



# Assyrian Aid Society of Canada

## HISTORY OF AKITU NEW YEAR CELEBRATION

### Website

[www.assyrianaidcanada.org](http://www.assyrianaidcanada.org)

*Assyrian Aid Society is dedicated to promoting cultural preservation and mobilizing sustainability efforts for Assyrians in their indigenous homeland.*

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## **Assyrian Aid Society of Canada Organization Overview**

The Assyrian Aid Society of Canada (AAS-CA) is a non-profit organization that was founded on August 4, 1992, as designated by Ontario provincial guidelines.

AAS-CA was established to mobilize humanitarian relief efforts for Assyrians during the Gulf War. AAS-CA is committed to supporting initiatives which focus on sustaining the ethnic identity and survival of the indigenous Assyrian people in their homeland.

Through these efforts, we aim to raise awareness on humanitarian issues affecting the living conditions of Assyrians in their ancestral lands, with the objective of coordinating relief responses for recovery. We also strive to preserve and promote their ancient cultural heritage by engaging with Assyrians in the diaspora to foster strong ties with those remaining in the homeland.

The Assyrian Aid Society - Iraq (AAS - Iraq) was established in 1991 and formed from a number of pre-war refugee relief organizations. AAS - Iraq was granted Special Consultative status by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in 2011. In February of 2016, the Assyrian Aid Society of Iraq was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. There are other independent global Assyrian Aid Society organizations in Iraq, Australia, the United States, and Sweden who share similar objectives.

## General Overview

The first of April marks Akitu – the Assyrian New Year also referred to as “*Kha’b Nissan*” (ܟܚܒܢܝܣܢ) which means the “first of spring.” This is the oldest recorded celebration for New Year festivities with records dating back 4,000 years ago to ancient Mesopotamia. *Kha’b Nissan* marks the first day of the new year as well as the first day of Spring, or *Nissan*. As such, the holiday is a symbol of revival to honour the re-birth of the natural world.

In ancient times, the Akitu festival began on April 1<sup>st</sup> and lasted for twelve consecutive days. Assyrian mythology tells a tale of the goddess of love marrying the god of vegetation. Their unity, during the Spring Equinox, meant the renewal of life and the fertility of Earth,

In modern days, it is customary in Assyrian villages to make a *Diqna d’Nissan*, or “Beard of Spring” to mark the Assyrian New Year. It is a beautiful tradition where women and girls gather fresh spring herbs and flowers and hang them at the entrance of their doors, to symbolically welcome spring into their home. Assyrian New Year is celebrated today by Assyrians around the world from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Turkey, as well as major cities in Canada, Australia, Sweden, the United States, New Zealand, etc.

Despite enduring many disputes in their indigenous homelands, and the devastation of their culture through ethnic cleansing and displacement, Assyrians continue to celebrate Assyrian New Year on the 1st of April and are seen as a symbol of their existence, newness in life as well as gratitude for their freedom.

## History of Akitu

### Day One - Three

Historically, Akitu festivities began with priests of Éšagila (Marduk's temple) reciting prayers with other priests to express fear of the unknown for humans. Ordinary people would answer with prayers. The head priest would head to the Éšagila on a daily basis to ask for Marduk's forgiveness (prayer was called "The Secret Of Éšagila") and to protect Babylon, his holy city. On the second day, the head priest would wake up before sunrise to bathe in the Euphrates River. On the third day, craftsmen created two puppets made of wood, gold, and precious stones. They were dressed in red and set aside to be used for the sixth day.

### Day Four

The same rituals were followed as the previous three days. Prior to sunrise, the priests would look for the sacred star group IKU (Field). The Epic of Creation, "Enuma Elish" would be recited during the day.

The Enuma Elish is the oldest story concerning the birth of gods, the creation of the universe and human beings. It illustrates how all the gods united with the god Marduk following his victory over Tiamat. The recitation of the story was considered to be the beginning of preparations in submission to the king of Babylon before Marduk on the fifth day of Akitu. At night, a drama was performed to praise Marduk.

## Day Five

On day five, the submission of the king of Babylon before god Marduk took place. The king, accompanied by the priests, would enter Éšagila. Together, they would approach the altar and the high priest would impersonate Marduk. The high priest would strip the king of his jewelry, scepter, and crown (the removal of all possessions was a symbol of submission to Marduk). He would kneel and pray to ask for Marduk's forgiveness.

The priest would respond to the king's prayer using Marduk's role in hearing and responding to his prayers by granting him power and increasing the greatness of the king's reign.

