

Devotion to Wisdom

Part IV: Heaven and Hell in Mazdayasna - what do
the Gathas teach us?

A Thought Catalyst

This is part IV of a series of talks presented by the [Public Relations Committee](#) of the California Zoroastrian Center. In this series, we explore Mazdayasna per the Gathas of Zarathushtra.

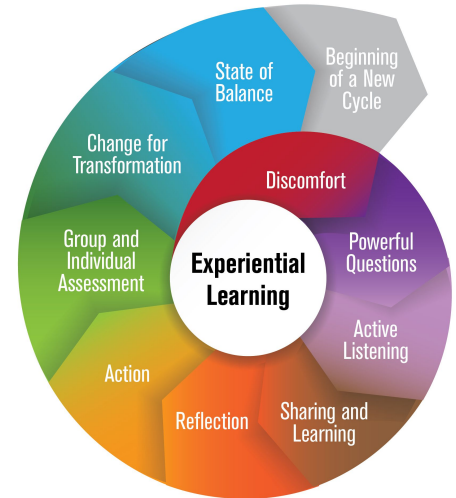
Today, we will explore the conventional notions of Heaven and Hell - and whether these ideas are compatible with the modern and living philosophy of the Gathas.

As Mazdayasna teaches each individual to think for oneself and utilize our Good Mind in search of the Ultimate Truth - this presentation is to serve as a *thought catalyst to spur discussion on healing our existence*.

The Gathas teach us a framework for self-realization and realization for the Divine

The Gathas are “thought provoking songs” and in them Zarathushtra teaches us a system and a way of looking at our reality that is timeless. In essence, he teaches:

1. that throughout our lives, we are confronted by choices;
2. that we should use our minds and hearts to **search for the Truth (Asha)**, for what is right and good, in all aspects of our reality, and for all existence
3. and choose it, with each thought, word, and action, by engaging the world, not rejecting it,
4. thereby perfecting our world and ourselves,
5. until we become one with the Divine, until we become a part of the "Endless Lights."



Why talk about the notions of Heaven and Hell?

There are few reasons why this topic is relevant for Zoroastrians and those interested in Zoroastrian philosophy:

- 1) The misconception that Zoroastrianism is the source of these ideas
- 2) Confusion from later Zoroastrian texts - not the Gathas
- 3) Most importantly, these notions **can distract from or inhibit** both our spiritual growth and our efforts to heal all existence



Notions of Heaven and Hell come from a fear based paradigm that are very distinct from Mazdayasna

The idea that humankind is to receive a “final judgement” from God based on their faith and compliance is a “carrot and stick” style fear based paradigm.

Heaven is the carrot - a place of reward, of eternal bliss and happiness - often regarded as the abode of God, the angels, and “blessed” spirits after death.

Hell is the stick - a place of punishment, torment, and wickedness. It is the abode of “Evil” and all of the “condemned” spirits for all eternity.



Are these ideas compatible with the Gathas?

I propose that they are not.

Let's take a look together...

Recap: the Framework of the Gathas

Recap from [Part I](#), the Gathas teach us a practical, spiritual philosophy focused on improving existence through self-realization and realization of the Divine:

1. **Goodness & Truth** - the Divine is wholly good, beneficial, our friend and ally -- Asha is the ideal, perfect, and wholly good order of existence, the way existence should be
2. **Free Will & Growth** - humankind is free to choose, learn from our choices, and adjust -- we can grow and realize Asha through our thoughts, words, and deeds
3. **Realizing Wisdom** - all of the Divine Aspects are attainable by us as we seek to realize Truth and Wisdom, mortal existence is the matrix for this spiritual growth
4. **Healing Existence** - to realize Truth and Wisdom, we must heal all of existence -- we do this by actively engaging life and helping others to grow -- no one can do this in isolation
5. **Completeness** - humankind and the Divine are parts of the same Whole, by progressing all existence towards Truth we become complete, reaching an enlightened state of being that transcends mortal existence -- part of the Endless Lights!



The purpose of our current existence is to evolve spiritually, life is the matrix for our growth

The **purpose of life is to grow and evolve** from a state of being that is a mixture of harmful and more beneficial*, to one that is completely good and beneficial.

The way that our reality is ordered through Asha, includes the law of consequences in which we learn via Free Will - through all of our choices.

Our Good Mind enables us to comprehend Truth and when we experience harmful or “bad” consequences of a choice, it increases our understanding and compassion. Similarly beneficial “good” choices are reinforced and also learned from.



* Y45.2, Y30.3

Freeing us from the Paradigm of Fear, enables us to grow from our choices in life

Through cause and effect we learn from our choices, this innovation breaks the paradigm of fear where obedience is required to win favor and avoid punishment.

