On a board or platter, artfully arrange a combination of the following elements:

- + Flatbreads, such as squares of lavash or sangak, or even wedges of pita
- + A block of tangy feta cheese
- + A mix of fresh herbs, such as basil, tarragon, or mint, along with radishes, all cut into portions that people can eat with their hands
- + Nuts such as pistachios or washed walnuts
- + A bunch of grapes



Noon o panir with herbs and pistachios.
Still from film

Gardiseh Navi

Winter fruit

Create a beautiful fruit platter with your winter favorites, including red fruits like pomegranate and red apples. We like to add orange wedges, grapes, and blackberries as well. You'll also want to have a bowl of cut watermelon on the table.

Ajil-e moshkel gosha

A bowl of roasted mixed nuts – such as almonds, pistachios, hazelnuts, walnuts, and cashews – is the perfect snack for a long Erev Yalda night. Add dried fruit for a traditional Yalda “ājil-e moshkel gosha”, which legend has it, will solve all your problems!

Latke tahdig

Tahdig is the legendary golden, crisp, saffron-scented crust that forms at the bottom of a pot of Persian rice. This mashup dish uses shredded potatoes to call back to latkes, and the result is a delicious fusion.

Sour cherry mini sufganiyot

Iranians love the taste of tart sour cherries, especially in the form of preserves with warm bread and clotted cream for dessert. This recipe is a bite-sized take on sufganiyot with a sweet-tart sour cherry filling.

Zoulbia

Throughout the Sephardic world, Jews eat a variety of regional fritters such as zalabaya, sfenj, and bimuelos. Having zoulbiā, a lacy Persian fritter in a spiced syrup, on the table, connects us to those traditions. You can find Zoulbia at your favorite Middle Eastern bakery, but if you want to make your own, here's Tannaz's recipe.

Erev Yalda Sangria

A signature beverage to warm you up from inside out, this sangria mixes winter fruits with red wine and a bit of orange liqueur.



The Erev Yalda food table.
Still from film

The Recipes

LATKE TAHDIGH

- + 2 C basmati rice
- + 3 Tbsp salt plus more for final seasoning
- + 1 large russet potato, peeled and shredded
- + ½ medium yellow onion, chopped finely
- + ½ C + 4 Tbsp neutral oil (e.g., canola, grapeseed)
- + ¼ tsp + 1 pinch ground saffron
- + ¼ tsp ground turmeric
- + 1 ½ C prepared fava beans (see note)
- + 1 cup finely chopped fresh dill, stems and all (about 2 large bunches)
- + ¼ cup dried dill (optional)
- + 2 tsp ground cardamom (optional)

You can make this rice with any flavorings, but the dill in Persian polo shevid baghali connects it to Ashkenazi flavors, and you can serve it with mast-o-musir, thick yogurt with Persian shallots (which you can find at Persian markets) for a callback to the sour cream we eat with latkes.

1-5 hours ahead, wash and soak rice and soak potatoes: Place rice in a small bowl. Cover with water, claw through gently with fingers. Drain and repeat this process two more times. Cover rice with water. Add 2 Tbsp salt; stir gently to dissolve. Place shredded potatoes in a separate bowl. Cover with cold water by about an inch. Add 1 Tbsp salt and stir through to dissolve salt. Let rice and shredded potatoes soak 1-5 hours.

Brew saffron by placing ½ tsp saffron in a small bowl with a few teaspoons of water or 2 ice cubes. Allow to steep while the rice soaks.

If you are using frozen fava beans, thaw them and drain off any water.

If you are using fresh fava beans, remove individual beans from the pod. Slice each bean in half lengthwise, and slip the bright green bean out of its skin.



Latke tahdig served during Erev Yalda.
Still from film

Prepare piaz dagh

Combine onion, ½ cup oil, and pinch of saffron in a medium saucepan. Cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, until soft and darkened in color but not burned, about 8 minutes.

Parboil rice

Bring 5 cups water to a boil in a large non-stick pot. Add the rice, with its water, and turmeric. Stir gently to combine.

Cook covered, on high heat, until the rice is barely softened at its core. At five minutes, put a grain under your tooth to check it: it should be al dente, but not hard. Individual grains should be elongated. If it's not ready, give it another minute or two. If it starts to boil over, lift the lid and stir. You don't want it to be totally soft at this point – you can always cook it longer later.

Meanwhile, drain potatoes and squeeze out excess water. In a bowl, mix them with 2-3 Tbsp oil and brewed saffron water to thoroughly combine. Potatoes should have a sheen from the oil and a pale yellow color.

When rice is ready, remove rice from heat and drain into a large colander. Spread rice to increase surface area and speed up cooling. Rinse with cold water.

Rinse and dry pot from parboil. Add 3 Tbsp oil and 2 Tbsp water to it; shake to incorporate.

Place shredded potatoes at the bottom of the pot, spreading them with a spatula or your hands to create a thin layer that covers the entire bottom surface of the pot.

