



# Panem et Circenses

## Armenian Religious Feasts and Celebrations



By Setrag Balian

“B

read and Circuses.” The Roman poet Juvenal who coined this phrase might as well have written it as a motto for Armenians, for whenever we meet, food and entertainment follow. Perhaps it is best illustrated during the festive season, when Armenian families gather to celebrate the birth of Christ. Armenians pride themselves on being the first Christian nation on earth (yes, we did accept Christianity before the Romans, in 301 AD), and as such our religious traditions are an integral part of our culture.

Armenians have lived in Palestine for at least 1,500 years. After the country had become a Christian nation, Armenian pilgrims began to make spiritual journeys to the Holy Land, braving political crises and the incessant wars of the region. When many of these pilgrims decided to stay, an Armenian Community started to grow in the heart of the city. Throughout the centuries, Palestinian Armenians have become an indivisible populace of Jerusalem, contributing to the shaping of the city. Through craftsmanship and pioneering, they bring diversity to this already multifarious city. However, as Newton postulated, “For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” Palestinian and Middle Eastern culture equally have influenced the Armenian community, gradually shaping Palestinian Armenian cuisine, language, and way of life. Notwithstanding the effects of integration, Jerusalemite Armenians – one of the smaller communities of the diaspora – have been able to preserve their identity unlike any other. Among their celebrations are traditional Christian feasts and holidays of uniquely Armenian character.



© Vince Photography

The main altar of Saint James Cathedral. Photo by Vince S Kahkedjian.

### Christmas

“Among my favorite holidays to spend in Jerusalem are Christmas and New Year’s. On these occasions all the Armenian community comes together, and there is a sense of unity. Even though it is the coldest season of the year, this unity gives a feeling of warmth and happiness,” my friend Nayat, a young university student, told me. Indeed, Christmas for our community is a time when we all put our differences aside and celebrate together.

Jerusalemite Armenian Christmas is the only one held on January 19, according to the Julian calendar. “I love it!” says my cousin George. “We get to enjoy the Christmas spirit for a whole month, and sometimes we even get two presents.” After all the lights and decorations are removed elsewhere and people start putting away their Christmas trees, two Armenian scout movements, Hoyetchmen and Homenetmen, lead a parade to escort the Armenian Patriarch to the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, once again reviving the Christmas spirit in Palestine. To the sounds of drums, trumpets, and bagpipes, the Patriarch, followed by the members of the community, makes his entrance to the birthplace of Christ.

Later that evening, the Patriarchate organizes a reception in the Armenian part of the Nativity Church at which high-level diplomatic representatives are present, including in recent years, the president of Palestine. It is a way for the Armenian Apostolic Church to reaffirm its presence in the Holy Land and also a reminder that Armenians have an important role to play in the preservation of the Christian Holy Sites in the region. The Armenian Church shares joint jurisdiction of two of the most important churches, the Nativity and the Holy Sepulcher, and have full jurisdiction over many more throughout the country.

After the reception, it has become a custom for Armenians to go to a restaurant in nearby Beit Sahour to celebrate the special occasion with their closest friends and family. At this point you might all be wondering, “When does the big Christmas dinner take place, when does the ‘panem’ part of the evening start?” Unfortunately, we do not have big Christmas dinners – but do not despair; we do have tremendous dinners on New Year’s Eve.



"Eech" (Armenian tabbouleh). Photo by Setrag Balian.

## New Year's

Regarding the celebration aspect, New Year's in the quarter is much closer to your stereotypical Christmas. Celebrated on January 13, it is a night of grand family dinners, a midnight church service, and oddly enough, Santa Claus. Ashken Shishmanian, who left Jerusalem 42 years ago and currently lives in Toronto, vividly remembers New Year's in Jerusalem. "On New Year's Eve, the Armenian *Kaghakatsis*\* had a beautiful tradition of preparing food, dessert, fruits, candies, and liquor, and leaving the door of their clubhouse open to welcome all passers-by, wishing them a Happy New Year," she recalls. Hermon Mhrianian from East Jerusalem adds, "The scouts used to go from house to house, wishing everyone good health, even offering food to the ones who were not fortunate enough to have loved ones around, making them feel a part of the bigger family, the community."

For my part, New Year's Eve has been the same for as long as I can remember. We gather at our closest family friend's house where there is an abundance of food, poets, teachers, and musicians. The night starts off slowly with the

"The parade is one of my favorite events of the year," affirms Hagop who plays the trumpet. "We get to represent our association, our country, and our church all at the same time. It is a moment when I feel extremely proud to be a Jerusalemite Armenian."

aroma of various foods travelling far beyond the walls of the house. As the mothers and grandmothers prepare the traditional dishes, which include stuffed vine leaves, *chi kofte* (raw meat), *dalakh* (stuffed spleen), *basturma* (cured meat), and *sujukh* (walnuts dipped in fruit syrup and dried), the younger generation play board games and the men crack jokes at every opportunity. As the music starts playing, everybody joins in by singing along – the cozy spirit of the season is here. We sing Christmas carols in Armenian, Arabic, and English, impatiently waiting for the food to be served. After the food is served and we've had all kinds of desserts, someone knocks at the door. It is *Gaghant Baba*, who has come to surprise the kids, bearing gifts all the way from Armenia, not the North Pole.

