



ANNE LEVENSTON/TORONTO STAR

**New Year:** The Behboodi family of North York celebrate Iranian New Year, Jamshidi Na-Ruz, which means New Day. In the foreground are his son Farshid and daughter-in-law Bina. In the background are Jahangir Behboodi, his wife Poooran and daughter Anahita.

## Iranian-Canadians celebrate New Year in traditional style

By Bev Cline

At the exact moment that spring arrives on March 20, North York's Jahan Behboodi, 61, his wife Poooran and their children will greet the New Year.

The holiday, Jamshidi Na-Ruz, literally New Day, started in Iran many thousands of years ago with the ancient King Jamshid. During his reign, details were recorded on the precise moment spring arrived. Spring signified new life, "when the earth started breathing again," Behboodi says.

Iranians all over the world celebrate Na-Ruz, he says, as do some Afghans, Baluchis, Kurds and Armenians. Those of the Zoroastrian and Bahai faiths and some Ismaili Muslims observe the holiday as well, although customs and traditions vary.

Behboodi, a retired airline pilot, is part of Metro's 2,000-strong Zoroastrian community, made up mostly of people from Iran, India, Pakistan and parts of Africa.

Zoroastrianism dates from the time of the prophet Zoroaster. Behboodi says no exact date of his birth is known but that it would be more than 3,500 years ago. Followers believe Zoroaster may have been the first prophet to preach of one God, he says. In the religion, God, or Ahura Mazda, is opposed to Anhriman, the Evil.

Na-Ruz is celebrated for 13 days.

Behboodi particularly likes celebrating the holiday in Canada. Although he spent his adult years in Iran, he grew up in Bombay.

"We begin preparing for the holiday in late February, when my family and I plant at least seven types of seeds such as wheat, barley and lentils in individual pots," Behboodi says, "so that by this week there are green shoots.

### Bowls of fruit

"In ancient Persia the theory was that the seeds that grew the quickest and most hardy would be selected for that year's main crop. Even the King's palace gardens would be tested before planting."

Thursday evening, a traditional table will be set. Since Zoroaster preached great respect for nature and his society was agricultural, most of the items show the goodness of the earth's bounty, Behboodi says.

The planted pots take the place of honor and there are vases filled with colorful flowers and twigs of evergreen bushes.

Bowls of fruit, a hardboiled egg, fresh green vegetables, dairy products, homemade breads and a white candy called noghl, made with sugar, almonds and nuts, are placed on the table.

At the moment spring is announced, family members will rise to their feet and Behboodi, as the eldest person present, will hold a

mirror engraved with a picture of Zoroaster in front of each one so the person can look deep into his or her heart. Behboodi then pours rosewater into each set of outstretched hands.

Religious items are important in a Zoroastrian's home, he says. The Zoroastrian holy book, the Avesta, is displayed and lit candles symbolize brightness and happiness.

Behboodi's home will be filled with the aroma of sandalwood, burned in a small fire lit in a silver bowl. Zoroastrians have great respect for fire for its ancient values of heat and light.

They celebrate the birth of fire on Jan. 29 each year, Behboodi says and believe that it was discovered by one of the Persian kings while he was out hunting.

The legend says the king's horse reared when it saw a snake. The king dismounted and threw a stone at it. The stone hit a rock and created a spark, which in turn set a small bush alight.

During the evening celebration of Na-Ruz, gold or silver coins are given to family members. "On my birthday my daughter might give back to me the coin that I gave her for Na-Ruz so that the coin travels full circle and stays in the family."

This is one of an occasional series about members of the ethnic communities that contribute to our rich cosmopolitan society.