



# BAHAISM XIV. NINETEEN DAY FEAST

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## BAHAISM

### xiv. Nineteen Day Feast

The Nineteen Day Feast (*ziāfat-e nuzdah-ruza*) is a gathering of the Bahai community every nineteen days that has devotional, administrative, and social aspects and is the core of community life.

The origins of the observance go back to the [Bāb](#), who established what eventually became the Bahai calendar, consisting of nineteen months of nineteen days each, and ordained that each Bābi should invite nineteen others every nineteen days as guests, even if only water be served and even if it be fewer than nineteen guests (*Bayān al-'arabi* 9:17). [Bahā'-Allāh](#) confirmed this injunction in the *Ketāb-e aqdas* (sec. 57; tr., p. 40), explaining that its purpose is “to bind hearts together, albeit through both earthly and heavenly means,” although in *Questions and Answers* (no. 48), this command is stated not to be obligatory. However, in the case of both the Bāb and Bahā'-Allāh, these appear to be injunctions to the individual rather than a command to establish a community institution. No further instructions regarding this command appear in the published writings of Bahā'-Allāh, possibly because elsewhere he states (*Entešārāt-lajna* XXXI, p. 31) that he did not want the Bahais to gather in large numbers, which might attract attention. But developments did occur,



since the German Christian missionary Pastor Christian Közle (d. 1895), who was stationed at Urmia, reports that the main meeting of the Bahai community occurs on the last day of each Bahai month (Momen, pp. 74-75).

‘Abd-al-Bahā’ evolved both the concept and the practice of the Nineteen Day Feast. Both in his dealings with the American pilgrims who began to arrive in ‘Akkā and in his correspondence, he encouraged the new North American communities to hold meetings every nineteen days, at which prayers were said and hospitality provided. As early as 1901, “Nineteen-Day Teas” for women were being held in Chicago. During 1905-07, the feast became formalized, regular, and country-wide, largely through the efforts of Isabella Brittingham, and were based on a feast hosted by ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ in 1905 (Stockman, pp. 50, 244-45; Walbridge). They also became community events rather than private gatherings. For these Western Baha’is, ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ linked the Nineteen Day Feast with the Lord’s Supper (‘Abd-al-Bahā’, p. 149; II, p. 421), interpreting the Qur’anic reference to a banquet (*mā’eda*) descending from heaven (Qur’an 5:112-14) as indicating that this should be both a physical and spiritual repast. He emphasized in particular the creation of an atmosphere of unity and spirituality, calling it a “confluence of holy souls” (The Universal House of Justice, I, p. 429). However, in Iran, there were still dangers for the Bahais from gathering in large numbers, at least in the early part of ‘Abd-al-Bahā’s ministry, and so ‘Abd-al-Bahā’ continued Bahā’-Allāh’s instructions that the meetings of the Bahais for prayers be in small groups only, and that they be on personal initiative, but he also indicated that they would eventually become formal community gatherings (Fāzel Yazdi, I, pp. 353-54).

The next major development of the Nineteen Day Feast came with Shoghi Effendi’s instructions in the early 1930s that, in addition to the devotional (prayers and readings from scripture) and social (food and conversation) sections of the feast, there should be an administrative section, where there would be consultation about the affairs of the community. Shoghi Effendi gave many other instructions about the feast, including: that it should be held, if possible, on the first day of the Bahai month; that in order to facilitate freedom of discussion during the administrative portion of the feast, only enrolled Bahais may attend; that only scripture (mainly Bahai but also from the Qur’an and the Bible if desired) should be read in the devotional part, but messages from the Bahai institutions and other material may be read in the administrative section; and that music may form part of the devotional section. The local spiritual assembly (*mahfel-e ruḥāni*) is to be responsible for



organizing the feasts, although it may delegate this task to individuals or committees. In areas where there is no spiritual assembly, the Bahais may nevertheless hold feasts.

The Universal House of Justice (*Bayt-al-'adl-e a'zam*), the present world leadership of the Bahai faith, sees the Nineteen Day Feast as a continuation of human activities throughout the ages, which have brought people together in acts of devotion and festivity. It sees its significance in its combining all of the important processes of human life, the spiritual, the administrative, and the social; its being an activity in which all Bahais can participate; and its role as the main way in which the local Bahai administrative institutions (local spiritual assemblies, *mahfel-e ruhāni*) can keep close contact with their communities. Indeed, the feast should form a “dynamic link” between the individual Bahais and the administrative structure of the Bahai community. It gives the administrative institutions an opportunity to communicate their plans to the community and, in the process of consultation, for the individual Bahais to present their innovative ideas and constructive criticism. All of this is seen by the Universal House of Justice as an important part of the process of building a unified community and progressing towards a global civilization. In addition, it has emphasized that great care should be given to the preparation of the locality for the feast, the choosing of the readings for it and the hospitality offered (The Universal House of Justice, I, pp. 419-22). While confirming Shoghi Effendi's ruling that the Nineteen Day Feast is primarily for enrolled Bahais, it has stated that, should individuals who are not Bahais attend, the feast can continue with the administrative portion modified to take account of this.

At present in the Bahai world, the Nineteen Day Feast is held within the above framework but with a wide variety of local cultural features. In some parts of the world, music and singing form a major part of the program; in other parts they do not feature at all. In smaller communities, the Bahais gather in each other's homes, and in larger communities, they gather at the local Bahai center. As communities grow even larger, there can be several Nineteen Day Feasts held in different parts of a locality.



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