

2017 Society of Scholars of Zoroastrianism (SSZ) Conference

Over 50 persons participated in the 2017 SSZ (Society of Scholars of Zoroastrianism) Conference from Friday, November 3 through Sunday, November 5, 2017, at the Arbab Rustam Guiv Darbe Mehr, Chicago, hosted by ZAC (Zoroastrian Association of Chicago), and supported by FEZANA (Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America), and WZO (World Zoroastrian Organization).

FRIDAY, November 3, 2017

The conference was kicked off with a “Meet and Greet” session, to introduce the distinguished speakers and guests to the community, after the regularly scheduled ZAC Monthly Humbandagi prayers.



Humbandagi Prayers prior to “Meet and Greet”

SATURDAY, November 4, 2017

The program opened with a Benediction by **Mobedyar Boman Damkevala**. The following brand new Monajat in English, written and put to music by **Mani Rao**, was performed by her for the very first time, at the conference, to sustained applause:

Wake up Mankind in beautiful world
In praise of Him Dadar Hormuz
His Whole creation is all alive
In Praise of Him Dadar Hormuz

Flowers are blooming with pretty colors
Rivers flowing spreading Ripples
Standing Trees on Alpines Mountains
In Praise of Him Dadar Hormuz

Beast and Bird roaming on earth
Living in harmony with each other
Let us Unite, sing all along
In Praise of Him Dadar Hormuz

Whole world is lost/ in its own bustle
Take a deep breath, Oh mankind
Watch nature’s display in rapt silence
In Praise of Him Dadar Hormuz

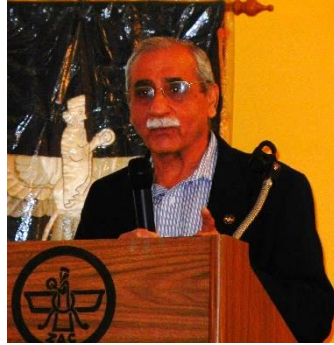
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Written and composed by Mani Rao

Participants were welcomed by ZAC President **Ervad Rayomand Ravji**, who recounted the history of the annual SSZ conferences, first started in 2006. Of special mention, was the presence of the **Rev. B. Herbert Martin**, President-designate of the interfaith Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago, and Pastor of the Progressive Community Church in Chicago.



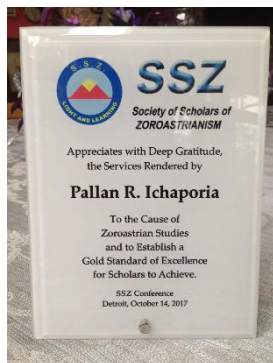
Ervad Rayomand Ravji



Rohinton Rivetna



Rohinton Rivetna (who along with **Roshan Rivetna** organized this conference, once again this year), explained the vision of SSZ, which is to revive the tradition of learning and scholarship within our Zarathushti community, and applauded the participation of all – academics, priests, educationists, lay scholars, students, and above all community members – in these conferences. He explained that our ultimate goals must be to get a status with the AAR (American Academy of Religions) and to establish a center for Zoroastrian studies.



As a token of appreciation for Pallan Ichaporia, who inspired the founding of SSZ, helped organize and participated in SSZ conferences in earlier years, SSZ presented a plaque to him in absentia, for “Services rendered ... to the cause of Zoroastrian studies and to establish a Gold Standard of excellence for Scholars to achieve.” Due to ill health, he is now unable to participate.

The Morning Session – was chaired by **Jim Engineer**, who presided over the following 4 presentations: --

1. Time to visit the Gathas by Fariborz Rahnamoon

Fariborz Rahnamoon, (fariborzr@hotmail.com) born in Yazd, and educated in a Catholic school in Bombay, has researched his own religion from an early age. He has a unique perspective on the Zarathushti religion and history, as a result of over 40 years of research. His findings and views are available on his website www.ancientiran.com Lately, he is working on the “Mazda Yasni” calendar, based on “Bundahishan”, that is recognized as “the Persian calendar from the 2nd millennium BCE”, and does not need any adjustment for 110,000 years.



