

## Freedom of Choice

### Meaning and Message of Yasna 30.2

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The Gathas are a well-worded, well-versed, well-patterned, well-defined, well-rounded, well-turned, well-linked, coherent, cohesive, concise, and precise *divan* of the Divine Doctrine by the Master-*Mânthran* (Thought-provoker) and Prime-Poet Zarathushtra Spitama. They have five meters, seventeen songs and 241 stanzas, small enough to fit into a pocketbook of only 40 pages. They discuss, in clear words, a unique Monotheism, Primal Principles of Existence, mental enlightenment, physical soundness, Good and Evil, Freedom of Choice, progressive life, constructive contribution, rehabilitation of the uprooted, renovation of the world, radiating happiness in a natural and peaceful environment, and advancing towards a godlike goal. They are supernal inspirations, sublime prayers, subtle rituals, simple directives, and sound advices for a superb, splendid life. The Gathas are the Guide to *Daênâ Vañguhi*, Good Conscience, “the best religion .... for the living .... [because it] promotes the world through righteousness and polishes words and actions in serenity.” (Song 9.10=Yasna 44.10)

All the above subjects are interrelated and therefore interwoven within the 241 stanzas, a moving mosaic of Message. One may pick a subject in a stanza, but to comprehend its meaning and message, he/she will have to see it in its context as given in the stanza, then look at it in the song in which the stanza stands, and then understand its interrelation with other stanzas in other songs. Understanding the Gathas is easy, provided one has the entire picture, the complete Doctrine in his/her full view. A single sample, out of context, may lead to misunderstanding or even wrong deduction.

Therefore, to comprehend the second stanza of the third song (Y 30.2), we shall have to carefully look at its main point in the context of the entire Gathic guidance. That main point is **Freedom of Choice** and the word on which it is based is *âvarenâo*. It is from the root *var* (Sanskrit *vr*), which means *to choose, to select* with a secondary meaning *to prefer, to like*.

Happily, the words derived from this root have been used 30 times in the Gathas, more than enough to give us the true meaning of it. They have been used twice in the Haptanghaiti and 12 times in the Fravarti (Yasna 12). It makes a total of 44 times in the Gathas and their Supplements in the same dialect.

The words from this root occur twice in the non-Gathic Yasna, once in the Vispered, twice in the Yashts and thrice in the Vendidad, a total of eight times in the entire Later Avesta. The non-Gathic Avesta is, in size, almost twelve times larger than its Gathic part. One may wonder at the ratio of eight times against the Gathic 44 times. The reason is simple. The non-Gathic part of the extant Avesta is more concerned about rituals, customs, prescriptions, proscriptions, legend, history, geography, medicine, and more. Its composers knew well that the Gathas were the Divine Doctrine. That was enough and adequate for them. They appended what they

considered appropriate. As it will be seen, although eight in number, they are a good help in understanding the significance of our subject of ‘Freedom of Choice’ as seen by the Avestan people.

My translation of the main stanza reads:

Hear the best with your ears  
and ponder with a bright mind.  
Then each man and woman, for his or her self,  
select either of the [following] two choices.  
Awaken to this Doctrine of ours  
before the Great Event of Choice ushers in.  
(Song 3—stanza 2)

But let me give also the translations by three Parsi scholars and three Iranian Zartoshtis:

**(1) Ervad Kavasji Edalji Kanga:**

.... (tê) mhotâ banâvo-ni agamcha darêk jan-nê potânê-mâtê ê (potâni) pasandagi-no êtekâd (hovo joîyê – yâne darêk mânasê khodâ-parasti tathâ dêv-parasti, ê bê-mân-thi jê sârûñ hoê tê pasand kari-nê, tê mûjab potâ-no dharm sañbañdhi êtekâd râkhvo ...

“.... Then before the great event, each person should, for his own self, have his preferred belief. (It means that each person should prefer from the two – God-worship and demon-worship, the one which is better and thus have his belief concerning the religion.) ....”

-Ervadji Kanga. Happily, he has this stanza in the Avestan script on the cover page of his book *Gâthâ bâ Maenî*, Gujarati language, Bombay, 1895.

**(2) D.J. Irani:**

“.... Let each one choose his creed with that freedom of ‘choice,’ each must have at great events. ....”

**(3) Dr. Irach J.S. Taraporewala:**

“.... Before you choose which of the Paths to tread, deciding each man by man, each for each; before the great New Age is ushered in, wake up, alert to spread Ahura’s word.