There is no punishment or forgiveness needed, the purpose of the law of consequences is enlightenment.

Our mortal existence is the matrix that enables the experiences necessary for our spiritual growth to realize Asha and the Divine. We can start to see how the fear based idea of a “final judgement” is not compatible with this worldview.



We realize the Divine by seeking the right thing, the Truth, without seeking reward or fearing punishment

The Gathas teach us a ever fresh way of life by encouraging us to always seek Asha, what is correct, true, and righteous, for all existence.

The Ashem Vohu mantra emphasizes that seeking Asha for its own sake – not to go to “heaven” or from fear of “hell” or “bad karma” – but simply for its own sake, leads to an enlightened state of joy that is it owns reward and naturally radiates to all existence.

*“Righteousness (Asha) is the best good. It is radiant happiness.
Radiant happiness comes to the person to whom
righteousness is for the **sake of the best righteousness alone.**”*



The Search for Truth is dynamic and ongoing - it's not compatible with a fear based paradigm and commandments

To be aligned with Asha, we must consult the most current understanding of our age: to find what is true and right in both existences of mind and matter for all. **The life of a Zoroastrian is to always question, reflect, learn and grow!**

Asha is incremental, the more we seek and align ourselves with it, the more we understand and realize it. This ongoing search means our understanding of Asha will evolve via our experience based growth.

We can see, therefore, how incompatible Mazdayasna is with the idea of reward and punishment based on commandments or “tests of faith”. This fear based paradigm is an obvious control mechanism not found in the Gathas.



What about the Chinvat Bridge?

Is this bridge of “separating” about a final judgement?

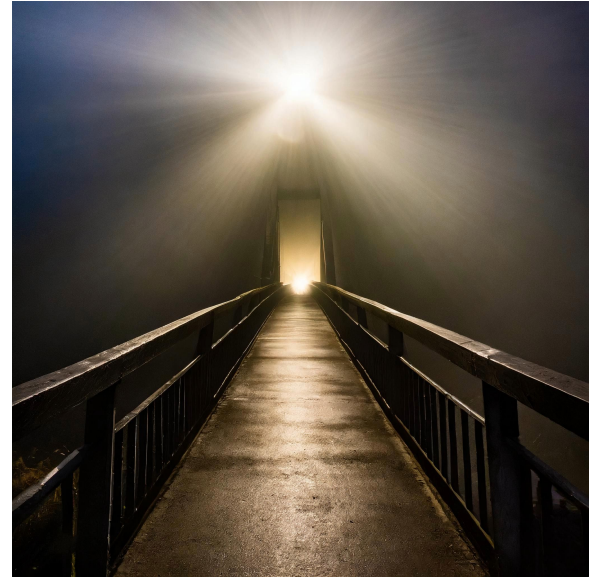
The Chinvat Bridge is an allegory for our spiritual evolution, we cross the bridge when we are complete

The Gathas are thought provokers that commonly use allegory. Let's look at Y46.10 as an example to better understand the allegory:

*“Whoever, man or woman, does what Thou, O
Mazda Ahura, knowest to be the best in Life.
Whoever does right for the sake of Right,
Whoever in authority, governs with the aid of the Good Mind;
I shall bring all these to join in songs of Thy Praise,
Forth, shall I with them cross the Bridge of Judgment.”*

The “Bridge of Judgement” might sound related to the Abrahamic “final judgement” but I read this as **the attainment of the Divine Aspects to fully realize the Divine**. This is where mortal existence isn't needed anymore as the matrix for our spiritual growth.

So the Chinvat Bridge is an allegory for crossing from our current state of being (mix of harmful and beneficial) to the entirely good state fully aligned with the Divine.



The Chinvat Bridge is not connected to Heaven and Hell in the Gathas, later texts have a different perspective

The Gathas also don't mention Heaven or Hell nor link them to the Chinvat Bridge.

“Good” outcomes aligned with the Divine are described as:

- The “most good existence” and the “most good thinking”
- Asha is mentioned as its own reward, resulting in radiant, joyful bliss
- Completeness that results from full realization of the Divine Aspects
- And an existence healed from “untruth” and the “House of Song”

“Bad” outcomes from harmful choices not aligned with Asha are described as:

- The “most bad-existence”, the house of “worst thinking” and of “untruth”
- Untruth leaves us in darkness, unhappiness and distress, opposite of the Divine Aspects

Later traditional texts i.e. Bundahishn, Venidad, and Arda Viraf Namah connect the Chinvat Bridge with judgement after life. These texts were written 1,000+ years after the Gathas when Avestan was no longer well understood.



