

with His disciples.

The Bahá'í feast originates in the writings of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh. It appears first in the Arabic Bayan as a command to entertain nineteen people every nineteen days, even if one is only able to give them water. Bahá'u'lláh confirms the commandment in His Kitab-i-Aqdas, explaining that its purpose is to 'bind hearts together' with material means,³ although in Questions and Answers He states that the feast is not obligatory.⁴ In these passages the Feast is a personal observance, in which the believer displays hospitality by receiving and feeding guests. There is no indication that it is an administrative or community institution.

Banquets and shared meals were an important part of the activities that surrounded the person of `Abdu'l-Bahá, at home and during His travels. The meals in `Abdu'l-Bahá's house served to unite the Bahá'í pilgrims who came from different countries and cultures. Often the visitors themselves hosted banquets. Early Bahá'ís often mention these shared meals in accounts of their pilgrimages.

However, during `Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry the feast also came to have a technical meaning as a monthly Bahá'í community meeting. This seems initially to have been a wholly social occasion -- certainly Middle Eastern Bahá'ís of the nineteenth century interpreted it this way -- although it soon began to be formalized as a religious institution. Illustrative of this phase were the 'Nineteen Day Teas' for Bahá'í women, begun in Chicago in 1901 and soon observed in other cities. After 1905 a more formal feast, combining a meal and devotions, came into practice in America, largely through the efforts of Isabella Brittingham. The Bahá'ís at first precisely copied a feast hosted by `Abdu'l-Bahá in `Akka in 1905. On the basis of the passage in the Kitab-i-Aqdas, the Bahá'ís understood the feast as a way of unifying the Bahá'í community. In America it supplemented the weekly worship meetings that most communities held. Not surprisingly, the American Bahá'ís associated the feast with the Lord's supper, an analogy that `Abdu'l-Bahá Himself made.

These developments were certainly guided and encouraged by `Abdu'l-Bahá. His writings on the subject stress the importance of the feast and its role in increasing the unity of Bahá'í communities. He made clear that the feast was to be a devotional occasion, with prayers and readings in addition to the meal. `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that the Bahá'í feast carried on the ancient religious obligation to display hospitality and to be generous with food. The aspect of the feast most stressed in the writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá was the creation of an atmosphere of spirituality, unity and prayer.

The modern administrative feast

The modern form of the feast arose during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi and parallels the rise of the modern local spiritual assembly. Shoghi Effendi seems to have turned his attention to the nineteen day feast in the early 1930s. To the two-fold feast of the time of `Abdu'l-Bahá, he added a third element, a community business meeting included `in direct response to the

growing needs of the Bahá'í community in this formative period of the Bahá'í Era for better training in the principles and practice of Bahá'í administration'.⁵

In a statement prepared by the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and endorsed by Shoghi Effendi, the form of the modern nineteen day feast is clearly described. The feast is to consist of three parts: first, devotional, consisting of readings from the Bahá'í sacred writings; second, a general community meeting, at which the local spiritual assembly and the community can consult; and third, a social meeting, at which food is served. Only Bahá'ís are to be present. Bahá'ís usually call these the 'devotional' or 'spiritual', the 'administrative' or 'business', and the 'social' or 'material' portions of the feast. The feast is described as the 'foundation of the new World Order'.⁶ Shoghi Effendi stressed the importance of the feast in Bahá'í community life, warning against both exaggerating and minimalizing the relative importance of the feast.⁷

The feast is held once during each Bahá'í month, preferably on the first day. In various places Shoghi Effendi allowed the feast to be held later in the Bahá'í month, the day before the first day of the Bahá'í month and during the Intercalary Days before the beginning of the month of fasting. The exact date, time and place for the feast are the responsibility of the local spiritual assembly.

Shoghi Effendi stated that the feast was intended only for the members of the Bahá'í community. Children of Bahá'ís, whether or not they are registered members of the community, are also allowed to attend. However, if a visitor who is not a Bahá'í happens to attend, he should be received hospitably. If he is well known to the community, he might be asked to leave the room during the community's business meeting. Otherwise, the business portion of the feast should be omitted. Feasts are also open to Bahá'ís from other communities and no believer in good standing may be excluded from a feast.