**(4) Ardeshir Faramji Khabardar:**

“.... the careful selection of the two ‘choices’, man by man for his own self, before the great setting off on life’s journey, ....”

**(5) Mobed Firuz Azargoshasb:**

“.... decide each man and woman personally between the two paths, good and evil. Before ushering in of the great day, or the day of the judgment, arise all of you and try to spread Ahura’s words (Zarathushtra’s message).”

**(6) Mobedan Mobed Rostam Shahzadi:**

“... Before the opportunity is lost, each man and woman should for his/herself choose between the two – the right path (Mazda-worship) or the wrong path (demon-worship). May you, with the help of Mazda Ahura, be successful in your choice of the right path.”

The word *âvarenâo* has been translated as *etekâd*, *yekîn* ‘belief, faith’ by Kanga; ‘creed’ by Irani; ‘choices’ by Khabardar; ‘Path’ by Taraporewala with the note “Bartholomae translates ‘avowal of belief or of faith’ and derives it from *var* (Skt. *Vr*), to choose and with [the prefix] *â*, to profess (a belief); *râh*, *aqîdeh* ‘path, belief’ by Azargoshasb, and *râh* ‘path’ followed by ‘Mazda-worship or Demon-worship’ by Shahzadi.

The stanza speaks of the full **Freedom of Choice of Belief** as the right of each man and woman and has a request to **awaken** to the Zarathushtrian Teaching of the Divine Doctrine before **the Great Event**. The stanza is one of the eleven stanzas of the Song devoted to the first sermon on *vahya mainyu* and *aka mainyu*, the better and the bad mentalities, which translate into human thoughts, words and deeds. It expounds this unique theme of Good and Evil that has confounded many an exponent. The following Song 4 (Yasna 31) guides how to choose the better mentality and lead a good life, and Song 5 (Yasna 32) exposes the wrongs done by the aberrant.

Regarding the remaining 29 instances of the words derived from *var*, all the above five persons give the meanings of verbs as ‘to choose, to prefer, to like (*pasand karvûñ*), to please, to believe, to put faith in (*mânvûñ*, *etekâd râkhvûñ*)’ and nouns as ‘faith, creed, religion, doctrine, custom, path.’

I have, in a larger version of my essay, given the renderings of the above persons for almost all the 44 instances in which the derivatives of the root *var* occur. Here I will confine myself to only those passages, which are more related to our subject of the day.

**Ahunavar (Yathâ Ahû):** We begin with *Ahunavar*, the stanza which has given the first Gatha its name *Ahunavaiti*. It says: “Just as the lord (*ahu*) is *vairyo*, meaning ‘to be chosen’, so is the leader (*ratu*) on account of their righteousness only.” Lord, according to Song 2 (Yasna 29) is the person “who repels the fury of the wrongful”, and the leader is the person “who offers civilization, nourishment and strength” to the living world. The person ‘to be chosen’ as both the “Lord and Leader” by the Living World was and is, of course, Zarathushtra Spitâma. He was the only person who had listened to the Divine Message and was prepared to proclaim it through his Songs. He was granted the sweetness of tongue to carry out his universal mission.

### Song 1.5 (Yasna 28.5)

Zarathushtra says: “With these greatest thought-provoking words, we shall convince the barbarians to choose (*vâurôimaidi*) the right religion.”

**Kanga:** “We shall be able to give faith to the wicked people.”

**Taraporewala:** “May we e’er convert with force of tongue those gone astray., (with a note: “...)

At any rate this passage is clear proof of the great desire of Z. that His New Message should spread all over the world.”)

**Shahzadi:** “When shall I have the ability of leading the warriors, antagonists, robbers, and astray to the path which is the best and superior.”

### **Song 4.3 (Yasna 31.3)**

Zarathushtra wants the Divine Message to help him “to guide all the living to choose for themselves (*vâurayâ*) the right religion.”

**Kanga:** “I may make all the living as believers.”

**Taraporewala:** “to convert all the living” and in his note he mentions about “conversion” and adds “that Zoroastrians in India today are on the whole averse to proselytizing; some indeed regard it as positively ‘sinful’ (*adharmî*).”

**Shahzadi:** “... Mazda has taught me the Religion of Mazda through his own tongue and talk and told me to convey it to mankind.”