In his presentation, Fariborz considers the Achaemenian period as the golden age of the Gathas, followed by the conquest of Iran by Alexander, when the Persian civilization was destroyed. 580 years later, Sasanians tried to reassemble the scattered Avesta, which now had elements of Mithraism in it. The collected Avesta comprised of all the existing beliefs of the time and was attributed to Zarathushtra. During 641-656 CE, the Arabs, believing that all knowledge needed by mankind was contained in the Quran, burned the books in the libraries, and put scholars to death. Thus, precious knowledge of the Gathas was destroyed.

The Gathas were rediscovered in 1885, by Prof. Martin Haug. Since then, they have been translated by many scholars who believe in the “*Anthropomorphic Almighty Roman God*” who created the earth in 7 days. In his presentation, Fariborz revisited the Gathas by “putting aside prejudices”, and “looking at things as they are”. With this in mind, Fariborz, reviewed the message contained in the following select Gatha passages: ----

- Gatha 28.5 ----- Gained Knowledge should be shared with all. Cyrus gave gold and permission to the Jews to rebuild their temple in Babylon.
- Gatha 28.1 ----- Wisdom is the prime righteous gift of Asha. Make good use of mind to create harmony between the universe and inner-self.
- Gatha 28.2 ----- Obtain Wisdom and knowledge in your field. Master the dual forces, Physical and Mental, through knowledge.
- Gatha 28.3 ----- Through Asha, derived by the Good Mind, making Good Rules, while increasing Righteousness, leads us to perfection.
- Gatha 28.10 ---- Reward for success is the satisfaction of gaining knowledge, and of doing a good deed, and of being known as being righteous, faithful, and praiseworthy.

Haft Amesha Spenta (The 7 Eternal Laws) ----

1 – BAHMAN (Good Mind) to be used to inquire and learn the
 2 -- ARDIBESHT (Ultimate Truth or Laws of Nature). Use them to make
 3 – SHAHRIVER (Good Rules – Good Laws – Good Products) which lead to
 4 – ESFAND (Lawful Desire – Righteousness) that will pave the way toward
 5 – KHORDARD (Perfection – Mental, Physical, and Spiritual) which lead to
 6 – AMORDAD (Immortality – (a) in Death, by being remembered for good work for generations, and (b) in Life, by losing the fear of death) resulting in oneness with
 7 – AHURA MAZDA (The Creator of Wisdom) through Self Realization (KHODAH) means
 (*Khod* = Self, and *Ah* = to come)

- Gatha 28.11 ---- Keep Good thoughts (in harmony with nature), declare them through Good words, and create Good deeds.
- Gatha 28.9 ----- Though the above, (Not Ahura Mazda), brings fury, use the mind to overcome difficulties.
- Gatha 30.2 ----- Listen to your heart. Consider with an open mind to choose the paths, suitable for each person for own self, to achieve greatness in your endeavors.

2. The Mazdayasni Calendar by Fariborz Rahnamoon

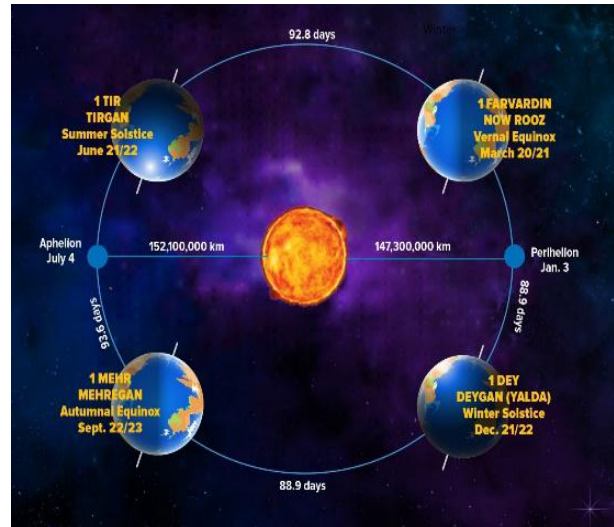
The calendar proposed by Fariborz, to be used by the Zoroastrian community, is based on the Bundahishn 25:25, “*The Mazda Yasni Calendar*”.