The king would then stand up for the priest to give back his jewelry, scepter, and crown. The return of the crown to the king signified renewal of power for the king by Marduk, whereas April was considered not only the revival of nature and life, but also to the state. Following his presence in earthly home and renewing its king's power, Marduk stayed in the Etemenanki (Towers of Babylon) or in the Éšagila temple. According to the tradition of Akitu, during this day, Marduk would enter his dwelling and be surprised by the evil gods who fight him. He is taken prisoner by Tiamat (the chaos monster and goddess of the ocean) and awaits the arrival of his son god Nabu who would save him from "Nought" and restore his glory.

## Day Six

Before the arrival of the gods, this day would be filled with commotion. The puppets made on day three were burned and a mock battle would take place. The commotion signified that without Marduk, the city would be in constant chaos.

The god Nabu, accompanied by his assistants of brave gods coming from Nippur, Uruk, Kish and Eridu would arrive by boat. The gods accompanying Nabu were represented by statues mounted on boats that were especially made for the occasion. Here, the people in huge numbers would begin their walk behind the king towards Éšagila (where Marduk was held prisoner), chanting, "Here's who's coming from far to restore the glory of our imprisoned father".

### Day Seven

The god Nabu frees Marduk from his third day of imprisonment. When entering his dwelling (on day five), the evil gods closed a huge gate behind him. Marduk would fight until Nabu's arrival where he would break the gate, and a battle would take place between the two groups until Nabu won and freed Marduk.

### Day Eight

After Marduk is free, statues of gods gather in the Destinies Hall "Ubshu-Ukkina", to deliberate his destiny where it is decided that all forces of the gods are to join and be bestowed upon Marduk. The king implores all the gods to support and honour Marduk. This tradition signifies that Marduk received submission from all the gods and is unique in his position.

### Day Nine

The victory procession to the house of the New Year (Akitu temple) where Marduk's victory in the beginning of Creation over Tiamat is celebrated. The Akitu temple, or "Bet Ekribi" (House of Prayers), was about 200 meters outside the city's walls. There were wonderful trees decorated and watered out of respect to the god who was considered to grant life to nature. The procession was a way for the people to express joy at Marduk's (Ashur) renewal of power and destruction of evil forces that controlled life in the beginning.

## Day Ten

Arriving at the Akitu temple, the god Marduk celebrates with both the upper and nether world gods (statues of gods were arranged around a huge table such as in a feast). Marduk then returns to the city, celebrating his marriage to goddess “Ishtar” where earth and heaven are united.

As the gods unite, the union is arranged on earth. The king personifies this union by playing the role of marrying the highest priestess of Éšagila. They would both sit at the throne before the people and recite special poems for the occasion. This love would bring forth life in spring.

## Day Eleven

On the eleventh day, the gods return accompanied by their lord, Marduk to meet in the Destinies Hall (Upshu Ukkina). This is where they met for the first time on the eighth day to decide the fate of the people of Marduk. In Ancient Assyrian philosophy, creation was considered as a covenant between heaven and earth, as long as a human serves the gods until his death. To justify this, the gods’ happiness is not complete until humans are happy as well. Thus, a human’s destiny to be granted happiness is on the condition that he serves the god.

Marduk and the gods renew their covenant with Babylon by promising the city another cycle of seasons. After deciding on the fate of mankind, Marduk then returns to his heavens.

## Day Twelve

The last day of Akitu. The gods return to Marduk’s temple and daily life resumes in Babylon, Nineveh, and all other Assyrian cities. The people prepare for another cycle of seasons.



## Modern Day New Year Celebrations





While many ancient Akitu traditions no longer continue, one that has survived is the tradition of *Diqna d’Nissan* or “Beard of Spring.” In modern days, it is customary in Assyrian villages to make a *Diqna d’Nissan* (ܕܝܩܢܐ ܕܢܝܫܢ), or “Beard of Spring” to mark the Assyrian New Year. It is a beautiful tradition where women and girls gather fresh spring herbs and flowers and hang them at the entrance of their doors, to symbolically welcome spring into their home.

Assyrian New Year is celebrated today by Assyrians worldwide by means of festivals, parties, and parades. From Iraq, Syria, Iran, Turkey, all the way to major cities in Canada, Australia, Sweden, the United States, New Zealand, etc this festival is celebrated by Assyrians alike.

Despite enduring many disputes in their indigenous homelands, and the devastation of their culture through ethnic cleansing and displacement, Assyrians continue to celebrate Assyrian New Year on the 1st of April and their act of celebration is seen as a symbol of their existence, newness in life as well as gratitude for their freedom.

For more information, please visit our website at [www.assyrianaidcanada.org](http://www.assyrianaidcanada.org).



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