### **Song 4.11 (Yasna 31.11)**

God has “fashioned for us the living world, conceptions and intellects, put life in the physical frame, and gave deeds and doctrine, so that one makes his ‘choice’ (*varenêng*) through free will.”

**Kanga:** “... for fixing the deeds and religious commandments or for the belief or choice.”

**Taraporewala:** “Whereby one may hold whatever Faith one wills.”

**Shahzadi:** Subtitle: “... You wanted every person to choose the way he/she prefers by his determination and in full freedom.”

\*It may be pointed out that **Mobed Firuz Azargoshasb** has written notes on stanzas 1.5, 4.3 and 4.11 that the Good Religion of Zarathushtra is a universal religion for all mankind and that it is to be spread through teachings without any push, persuasion and/or force. People may choose it through their knowledgeable discretion and Free Will only.

### **Song 6.2 (Yasna 33.2)**

“Whosoever foils the wrongful by word, thought or action, or ... teaches good things, advances in his choice (*vârâi*).”

**Kanga:** “He ... presents for his religious belief i.e. he strengthens his belief.”

**Taraporewala:** “They accomplish (Thy) Purpose. (in the vocabulary *vâra*, wish, lit. ‘choice.’)”

**Shahzadi:** “... or guides a wrongful person on the right path, ... (Note: Propagation of religion and fighting evil is permitted according to this stanza.)”

### **Song 12.6 (Yasna 47.6)**

“... With the growth of serenity and righteousness, (serenity) shall convert many a seeker.”

**Kanga:** “It is completely selected by the aspirants.”

**Taraporewala:** “She shall draw (into her fold) many Seekers.”

**D.J. Irani:** “This shall cause many to hear Thy Message.”

### Song 13.4 (Yasna 48.4)

“Whoever, Mazda, has set his mind on the better or the worse, sets his conscience accordingly with actions and words. His desire follows his cherished choice (*varenêng*).”

**Kanga:** “He who keeps himself good and pure, maintains the religion the same way; his wish, belief and faith follow suit.”

**Taraporewala:** “His will follows his voluntary choice.”

**Shahzadi:** “His desire follows the same path.” (Note: a Persian couplet: You see exactly what you wish. You wish exactly what you see.)

### Song 14.3 (Yasna 49.3)

“This has been put as a choice (*varenâi*) that righteousness is for the promotion of the doctrine, and wrong is for harming it.”

**Kanga:** “In order to guide the people of world, **the religious preference** .... has been laid down.”

**Taraporewala:** “It is laid down by Mazda as choice for all – the Teaching that Truth shall prevail, that Untruth shall be frustrated.”

**D.J. Irani:** “According to Thy Faith, O Mazda, the choice of Righteousness is its own vindication.”

**Shahzadi:** “... the Mazda-worship Religion is based on Truth and therefore it is always beneficial, and the demon-worship religion on Lie and therefore always harmful.”

### Song 17.2 (Yasna 53.2)

“And now, let Kavi Vishtaspa, the Zarathushtrian Spitama, and Ferashaoshtra pursue, with mind, words, and deeds, the knowledge for the praise and for the choice (*fraoret*) of veneration of the Wise One, in order to establish in straight paths the religion which God has granted to the benefactor.”

**Kanga:** “... With **faith** in adoration rites ....”

**Taraporewala:** “Let each choose acts of piety ... meditating on the Path of Truth – the Faith Ahura has revealed to the Saviour.”

**D.J. Irani:** “May they teach all to keep to the established straight path, ....”

**Shahzadi:** Subtitle: The Best Course to Teach the Religion to Mankind. “For the pleasure of Mazda, all should sincerely spread the best religion through thought, word and deed. .... Vishtaspa and Ferashaoshtra became supporters of Zarathushtra and succeeded as the Benefactors (Saoshyants) .... in teaching people the right path of the religion.”

**Note I:** Mobed Azargoshasb follows closely his preceptor, Dr. Taraporewala, in his translations of the Gathas. Nevertheless, he has his independent way also. His renderings of the above stanzas are in quite harmony with Dr. Taraporewala's.

**Note II:** Mobed Shahzadi has given subtitles to most of the stanzas of the Gathas in his translation. Thirty-two of them present the Good Religion as the 'universal' and that it should be propagated and spread, and the Subtitles speak of Freedom of Choice.

