

RELIGIOUS & CULTURAL OBSERVATIONS.....

Yalda (Winter Solstice)



In support of our patients, their families and our employees, faculty members and students, this information is offered as a resource about the ancient Persian festival, Yalda, meaning “birth.”

History and Meaning:

During the Yalda festival, Iranians celebrate the coming of winter, renewal of the sun and victory of light over darkness. It is the longest night of the year. “Yalda” is a Syriac word meaning “birth,” and the festival celebrates the eve of the birth of Mithra, the sun god. Family members and close friends gather at the eldest family member’s home to pass the long night and protect themselves from lurking evils. They eat, drink, and read Hafez until after midnight. The rising sun represents the victory of light over darkness and good over evil.

Relevant Observances:

- Watermelons and pomegranates are important fruits for Yalda night. They are symbolic through their color and shape and are said to protect observers from becoming ill in the winter season. Pomegranates symbolize the dawn (the outside of the fruit) and glow of life (inside of the fruit). The spherical shape of watermelons represents the sun.
- Fesenjan is a popular shared dinner dish. It is a rich, tangy Iranian chicken stew, made with walnuts and pomegranates.

- The oldest member of the family says the prayers during Yalda night.
- Observers participate in Faal-e Hafez (Hafez Omen), during which each family member makes a wish and randomly opens *The Poems of Hafez*. Whichever poem is shown is believed to be the interpretation of the wish.

Tips for Supporting Patients:

- Special foods and drinks may be requested and should be allowed if medically appropriate.
- Patients may want additional time for reflection, reading and prayer.

Tips for Supporting Staff and Faculty Members and Students:

- Employees, faculty members and students may request this time off. This should be allowed.

For More Information

Please contact the Office of Diversity and Cultural Competence at diversity@jhmi.edu or Paula Teague, senior director of the Department of Spiritual Care and Chaplaincy, at pteague1@jhmi.edu.