The four positions of the earth in its orbit around the sun determine the seasons, which are of unequal length. (Spring – 92.8 days, Summer – 93.6 days, Autumn – 89.9 days, Winter – 88.9 days).

Each season divided into 3 months works out to 31 days each for the first six months, with the next 5 months of 30 days each.

The last month would be 29 or 30 days, to be determined by the Vernal Equinox.

- *Spring* Months – Farwardin, Ardibehst, and Khordad – (beginning with Vernal Equinox or Now Rooz festival)
- *Summer* Months – Tir, Amرداد, and Sherwar – (beginning with Summer Solstice or Tirgan festival)
- *Autumn* Months – Mehr, Aban, Adar – (beginning with Autumnal Equinox or Mehregan festival)
- *Winter* Months – Dey, Vohuman, and Spandarmad – (beginning with Winter Solstice or Deygan (Yalda) festival)



The Mazdayasni Calendar needs no adjustment for 110,000 years, a fact recognized by TimeAndDate.com as the Persian Calendar from the 2nd millennium BCE.

In the ancient days the calendar did not give importance to 7 day week. So, for the modern version of the Mazdayasni Calendar, each of the 7 days of the week are given the following names: Monday=Bahman (good mind), Tuesday=Ashavahishta (Truth), Wednesday=Shahrivar (Good Rule), Thursday=Espand (Righteousness), Friday=Khordad (Perfection), Saturday=Amرداد (Immortality), Sunday=Ormazd (Spirituality).

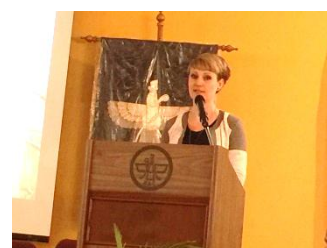
The Mazdayasni Calendar allows us to perform differently for each season, and be connected with nature, and celebrate all its landmarks. This common calendar, based on nature, should be revived, adopted throughout the worldwide Zoroastrian community.

(Copies of the Calendar for Mar 2017 thru Mar 2018 were distributed to all the attendees of the SSZ conference, through the courtesy of Fariborz Rahnamoon and the Minuteman Press, Burnaby, BC, Canada. Contact Fariborz to have copies printed at your local Minuteman Press.)

3. **Achaemenid Art and Artisans: A tactile exploration of the Apadana reliefs at Persepolis** by Dr. Kiersten Neumann

Dr. Kiersten Neumann (neumann@uchicago.edu) is curator and research associate at The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, having received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. She specializes in Mesopotamian visual culture and built environments, with a focus on sensory experience, ritualized practice, and cultural modes of viewing and representation. She is currently working on a book project that explores the sensory experience of the Neo-Assyrian temple; this builds upon her dissertation, which was awarded The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq Donny George Youkhana Dissertation Prize for the best U.S. doctoral dissertation on ancient Iraq. She is the organizer and chair of the session "Senses and Sensibility in the Near East" at the American Schools of Oriental Research annual meeting. Kiersten also curated the special exhibition at the Oriental Institute Museum, entitled "Persepolis: Images of an Empire" (Oct. 2015–Sept. 2017), and in October 2016, traveled to Iran as a second host for the Oriental Institute's Ancient Land of Persia travel program; these experiences that have inspired her to delve deeper into the role of the senses in Achaemenid art and architecture.

Dr. Neumann's talk focused, in particular on the reliefs of the Apadana at Persepolis, attributed to the Achaemenid king Darius I. Through a focus on the preserved materials of this great monument, she brought to light traces of the people of the past – both the people who created these carved stone images as the city was being built and those who moved through these space during actual practice. She explained their interaction with these works of art by highlighting the ways in which the touch of the craftsmen and artisans created these reliefs, the ways in which their touch is encapsulated in the reliefs, and the ways in which future visitors to this building may have been encouraged or inspired to touch and interact with the reliefs. She showed how the various aspects of the Apadana reliefs suggest an intentionality on the part of the craftsmen to express, through this work of art, certain cultural and socio-political concepts and codes of the Achaemenid royal court, in addition to demonstrating their skill and mastery of their profession.