**Haptanghaiti: Song 1.3 (Yasna 35.3):**

“That we have chosen (*vairîmaidî*), Lord Wise, through sublime Righteousness, which we have thought, spoken and done. Of these deeds, the best be for both the [mental and physical] existences.”

**Yasna 16.2:**

“We venerate Zarathushtra's Religion. We venerate Zarathushtra's Choice (*varena*) and Doctrine.”

**Yasna 57.24:**

“This religion was forth chosen (*fraoreñta*) by Ahura Mazda the Righteous, also by Good Mind, Best Righteousness, Choice Dominion, Progressive Serenity, Wholeness, Immortality, Ahurian Questions, and Ahurian Doctrine.”

**Vispered 5.3:**

“For You, Righteous Ahura Mazda, I choose for myself (*verenê*) this religion as a Mazda-worshipper, Zarathushtrian, void of false gods and of the Divine Doctrine.”

**Yasht 10.92:**

“This religion was chosen forth (*fraoreñta*) by Ahura Mazda the Righteous. .... The Amesha Spentas chose (*vereñta*) the religion...”

**Yasht 13.89:**

“Zarathushtra was the first to eliminate false gods and to choose (*fraorenata*) to be a Mazda-worshipper, Zarathushtrian, void of false gods, and Divine Doctrine.”

**Vendidad 12.21:**

“Should an alien-believer (*anya-varena*) alien-doctrined (*anya-tkaesha*) die, how many creations of the Progressive Mentality would he pollute?”

**Vendidad 15.2:**

“He who teaches the alien-belief (*anya-varena*) and alien-doctrine (*anya-tkaesha*) to a righteous person knowing.”

\*These two previous passages show that other religions were known by the term ‘alien’ instead of what some religions do by calling others as heterodoxy, unbelief, heresy, paganism, or heathenism.

### **Vendidad 19.2:**

“Zarathushtra chose for himself (*fraorenaêta*) the Mazda-worshipping Religion.”

The use of the words derived from *var* show that they do carry the idea of the choice of religion and also that the Gathas are the Divine Message for mankind. That means that the Good Religion is the first missionary religion, a mission that firmly believed in “Freedom of Choice” after a good knowledge of the thought-provoking Message presented with a sweet tongue. To sum up what one understands from all the above references is:

- (1) Freedom of Choice is for every individual person.
- (2) A good choice is made by considering the subject with a bright, clear, un-tinted and unbiased mind.
- (3) Zarathushtra wishes all to be awake to his Teachings also.
- (4) The message is universal and is not confined to race, color, and nationality.
- (5) It has to be peacefully spread with a soft and sweet tongue.
- (6) Force and coercion are not allowed.

It is because of such a meaningful mission that the composer of the eulogy in honor of Zarathushtra in the Farvardin Yasht declares: “Henceforth the Good Religion of Mazda-worship will spread all over the seven climes of the earth.”

With our main subject of Song 3.2 (Yasna 30.2) in view, we now turn to two important points: (a) *Mazê Yâonghô*, the Great Event and (b) Declaration of Choice.

The word *yâonghô/yâh* is derived from the root *yah*, Sanskrit *yas*, meaning ‘to endeavor, to strive’. It occurs in Song 3.2 (Yasna 30.2), Song 11.14 (Yasna 46.14), and Song 14.9 (Yasna 49.9). It also occurs as ‘*mazishtëi yâonghâm* – the greatest of events’ in Haptanghaiti Song 2.2 (Yasna 36.2). The two Gathic instances show that the occasions refer to the days King Vishtaspa and Jamaspa chose the Good Religion and the Haptanghaiti occurrence speaks of the day when the congregation of early Zoroastrians had encircled the Fire altar in their community enclosure for a special occasion called the greatest of the events, perhaps a group initiation into the Good Religion.

*Yâonghô* has been rendered as ‘*mphoto banâv, agtyanûñ kâm* – a great event, an important undertaking’ by Kanga, ‘great events’ by D.J. Irani, ‘ushering-in-of the Great New Age’ by Taraporewala, ‘the great setting off on life’s journey’ by Khabardar, ‘ushering in of the great day or the day of judgement’ by Azargoshasb, and ‘opportunity (sic)’ by Shahzadi. In Song 11.14 and Song 14.9, the some of the above scholars have translated it as ‘The Day of Judgment.’