The modern feast is usually sponsored by the local spiritual assembly. Ideally, it is held in the haziratu'l-quds or Bahá'í centre but in smaller communities it usually rotates among the homes of the individual Bahá'ís. In large communities there are sometimes several district feasts, each of which is attended by representatives of the assembly. Communities with fewer than nine believers often have feasts, although this is not strictly necessary since there is no local spiritual assembly. Attendance at the feast is desirable but not obligatory. No sanctions may be taken against a believer who fails to attend feasts.

devotional portion

The role of the devotional programme at the nineteen day feast was first

indicated by `Abdu'l-Bahá. Shoghi Effendi stated that the readings should be chosen mainly from the prayers and Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and the Bab and to a

lesser extent from the writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá. In a letter to the American Bahá'ís Shoghi Effendi asked that they not read his own writings in the devotional portion of the feast. In Iran, however, it was common for his prayers to be read as part of the devotional programme. Shoghi Effendi also permitted the use of selections from the scriptures of other religions although he recommended that Bahá'í readings should predominate. The Universal House of Justice has suggested a programme, based on Shoghi Effendi's statements, in which the feast opens with prayers and devotional readings from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Bab and `Abdu'l-Bahá, followed

by readings from other Tablets, the writings of Shoghi Effendi and the scriptures of other religions.⁸ Hymns, poems and chants based on the holy writings, as well as instrumental music may also be included.

administrative portion

It was Shoghi Effendi who first envisioned the feast as an administrative occasion. The programme of the administrative portion of the feast is well summarized as `general consultation on the affairs of the Cause, at which time the Local Spiritual Assembly reports its activities to the community, asks for suggestions and consultation, and also delivers messages received from the Guardian and the National Assembly'.⁹ The feast is thus the most important occasion for communication between Bahá'í administrative institutions and the believers. At the feast the believer is encouraged to offer his views, suggestions and criticisms fully and frankly. The only limitation on freedom of discussion is that it should not be of a nature to undermine the authority of the Bahá'í institutions or involve criticism of individuals.

social portion

The sharing of food is the original core of the feast and derives from the commands of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh. `Abdu'l-Bahá particularly emphasizes the duty of hospitality incumbent on the host of the feast. This portion of the feast is intended as a social meeting of the believers.

Contemporary practice

The feast, as the only required routine community meeting, is usually one of the first Bahá'í activities established in a community. The regular holding of feasts is often viewed as a measure of the health of a Bahá'í community. Although the three-part format of the feast is observed everywhere in the Bahá'í world, there is considerable variation in the details of the programme among countries, communities and even individual hosts, a diversity encouraged by the Universal House of Justice. The style and length of devotions, the amount of time devoted to administrative matters, and the elaborateness of the

food and entertainments of the social portion of the feast vary according to the cultural traditions of the area or the local Bahá'ís, the tastes of the host and the particular circumstances of the community.

Related practices and observances

Several other aspects of Bahá'í life may conveniently be discussed here in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's original injunction to display hospitality as a way of uniting hearts.

hospitality

The feast was originally a display of hospitality, as the writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá on the subject make clear, whose purpose was the furtherance of unity. Moreover, Islamic societies lay great stress on hospitality, and this was carried over into the Bahá'í community by Bahá'ís of Islamic background.

Early Western Bahá'ís also were inspired by the example of the mutual hospitality of the early Christians of the New Testament. The exchange of hospitality has thus always been an important factor in knitting together diverse Bahá'í communities. `Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized the importance of hospitality as a way of reducing the distrust between different nations.¹⁰ Bahá'ís often cite the example of `Abdu'l-Bahá's generous and unquestioning hospitality to friends and strangers alike. Bahá'ís are counselled by their administrative institutions not to allow others to take undue advantage of their hospitality and not to presume on the hospitality of other Bahá'ís.

shared food and meals

In practice, the sharing of food occupies a large place in Bahá'í community life. Bahá'í meetings -- whether for administration or for teaching, study or the observance of holy days -- usually involve food and drink. Often this is simply cakes and beverages but full meals are not uncommon. Like the nineteen day feast itself, such practices vary widely depending on the cultural background and personal tastes of the Bahá'ís.

sharing food as charity

In `Akka `Abdu'l-Bahá maintained extensive charities, amounting to a sort of private social welfare system. Much of this involved the distribution of food, a great part of which came from Bahá'í farms in Galilee and the Jordan Valley.

He was knighted by the British government for His services in averting famine in the `Akka area during World War I. Since then, Bahá'ís, with their very limited resources, have rarely been able to emulate His example. However, since 1983 the Bahá'í community has begun to devote many more resources to community development. Although many of these local projects involve food, these usually take the form of agricultural development rather than food distribution.

Notes:

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Secret of Divine Civilization, pp. 46-51.

Matt.: 25:31-46.

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From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 29 July 1935, in Compilation, vol. 1, no. 939, p. 433.

The Universal House of Justice, Compilation, vol. 1, p. 420.

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 2 October 1935, in Compilation, vol. 1, no. 940, p. 434.

From letter of the Universal House of Justice to the Hands of the Cause of God, 25 August 1965, in Lights, no. 818, p. 244.

Universal House of Justice, compiler, Bahá'í Meetings, the Nineteen Day Feast (Wilmette)

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