The Apadana (great audience hall) was among the first buildings constructed at the city of Persepolis, founded around 520 BCE by Darius I the Great, who ruled from 522 through 486 BCE. Persepolis, as it was called in Greek, meaning "city of the Persians", or "Parsa" in Old Persian, was one of the 5 principal dynastic centers of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, along with Susa, Pasargadae, Ecbatana, and Babylon. This vast empire contained within its boundaries a diversity of peoples and cultures. Though founded by Persepolis, work continued at the site until the fourth century, with later additions by Xerxes, Artaxerxes I and Artaxerxes III, until its destruction in 330 BCE with the arrival of Alexander III of Macedon (or Alexander the Great) and his army.

4. An Overview of the Avesta.org website by Joseph Peterson

Joseph Peterson (jhpeters@us.ibm.com) has been studying religious texts for decades. After years of collecting and digitizing rare texts for his own research, in 1995 he created the avesta.org website to share them with a wider audience. It has enjoyed an amazing popularity, with over 10 thousand document requests per day. He has translated many religious and esoteric texts, and loves trying to unravel their often complex relationships and influences. Peterson has a degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of Minnesota, where he also studied various languages and religions. He lives near Rochester Minnesota.



- Over 11 thousand files
- 300 audio recordings
- 13 thousand requests per day
- Over 4 million unique requestors (some may be dups)
- Most not identifiable by besides .com & .net, india is by far the largest number of requests, followed by Canada, Germany, Brazil, and Iran

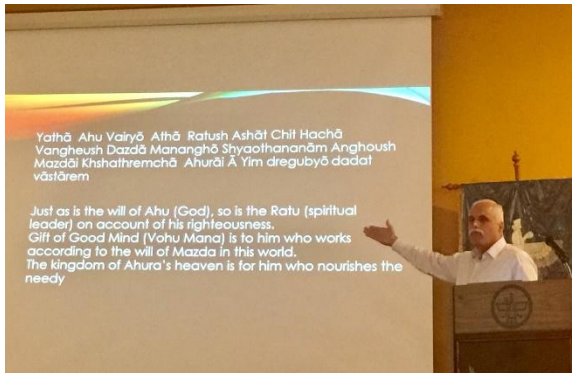
Avesta.org website and usage

Joseph Peterson created the avesta.org website over a 20-year period. He started by digitizing texts for his own use. He found that with the use of the internet, he could cross-reference, better understand, and check the accuracy of the information. He avoids controversies, and does not insert his own views. He started by posting texts and photocopies from Soli Dastur, Kersey Antia, Jehan Bagli, etc. He also included events from Newsletters, Mobed Council, Fezana, etc. To avoid confusion the website uses “standardized” spelling from Kotwal and Boyd. The site has evoked tremendous interest worldwide. Joe is continuing his passion to improve the site, by adding more events, annotations, better scans, more rare textbooks, mobile device support, more epub, searchable pdfs, more videos, and other improvements.

The Afternoon Session – was chaired by **Jamshed Rivetna**, who presided over the following 4 presentations:-----

1. Live your prayers by **Ervad Tehemton Mirza**

Er. Tehemton Mirza (tmirza@execulink.com). Following rigorous religious training at the M.F. Cama Athornan Institute, Tehemton was ordained Navar and Maratab at Udvada Atashbehrum. His professional career took him from Mumbai to Iran to Indonesia and he finally settled in London, Ontario Canada where he and his wife Zenobia own and operate a CPA practice. As a Mobed, Tehemton volunteers religious and spiritual services to Zoroastrians in South Western Ontario and Michigan. In addition to being a recreational pilot and a marathoner, Tehemton has published articles on Zoroastrianism in North American publications and spoken on Zoroastrian topics at Zoroastrian associations throughout North America. Tehemton currently serves as Vice President of North American Mobeds Council.



Ervad Mirza explained that Zoroastrian teachings are permissive (reflective), not authoritative. Zoroastrian prayers are uniquely practical. Rather than just praising God, these prayers preach values. He illustrated this point by explaining the messages of values in:

- *Ashem Vohu* – Asha (which means righteousness, justice, divine / natural law, truth) is the best good and it is happiness. Happiness is to him, who is righteous (morally right or justifiable) for the sake of the best Asha.
- *Yatha Ahu Vairyo* – Just as is the will of Ahu (God), so is the Ratu (spiritual leader) on account of his righteousness. Gift of Good Mind (Vohu Mana) is to him who works according to the will of Mazda in this world. The kingdom of Ahura's heaven is for him who nourishes the needy.