The word *yâh* does not occur in the Later Avesta but the word for Koshti, the religious girdle is derived from it. It *aiwi-yâongh*. The prefix *aiwi* meaning ‘to, towards, for’ also imparts

‘intensity’ to the word. That expresses what the Koshti stands for: to strive for the New Age begun by Zarathushtra’s Divine Message. The Koshti, we all know well, is girdled on the occasion of the Declaration of Choice – the Initiation Ceremony. *Aiwi-yâongh*, the Koshti, is first girdled on *Yâongh*, the **Great Event** in one’s life.

**The Declaration of Choice** begins with Yasna 12, known as *Fraoreitish Hâtish*, the Religious Choice Chapter, a declaration that was/is made by the Initiate for the Choice of the Good Religion. It is, in fact, the responsible response to Zarathushtra’s call for consideration and choice.

In **Yasna 12** (repeated in Yasna 1.13, 3.24, 11.16, 14.4, 57.24), the Initiate states: “I do hereby eliminate the false gods. I do hereby **choose for myself** (*fravarânê*) to be Mazda-worshipper, Zoroastrian, void of false gods and Divine Doctrinal...”

“I do hereby **choose** (*varemaidî*) the progressive serenity for myself. May it be mine!”

Then the Initiate declares that he/she will cleanse the world from theft and violence; guard the home of the Mazda-worshippers against harm and destruction; give the wise people, who live on this earth with their cattle, full freedom of movement; does not intend to hurt any body or soul; renounces false gods and their devotees; renounces sorcerers and their devotees; renounces each and every mental malady and physical ailment; in fact all falsities and malignities in thoughts, words, and deeds.

He/she renounces the false gods just as the Righteous Zarathushtra did, and goes on to declare:

“With the Choice Belief (*varena*) in waters, with the Choice Belief in plants, with the Choice Belief in the bountiful world; with the Choice Belief in God Wise who created the living world and the righteous man—the Choice Belief Zarathushtra had, the Choice Belief Kavi Vishtaspa had, the Choice Belief Ferashaoshtra and Jamaspa had, and the Choice Belief each of the truth-practicing righteous Benefactors have, it is with the same Choice Belief and doctrine that I am a worshipper of the Wise One.”

“I, with my appreciations and **Choice Beliefs** (*fravaretas-châ*), **choose for myself** (*fravarânê*) to be Mazda-worshipper and Zoroastrian.

I appreciate well-thought thoughts,  
I appreciate well-said words,  
I appreciate well-done deeds.

I appreciate the Good Religion of Mazda-worship which overthrows yokes yet sheaths swords, teaches self-reliance, and is righteous. Therefore, of the religions that have been and that shall be, this is the greatest, best, and sublimest. It is divine and Zoroastrian. I do attribute all good to God Wise.”

It is a daring declaration, and it is a **great event**. The very fact that one calls his/her religion as the greatest, best and the sublimest, means that he/she considers all other religions as great, good and sublime and that he/she has made the choice after a comparative study of as many of



them as possible with a bright mind. The declaration explains the full meaning of the Gathic stanza. It gives the salient points of the Good Religion. Enjoying the Freedom of Choice, it is a highly desirable, proper and practical response to Zarathushtra's call for awakening to his Divine Message, our subject of the day.

*mazdayasnô ahmî, mazdayasnô zarathushtrish  
fravarânê âstûtascâ fravaretascâ.  
âstuyê humatem manô  
âstuyê hûxtem vacô  
âstuyê hvarshtem shyaothanem.  
âstuyê daênâm mâzdayasnîm  
fraspâyaoxedhrâm nidhâsnaithishem  
khvaêtvadathâm ashaonîm  
yâ hâitinâmcâ bûshyeiñtinâmcâ  
mazishtëcâ vahishtâcâ sraêshhtëcâ  
yâ âhûirish zarathushtrish  
ahurâi mazdâi vîspâ vohû cinahmî.  
aêshâ astî daênayâ mâzdayasnôish âstûitish!*

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**NOTE:** The above article is the speech made by Ali A. Jafarey at the **Special Event**, sponsored by **FEZANA** (The Federation of North American Zoroastrian Association) as a concurrent event on 30 December 2000 to the 7th World Zoroastrian Congress, also sponsored by FEZANA and hosted by the Zoroastrian Association of Houston, held at J.W. Marriott, Houston, Texas from 28 December 2000 to 1 January 2001.