The “best” and “worst” existences are states of mind that begin in our mortal lives as a result of our choices

The Gathas teach us that there are two primordial ways of being: twins housed in the individual mind which are realized through our choice of thoughts, words, and deeds.

The “good” or beneficial way of being moves towards the Divine Aspects and realizing the Divine. It creates Life and results in the “Best-Consciousness” as its own reward.

*“In the beginning there were two primal spirits, Twins spontaneously active,
These are the Good and the Evil, in thought, and in word, and in deed.
Between these two, let the wise choose aright. Be good, not base!*

*And when these Twin Spirits came together at first,
They established Life and the Denial of Life;
And so shall it be till the world will last.*

*The worst existence shall be the lot of the followers of evil,
And the state of Best-Consciousness be the reward of the righteous.” -Y30.3-4*



God and humankind are allies and partners in improving existence, the relationship is not authoritarian

The relationship between the Divine and humankind is not authoritarian nor like a parent to a child. It is described as a **friend to a friend, an ally, and a partner***. It is a paradigm based on mutual love and interconnectedness.

The Divine isn't something external to judge, save, or punish us. We are our own saviors realizing the Divine within! As we learn from our choices via Free Will and evolve towards the Divine Aspects, we become complete and one with the Divine.

This realization of the Divine is “guaranteed” due to the growth that comes from Free Will and the cause and effect from the law of consequences. This idea simply isn't compatible with a fear based paradigm of commandments.



* Y44.1, Y46.2, Y44.2

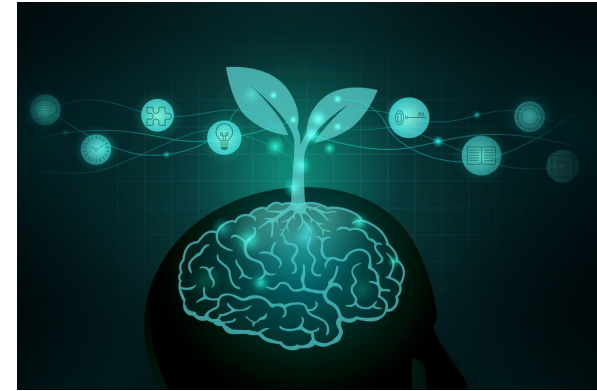
Zarathushtra proposes that Evil will eventually be defeated by virtue of Free Will and Cause and Effect

The Gathas speak of the defeat of “Evil” or “Deceit” being guaranteed:

*“However, it has been fated for this world, Wise One, that the truth is to be saved for its (good) preference, **that deceit is to be destroyed for its (false) profession.** By reason of this, I am eager for the alliance of good thinking, in order to ban all the deceitful persons from our company.” -Y49.3 (Inslar)*

As we learn from our choices and their consequences, this adjusts our subsequent choices in thousands of big and small ways. This grows with each thought, word, and deed over a lifetime which is the purpose of mortal life.

We ban deceit from our company by enlightening deceived minds which can only happen with Free Will. You cannot change one’s mind with commandments and fear. This only controls behavior but doesn’t create the “best consciousness” which can only be learned.



To summarize: conventional ideas of Heaven and Hell are not compatible with Mazdayasna per the Gathas

Free Will is essential for our spiritual growth and is contrary to a paradigm of obedience and faith. The idea of a final judgement and subsequent reward or punishment also doesn't compute with the Zoroastrian purpose of growing from our choices to evolve to an entirely beneficial state of being.

As we heal all of existence, we realize Zarathushtra's notion of the best reward: an existence that is Wisdom personified, entirely beneficial, we become complete and one with the Divine, part of the "Endless Lights!"

I'd like to close with a beautiful quote that expresses a very Zoroastrian idea:

"I was in darkness, but I took three steps and found myself in paradise. The first step was a good thought, the second, a good word; and the third, a good deed."

-Unknown but often attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche



Sources and Acknowledgements

This presentation brings together various works from:

- Dina G. McIntyre - [Gathas of Zarathushtra](#) and [CZC Seminar Liberating Zarathustra's Relevance](#)
- Dr. Kaikhosrov D. Irani - [Introduction to the Gathas](#) and [Zarathushtrian Philosophy](#)
- Dr. Ali A. Jafarey - <https://zoroastrian.org/articles/salient.htm>
- All Gathas verses listed are from [D.J. Irani's translation](#) unless otherwise noted

With immense gratitude, I have learned so much from these amazing scholars 🙏

You may also find the California Zoroastrian Center's [Public Relations Website](#) as a useful resource.

Wishing you all radiant happiness 🔥 ushtā!

Navid Mansourian

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Discussion