He used the above and other extracts from Kushti Prayers and Gathas to demonstrate that Zoroastrian prayers are statements of *facts, truths, wisdom*, for spiritual growth with many layers of meanings revealed when you meditate and analyze them. They provide an “*Instruction Manual*” for Good Life.

In sharp contrast to other commonly delivered presentations on the meaning of Zoroastrian prayers, Ervad Mirza presented the subject as an inspirational message (sermon style) to understand and learn our prayers, and most importantly to “*live them*”. How we “*act*” is more important than what we say to God.

2. (1) Basics of the Gathas and (2) The Gathas: Not primitive ritualism, not pre-modern rationalism, but poetic ethico-mystical mentalism by Prof. Martin Schwartz (via Zoom)

Prof. Martin Schwartz (martz@berkeley.edu) who was trained for his Ph.D. at UC Berkeley as the last student of Walter B. Henning, taught Iranian Studies and Sanskrit at Columbia from 1968-1970, and Iranian Studies at the University of California, from 1970 until his retirement as Professor Emeritus in 2011. He has produced very many publications on all aspects of Iranian Studies, particularly Old Iranian and Middle Iranian texts and linguistics, including ground-breaking studies of Christian Sogdian, of Bactrian, and of Khwarezmian, but also seminal studies in the history of New/Classical Persian. He has written studies and surveys of pre-Islamic Iranian culture, especially Avestan, Achaemenid, and Sasanian Zoroastrianism, and also Manicheism. He has more and more been focusing on the Gathas, and is presently at work on two books on the subject, aspects of which he shared at this Conference.



(1). **Basics of the Gathas** -- This lecture was a general description of the Gathas--their poetic style, their content, and their importance for not only post-Gathic Zoroastrianism, but for religions and philosophies of the world. Reasons were provided for dismissing the views of some scholars that the Gathas are concerned with a primitive materialistic ritualism, and also that Zarathushtra was not a real historical personage who was the single author of the Gathas. Rather (as supported by

Lecture (2)), it is indicated that Zarathushtra was an absolutely awesome, innovative spiritual leader, intellectual, and poet.

(2). **The Gathas: Not primitive ritualism, not pre-modern rationalism, but poetic ethico-mystical mentalism.** -- This lecture summarized and provided examples for several of his foremost discoveries as pertains to the striking intricacies of his compositional style: a) concentric schemes for each individual poem; b) phonic encoding of the theology of the Gathas; c) the compositional mechanics whereby the individual poems were generated one after another; d) how Zarathushtra lampooned and lambasted the earlier hymn to *Haoma*.

Video of Prof. Schwartz's presentation can be seen in its entirety on YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvlanpHeoB0>

3. In search of Zarathushti Kurds by Fariborz Rahnmoon

(Fariborz's Bio is shown on a previous page.)



Entrance to Kurdistan--Hamadan
"Proclamation by Daryoush
and Khashayar Shah"



Sulamania Zarathushti Place of Worship



Kurdish Kusti

While in Iran Fariborz decided to pay a visit to the Zarathushti Kurds and get to know them. They went to Marivan, the Kurdish border town in Iran, and from there r crossed the Bashmahk border into Suleymania in Iraq. Kurdistan is a mountainous area with cities developed in lush valleys. Entry to the valley is through narrow mountain passes, which has helped the Kurds preserve their language and culture in the safety of these cities. The Kurds are the ancient Madhs. Cyrus the Great's mother was a Madh. They claim that Zarathushtra was a Kurd for he was a Magi and Magi were a tribe among the Madhs. They tie a shawl around their waist

with 3 knots as part of their national dress. Unlike the Tajiks they did not come to the Zarathushtis to ask for permission to become Zarathushtis for they believe they are the original stock.