As we get closer to midnight, we all put on our coats and head to the main

courtyard of the Armenian Quarter where the midnight service is about to start. Here, all the families of the community gather after a long night of eating, drinking, and singing. The clock strikes 12, a group of seminarians accompanied by priests start off the service. Children enthusiastically wait for the service to finish so that they can set off their fireworks. "Yalla, when are they going to finish?" they are heard asking their parents. As soon as they hear "Amen," the fireworks start, the crowd applauds. After the fireworks, the members of the community kiss and hug, wishing each other a Happy New Year. Jerusalemite Armenians are once again united as one big family.

## Vartavar: The Festival of Roses

Like many celebrations, Vartavar dates back to pagan times when Armenians worshipped Greek-like



The Hoyetchmen Scouts in the main courtyard of the quarter. Photo by Vince S Kahkedjian.





*Vartavar: The Festival of Roses.*

gods and goddesses. Vartavar, which literally means “rose” and “rise,” was dedicated to the Armenian goddess of water, beauty, love, and fertility, Asdghik. Armenians offered her roses, which is why it is celebrated during harvest time, 98 days after Easter. During this feast, people sprinkled each other with rosewater. As it was one of the favorite festivals of Armenians, this pagan tradition was later linked to the Transfiguration of Christ, which is an

event in the New Testament when Jesus is transfigured and becomes radiant in glory upon a mountain.

Nowadays, it is a great way to cool off during the hot summer days of August. Children impatiently wait for the day they get to drench everyone in water, including priests. “The only thing we care about is splashing someone and not getting splashed back,” says Talar, who is currently studying medicine in Armenia. All the young people gather in the main courtyard of the quarter and get ready to plan their attack on unsuspecting members of the community. Water balloons and water guns, buckets and hoses turn the whole quarter into a water battlefield. If you dare visit the Armenian Quarter on this day, expect to leave soaking wet.

In addition to the more traditional religious holidays, Armenians have many unique feasts, some of which are ancient pagan-turned-Christian holidays, whereas others are important in Christian Armenian History.

## Vartanants: The Heroic Battle of Avarayr

Vartan Mamigonian, one of the most famous Armenian heroes, led the heroic battle of Avarayr, fighting alongside soldiers and priests to protect and defend Christianity against the much larger and stronger Persian army who outnumbered them more than five to one. The Persians had advanced into many Armenian provinces and made it impossible for their inhabitants to practice their faith freely as the Persian king Yazdigerd II had sent out a decree demanding that Armenians convert to Zoroastrianism. In light of the news, Saint Leontius and Mamigonian called the Council of Ardashad, and together with Armenian bishops decided to defend their faith, ready to fight to their deaths. They sent out a declaration of faith to the Persian king, thus forcing him to go to war. On May 26, 451, over 1,036 brave Armenian men, including Mamigonian, lost their lives on the plains of Avarayr. Although the Persian army won a military victory on that day, the lives of these men were not lost in vain. Eventually, after the treaty of Nvarsak in 484, Armenians were allowed to practice their religion freely, thus ensuring the protection of Armenian freedom and liberty. After his death, Mamigonian was consecrated as Saint Vartan.

Vartanants is one of few celebrations that are both nationalistic and religious in nature, which further corroborates the strong ties that exist between the Armenian people and their faith. I always remember hearing the story of the Battle of Avarayr as a child. There was even a children’s song that went “Who am I? Who am I? I am a small Armenian child, an Armenia-loving,

grandchild of Saint Vartan.” The students in the Sts. Tarkmanchatz Armenian School of Jerusalem usually act out a play in honor of the battle. The moral is that a big military defeat may hold an even greater moral triumph. It is the story of a people rejecting tyranny and oppression and choosing to fight for their freedom. Through foreign rule, occupation, and genocide, Armenians have confirmed that the spirit of Saint Vartan, conscience, and courage remain alive in each and every one of us, and Vartanants is the day on which we remember that. It is a custom, on this day, to congratulate all Armenian men who do not have a saint’s name.

The French poet Emile Henriot says that culture is what remains when all else is forgotten. After a genocide that claimed the lives of 1.5 million Armenians and scattered the survivors all over the world, robbing them of most of their historic land, the Armenian community of Jerusalem is proof that culture indeed remains deep in our souls. The Armenian-American writer William Saroyan says it best: “When two [Armenians] meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia.”

*Setrag Balian is a 19-year-old Palestinian Armenian who studied economics in France and currently studies ceramics in Madrid. Passionate about politics, he mainly writes about the Armenian Community of Jerusalem.*

\* There are two types of Armenians within the Palestinian community: The Kaghakatsis (locals) were the first Armenians to settle in the Holy Land, arriving from the fifth century up until 1915. The Kakhtagans are descendants of Genocide survivors whose ancestors fled to Jerusalem in 1915.