



## HAFT SIN

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**HAFT SIN**, denoting ‘seven items beginning with the letter *sin* (S)’, is one of the components of the rituals of the New Year’s Day festival (see **NOWRUZ**) observed by most Iranians (**Figure 1**). The items are traditionally displayed on the *Sofra-ye haft sin* (Massé, *Croyances*, pp. 156-57; Enjavi, I, pp. 87-105; Honari, pp. 30-33, 132-35; Ġaravi; Bolukbāši, pp. 8-9; Šakurzāda, pp. 62-64, 98-102; Šafinežād, pp. 404, 434-35). This is a dining cloth (*sofra*) that every household spreads out on the floor (or on a table) in a room normally reserved for entertaining guests, and places upon it the following items. At the head (farthest from the entrance) is placed a mirror, flanked by two candelabra holding candles (traditionally according to the number of the children in the household). In front of these are placed a copy of the Qur’ān (the *Šāh-nāma* or the *Divān* of Ḥāfeẓ have also been used), a jar of water usually containing a goldfish (many households add a jug of rainwater collected earlier and/or a bowl of water containing a green leaf of pomegranate, sour orange, or box-tree (*šamšād*), vessels containing milk, rose water (*golāb*), honey, sugar, and (one, three, five or seven) colored eggs. The center is normally occupied by a vase of flowers, customarily hyacinth (*sonbol*) and branches of musk willow (*bid-e mešk*). Next to it are placed *sabza* and at least six more items starting with the letter *sin* (described below), a plate containing fruit (traditionally apples, oranges, pomegranates and quinces), some sort of bread (often sweetened, such as the Shirazi *tali-ye širin* made of fine wheat flour, sugar, honey and rose water; for variations see Honari, pp. 125-26), *māst* (yogurt) and fresh cheese, various sweets, and *ājil*, a mixture of dried roasted seeds of chick-peas, melons, wheat (*gandom berešta*), rice (*berenjak*) and nuts, all mixed



with raisins.

The *sin* items are traditionally as follows: 1. *sabza*, that is, wheat (or barley, sometimes lentils also) grown to the height of a few inches inside a thin piece of white cloth wrapped around a clay jug (*kuza*; nowadays the *sabza* is more commonly grown on a shallow earthenware plate); 2. *sepand* (*esfand*), seeds of wild rue (often placed in a small incense burner and burned just after the turn of the year, see esp. Donaldson, pp. 120-23); 3. *sib*, apples, already mentioned; 4. *sekka*, a few newly minted coins; 5. *sir*, garlic cloves (formerly with the roots dyed red, blue and green to resemble colored tassels); 6. *serka*, vinegar; and 7. a bowl of *samanu* (called *samani* by the Shirazis and Kurds). This last item is prepared in the following way (Šakurzāda, pp. 62-64). A goodly amount of wheat is soaked in water (preferably rain water collected for the purpose) for three days and then spread on a large metal tray (*sini*) and covered with a white cloth. When the wheat has grown a little, it is minced on a stone slab or wooden board and then ground in a mortar (*hāvan/hovang*) and the sap mixed with hot water, oil, and flour, and the whole cooked very slowly (often taking an entire night) by women (no adult male is allowed to participate in the process); unshelled almonds and walnuts are also added. The result is a thick, sweet paste reddish in color, a portion of which is reserved for the Nowruz table and the rest distributed among neighbors, who return the container together with one or more colored eggs or a green leaf.

Five observations are in order here. First, despite the name, the *Sofra-ye haft sin* contains many essential elements that do not start with the letter *sin*. Secondly, the selected *sin* items invariably number more than seven, and *senjed* ‘fruit of jujube’, *somāq* ‘sumac’, and *sowhān* (brittles made of granulated sugar and honey enriched with saffron, almond and pistachio seeds), are almost invariably added. Many households add even more *sin* items, such as *sabzi* (a dishful of germinated fine herbs), *siyāh dāna* ‘fennel’, *sangak* (a very hard pea-like grain, cooked for a very long time; the dish is widely popular and in Kāšān even sold as a special *haft-sin* item: Enjavi, I, p. 89), *se-pestān* ‘sebestan’, and *sorma* ‘collyrium’. Thirdly, the *Sofra-ye haft sin* is not particular to the Nowruz festival. In many places it is customary to set out an identical *sofra* for wedding ceremonies (Honari, p. 31; for Gilān in particular see Pur(-e) Davud, p. 77, and in certain areas it is prepared during the eve of the fortieth winter day (*šab-e čella*, in reality midwinter’s eve); in the region of Kāšān it is set out at the Esbandi festival on the 25th Bahman (11th month), which corresponds to 1st Esfand (12th month) in the official calendar (Enjavi I, pp.