4. Panel discussion on the Gathas moderated by **Dastur Kersey Antia** and all **Speakers with Next Generation Panelists**



Summary of Topics Discussed:-----

- **Dastur Kersey Antia** --- Stressed the importance of Gathas, and the need for studying and researching them.
- **Ervad Rayomand Ravji** --- World is full of suffering. How to use the teachings from Gathas to assist.
- **Cyrus Rivetna** --- What was learned in today's conference? Do good without expecting reward. Through his Architecture firm, tries to improve other's lives. Will try to learn more about Gathas, after today's event.
- **Pervin Taleyarkhan** --- Thanks to parents who teach and explain Zoroastrianism from an early age. Importance of role models.
- **Kamal Saher** --- Asha has many meanings. The bottom line is – 'Do the right thing.'
- **Khursheed Ichaporla** --- How to make Zoroastrianism relevant and interesting to an 8-year old child? In addition to available children's books, consider stories from the ShahNama.

During the **networking hour**, at the end of the day, the participants enjoyed hearty snacks and drinks, while developing precious relationships with others. The theme during the entire day was to encourage participation from younger generation Zoroastrians, and to disseminate knowledge, including books and other scholarly literature.

SUNDAY, November 5, 2017

1. Roundtable discussion with Speakers, Mobeds, and Community members moderated by Rohinton Rivetna



Participants : Fariborz Rahnamoon, Kayomarsh Mehta, Hosi Mehta, Jehangir Darukhanavala, Boman Damkevala, Tehehemton Mirza, Jeraz Engineer, Zenobia Mirza, Porus Dadabhoy, Yazdi Bilimoria, Rayomand Ravji, Joseph Peterson, Rohinton Rivetna, Roshan Rivetna, Jamshed Rivetna, Phiroz Darukhanavala, Nilufer Darukhanavala

Summary of discussions and conclusions: --

- a. Mobeds interaction with the speakers:
 - Need more participation of mobeds in education about religion
 - Er. Tehemton Mirza's presentation (Live your Prayers) was very well received by the audience. Must build further on this approach. Er. Mirza will work on developing a series of videos on each of our basic prayers in inspiring, sermon format, and make them available on the NAMC website.
 - Some of the mobeds could specialize in religious education.
 - Main priority must be to structure informative events and programs that will encourage youth to get involved. (Avoid controversies relating to orthodoxy and rituals. These tend to "turn off" the youth.)
 - Er. Mirza and Er. Ravji committed to discuss these issues at Mobeds Council.
 - Develop a "Job Description" for priests that includes speaking and explaining prayers, on a regular basis.

- Under infra-structure development plan, each association must have resident (or several appointed) priests that can be trained in the art of preaching. (Council of Churches in the local area can help.) Note: London and Hong Kong have resident priests.
- Preaching about a prayer must contain a “*very simple message*”, that makes one “*feel good*”, and inspires to “*live your Prayer*”, followed by “Give and Take” discussions.
- In Christianity, church attendance on Sundays is considered obligatory. In Parsi custom in India, daily prayers are done privately at home, with most persons attending fire temples on special days only. Some Parsis do attend regularly, including some even daily. For North America, it is suggested that everyone attend at least once a month. This would include preaching by a trained mobed.
- Preaching should be included in each religious meeting and function. To encourage more attendance at these meetings, consider adding 2 names of departed in each Jashan ceremony.
- Develop an education curriculum for priests that include material in written, and audio/video formats.

b. 2017 Conference Critique:

- Facility and food were very good; speaker’s presentations and participation by audience was good. (Many questions and discussion on each topic)
- Using a variety of topics, instead of focusing on just one issue as in the past, helped maintain interest and attention.
- Need educational material for teenage years. Prayer rituals are important. But, they must be accompanied by how to use the teachings of our religion in real life. Must focus on – “How to lead a good life.” Must try to include in future conferences, to encourage youth participation.
- Video recording or live streaming of proceedings is requested.