In the colander of rice, add fresh and dry dill, caramelized onions, fava beans, and if using, cardamom. Season with salt and pepper. Using a fork, gently stir to incorporate all ingredients. With a wide spatula, pour herbed rice into pot, shaping rice into a mound, so that it doesn't touch the sides of the pot. Using the handle of a fork, make about 5 'chutes' in the mound of rice, one in the center and 4 around the periphery. Poke the fork handle through the rice to the bottom of the pot, then move it gently from side to side to open the chute to about 1 inch diameter.

Place pot over medium-high heat, covered. When it starts sizzling and sputtering, around 8 minutes, lower the heat to low, and allow it to cook for 60-75 minutes.

Check rice after the first 20 or so minutes, and troubleshoot:

- + Too dry? Drizzle with a tablespoon of oil.
- + Too hard? Add 1-2 tablespoons water.
- + Too wet? Place a cloth rag or towel tautly over the pot, then cover. Fold the ends over the lid, so that they are not near the fire. This will absorb any steam that develops and prevent it from re-incorporating into the rice.

As the rice cooks, you can gently pull up an edge with a small spatula to check the tahdig. If it's burning, lower the heat. If it's cooking too slowly, you can increase the heat to medium low, but watch it so that it doesn't burn.

To serve, use a large spatula or thin saucer to scoop rice into serving platter. Carefully invert entire tahdig onto a large round platter.

**SOUR CHERRY
SUGGANIYOT**

- + 2 Cups sour cherry preserves
- + 2 Tbsp cornstarch
- + 1 16 oz package canned biscuit dough, such as Pillsbury Grands or Trader Joe's Organic
- + 3 Cups neutral, high smoke point oil, for frying (such as grapeseed, canola, or peanut)
- + ½ Cup powdered sugar

Adapted from Shannon Sarna for The Noshers

First, prepare filling. Using an immersion blender, blender, or food processor, blend sour cherry preserves until smooth and uniform in texture. In a small bowl, mix cornstarch with 2 tablespoons of water until fully combined. Place preserves in a small pot over medium heat. Add cornstarch slurry and stir to combine fully. Bring mixture to a boil, stirring frequently, and cook until mixture thickens to a spreadable, gelatinous consistency. Remove from heat and set aside.

Add oil to a heavy bottom pot, and bring to a temperature of 360F.

Open biscuit dough container and separate individual biscuits on a flat surface. Cut each into quarters, and roll each quarter into a ball. Fry, about 5-6 at a time, until golden brown on all sides, about 2-3 minutes total, turning if necessary.

Allow sfganiyot to cool on a rack covered with a paper towel.

Pour sour cherry filling into a piping bag, or a plastic sandwich bag with one corner snipped off.

Once sfganiyot have cooled, poke a hole in each through to the center with a wooden skewer, rotating the skewer to widen the hole to about one centimeter. Fill each hole with preserves.

Sprinkle sfganiyot with powdered sugar just before serving.



Sour cherry sfganiyot sprinkled with powdered sugar.

Photo by Candice Navi

EREV YALDA SANGRIA

- + 1 750 ml bottle red wine
- + ¼ C orange liqueur, such as Cointreau or Grand Marnier
- + 3 Tbsp granulated sugar
- + ½ C pomegranate seeds
- + 1-2 apples, such as Fuji, Gala, or Honeycrisp, cored and sliced into thin wedges
- + 1-2 navel or blood oranges, washed and sliced into thin half-moons
- + 1 cup club soda

In a large pitcher, mix together wine, orange liqueur, and sugar, stirring until sugar is dissolved. Add fruit, and chill until ready to serve, up to 4 hours. Just before serving, add ice and club soda, stir to combine.

You can optionally add cinnamon or ground cardamom for a spiced sangria.



Erev Yalda sangria and additional dishes in the Erev Yalda spread.

Still from film + photo by Candice Navi



Acknowledgments



The flame of the candles at Erev Yalda slowly faded.

Photo by Candice Navi

First, we want to thank each other. As we developed something new, we trusted and dreamt while growing as friends and creative partners aware of the many generations of Iranian Jewish women before us who led us to such a position to tell a new story.

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This digital guide was brought to life by the design talents of Candice Navi.

We thank Jonathan York for warmly opening his home for our Erev Yalda gathering.



Our Erev Yalda guests.
Stills from film



Awa
Be k
to y
Take
into
of L
And
brea
Haf

We've been socialized to fear the dark and its unknown. On the Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year, Yalda invites us to gather a few good friends, ritual foods, and proverbial poems and realize that not only is the dark nothing to fear but that it has magic and beauty to steep in. At a time when we know too well how fear can lead to division and disharmony, the insights and rituals of Yalda have never been more necessary.

night
شب شیب shab
لילה layla

poetry
شعر sher
שירה shira

pomegranate
انار anar
רמון rimon

love
عشق eshgh
אהבה ahava

light
نور noor
אור or

darkness
تاریکی tariki
חושך khoshekh

TEXT
Rachel Sumekh
& Tannaz Sassooni

DESIGN
Candice Navi

TYPEFACES
Aktiv Grotesk,
Dalton Maag
Apercu Mono,
Colophon

The cover doubles as the film's poster; it visually represents the cultural remix of Erev Yalda. Calligraphy and illustrations from Persian illuminated manuscripts from the 1500s are collaged together with contemporary English translations of Hafiz and Rumi.