44, 87-105; II, p. 163). Fourthly, some peoples who share in the heritage of Iranian culture and tradition (e.g., the Afghans, Tajiks, Armenians) do not prepare it. Even more remarkable is the fact that it is not customary among the Kurds (Honari, pp. 132-33) or the Zoroastrians (Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 168 n. 10; Āzargo-šasp, p. 247), both ardent preservers of ancient Iranian traditions for whom the heptad does play a central role. It is noted however by Niknām (p. 32) that “nowadays the *haft-sin* is prepared for the Nowruz table in many Zoroastrian families, particularly those living in cities.” This is clearly a new trend influenced by increased contact with other Iranians. Interestingly, the Kurds bake the *samani* cake for the feast of *Kose geldi* (Bois, p. 477; see [FESTIVALS V. KURDISH](#)). Fifthly, although we know that the Sasanians greeted Nowruz by growing seven kinds of seeds on seven pillars (*setuns*) and placed on their Nowruz table trays containing seven branches of vegetables (wheat, barley, peas, rice, etc) as well as a loaf of bread made from seven kinds of grain (*Ketāb al-maḥāsen wa’l-azdād*, p. 361), no analogy with the *haft sin* should be adduced because of the inconsistencies noted under numbers 1 and 2.

The history of the custom is thus obscure. Some have speculated that the original items started with the letter *šin* (Bolukbāši, pp. 8-9; Šakurzāda, p. 99,) citing as evidence a couplet clearly recent in date which asserts that “under the Kayanids the Iranians used to place on the Nowruz table *šahd o šir o šarāb o šekar-e nāb; šam’ o šamšād o šāya*” (honey, milk, wine, pure sugar, a candle, branches of box-tree, and fruits). The artificiality of an explanation that cites Arabic names and neglects such essentials as *sir*, *samanu* and *sepan* is self-evident. Nor can one take seriously the views that the term *haft sin* is a corruption of *haft sini* (seven metal trays: Faravaši, p. 57) or *haft mim* (items starting with the letter M, such as *māst*, *miva* ‘fruits’, *meygu* ‘shrimp’, *maviz* ‘raisins’, etc.: see Maškur, pp. 20-21), or even *haft čin* ‘seven [things] set out’ (Honari, pp. 31-32, 132-35). Indeed, all indications suggest that the *haft sin* as we know it is not old. There is a dubious and isolated reference to it in a Persian manuscript attributed to the Safavid period (no. 3982 in the Central Library of the University of Tehran, see *Fehrest-e Ketāb-kāna-ye markazi-e Dānešgāh-e Teh-rān* 12, 1339-40 Š./1960-61, p. 2976). Otherwise, it is rarely mentioned in the eyewitness accounts of the Nowruz ceremonies by nineteenth-century travelers and historians. Only Heinrich Brugsch, who was in Tehran in 1860 and described the Nowruz festival in some detail, claims (Brugsch, II, p. 346) that the Iranians greeted the national festival by planting in their gardens flowers with names beginning with the letter S. There are also



references to a large tray filled with seven kinds of fruit (Wilson, pp. 24-26; Inostrantsev, tr., p. 184) but not to *haft sin*, which accordingly seems to have come into vogue only in the last century, owing to publicity in the media.

However, if one considers the *sofra* of Nowruz as a whole and disregards the letter *sin*, its essential items perfectly afford reasonable explanation as the reflections of the pastoral and sedentary conditions of ancient Iranians and of their beliefs, especially with regard to the Aməša Spəntas (q.v). Its preparation on the eve of the Nowruz, and the widespread belief that the souls of the departed come down and partake of the table, clearly connect it with the All Souls festival (see [FRAWARDĪGĀN](#)). The eggs (*tokm*) symbolize people (*mardom*, from *\*martiya tauxman-* ‘mortal seed’; in the town of Kor eggs are placed under the bench prepared for the bride with the hope that she may bear children: Honari, p. 33 n. 1) and point to the Creator; the milk represents the cattle and Vohu Manah/Bahman, the candles purifying fire and Aša Vahištā/Ardibehešt, the coins wealth and Xšaθra vairya/Šahrivar; the hyacinth symbolizes both Haurvatāt/Hordād and Amərətāt/(A)Mordād (Russell, p. 382), as do the water, the *sabza* and the *sabzi*; the musk willow represents Spənta Armaiti/Spandārmad, as does the wild rue (*sepand/esfand*), which has kept part of her name. More interestingly, her healing power (possessing one thousand remedies, ten thousand remedies: *Yt* 1.27) may be indicated by the garlic, which was so esteemed by the Iranians as a medicine and a means of warding off the evil eye and demonic power that the Persians named one of their months Θāigarči- ‘Month of garlic’ (cf. Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 187). Anāhid is represented by the (rain)water collected specially for the occasion. The *samanu*, which is absolutely essential for the *sofra* and is considered so powerful an aphrodisiac that some call it “the strength of the patriarch” (Honari, p. 123), must also be attributed to Anāhid because it is generally prepared (even among the Kurds, who do not set out the *haft sin*; Bois, p. 477) only by women, who while stirring the cooking mixture make wishes that they may get good husbands or fine children. Furthermore, the dish is prepared as an offering in the name of the highly revered Fāṭema-ye Zahrā-ye ma’šum “Fāṭeme the infallible Zahrā” (Zahrā is also the Planet Venus/Anāhid; for the connection see Eilers, pp. 97-108; see [FĀṬEMA ii. in MYTH, FOLKLORE, and POPULAR DEVOTION](#)). The Kara Māhi, which swims in the Vourukaša sea and wards off harmful creatures (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 89), is represented by the fish in the jar. This analysis, which can be taken much further, shows that the essential objects of the Nowruz table are very ancient and meaningful (cf. Christensen, p. 158; Massé, *Croyances*, p. 156), while the idea of the *haft sin* is



recent and the result of popular fancy tastefully developed into a pleasant ritual.

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