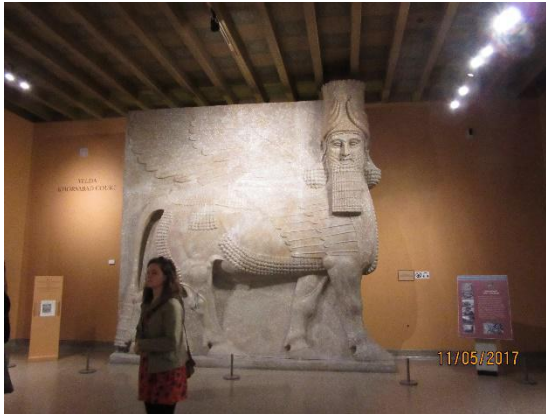
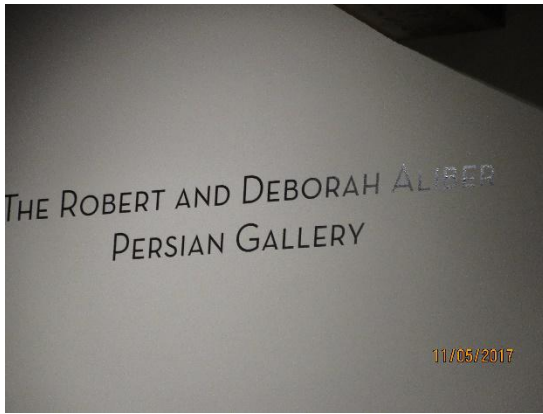
c. Planning the 2018 SSZ Conference:

- 2018 SSZ Conference in Canada will be held in Toronto. (Tehemton Mirza, Darius Bharucha, Adi Irani, Khushru, and others will coordinate)
- 2018 SSZ Conference in Chicago will be planned by Rayomand Ravji. He will develop the subjects to be covered. Pervin Taleyarkhan will also assist.
- To assist future conference planning, try to develop a list of 200+ names of potential speakers at conferences.
 - Rohinton has a hand-written list of scholars and students of Zoroastrianism who could serve as speakers. Rayomand Ravji and Jeraz Engineer volunteered to place this “Resource list”, after vetting, on s-s-z.org.
 - Speakers typically are associated with universities. (Must obtain their

- consent, and try to get their travel covered by their institution)
 - Speakers must aim toward imparting ‘wisdom’ as opposed to just “knowledge”.
 - It is suggested that each association, with a Darbe Mehr, should have at least one SSZ Conference each year.
 - Have young people help plan the conferences, and participate as speakers/chairs
- d. Organization structural improvements:
 - SSZ does not have Tax-exempt status.
 - To get it, must have Charter, Mission, Vision. In lieu of Pallan Ichaporia, who cannot serve due to ill health, Rayomand Ravji and Pervin Taleyarkhan will serve as Directors, along with Rohinton Rivetna.
- e. Establishment of “Center for Zoroastrian Studies”:
 - To provide a Chair at a university requires an investment of up to \$4-6 million.
 - Can set up our own “Center for Zoroastrian Studies”, where students from many universities can take “For Credit” courses.
 - Need to expand library.
- f. Suggestions to Increase Youth Participation:
 - Several items covered above (informative events without controversies, concentrating on how to “live your prayers”, etc.)
 - Youth camp and sleepovers have been successful.
 - More social functions
 - Youth Congress more often.
 - 3rd Sunday of each month – intermarried person get-together. Adult and Youth Discussion group on Zoroastrian topics.
 - More spiritually exciting events (“We know how to make a living, let’s learn to live”)
- g. Mazdayashni Calendar:
 - Kurds and Islamic republic of Iran already using it.
 - Fariborz Rahnmoon and Minuteman Press have already produced the calendars.
 - It is suggested that each association can purchase and mandate the use of these calendars for local use, until FEZANA can do it for North America. Associations may contact Fariborz (fariborzr@hotmail.com) to order copies to be printed at their local Minuteman Press.
- h. Vote of Thanks:
 - To the many volunteers and speakers for their efforts
 - Special Thanks to Rohinton and Roshan Rivetna for once again organizing this conference in Chicago, and managing the many details leading to a successful event.

2. **Visit to the Oriental Institute** by interested conference participants

- Several conference participants car-pooled to the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, and found the exhibits pertaining to ancient Iran very informative and educational.



Above Report respectfully submitted by **Jehangir Darukhanavala**