

May 2, the Festival of Paradise comprises three Holy Days. On the 1st (April 21), 9th (April 29), and 12th (May 2) days of Ridvan, Baha'i communities will gather ?

to commemorate the signal events of that historic occasion.

The Baha'i Faith, one of the youngest world religions, was founded by Mirza

husayn-'Ali Nuri (1817–1892), a Persian nobleman known by his spiritual title,

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Baha'u'llah ("Glory/Splendor of God"). The Baha'i religion is also regarded as

having been cofounded by Baha'u'llah's predecessor and harbinger, Sayyid 'Ali-

Muhammad of Shiraz (1819–1850), known as the Bab ("the Gate").

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The unfolding of Baha'u'llah's prophetic mission was gradual, progressively

revealed in a series of disclosures. The "Festival of Paradise" commemorates

Baha'u'llah's private disclosure of his eschatological identity to a handful of his

companions—around four years prior to his public proclamation to the rulers and

religious leaders of the world (c. 1867–1873). To a select few Babis, Baha'u'llah

announced that he was the "Promised One" foretold by the Bab. To a select group

of the world's most powerful potentates and clerics, Baha'u'llah sent open epistles,

proclaiming himself to be the "Promised One" foretold by the prophets of all past

religions. In these "Tablets" (as the epistles were called), together with general Tab-

lets addressed to kings and ecclesiastics collectively, Baha'u'llah stated that he was,

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inter alia, the long-awaited "World Reformer" who came to unify the world—a

transformation that would, in the course of time, come about through the power of

his universal principles and laws adapted to the needs of this day and age.

Briefly, the history of Ridvan began on the afternoon of April 21, 1863 (around

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3:00 p.m.). Baha'u'llah arrived in the Najibiyyih Garden, subsequently designated as the "Garden of Ridvan." Located on the east bank of the Tigris in Baghdad,

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Najibiyyih was once a wooded garden, where Muhammad-Najib Pasha (Turkish:

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Mehmed Necib, d. May 1851), governor of Baghdad (r. 1842–1847), had built a palace and placed a wall around the garden. It is now the site of "Baghdad Medical City" (formerly known as Saddam Medical City), a large modern teaching hospital in Baghdad.

Baha'u'llah's entrance into the Garden of Ridvan signaled the commencement of

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his momentous announcement, first to his companions, and eventually to the world at

large. Exactly what transpired is shrouded in mystery, and accounts vary. Prior to this

time, Baha'u'llah had concealed his mission for 10 years (1853–1863).

This period of

"messianic secrecy" has been referred to as the "Days of Concealment"

(*ayyam-i-*

butun—a term that connotes the image of embryonic development), although

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Baha'u'llah's writings in Baghdad during this period are rife with hints about his pro-

phetic mission, especially in his preeminent doctrinal text, the Book of Certitude

(*Kitab-i-Iqan*), which was revealed in two days and two nights in January 1861.

In 1869, as part of the subsequent public proclamation of his mission to the world's

political and religious leaders, Baha'u'llah dispatched his second epistle (c. 1869) to

Napoleon III (d. 1873). In this "Tablet" (spirited out of

Baha'u'llah's prison cell by a

Baha'i pilgrim, who concealed the letter in the brim of his hat) to the emperor of

France, Baha'u'llah announced: "All feasts have attained their consummation in the

two Most Great Festivals, and in two other Festivals that fall on the twin days." Here,

the two "Most Great Festivals" are the Festival of Ridvan and the

Declaration of the

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Bab (evening of May 22, 1844). The “twin days” refer to the Birth of the Bab (Octo-

ber 20, 1819) and the Birth of Baha’u’llah (November 12, 1817).

The purport of what Baha’u’llah proclaimed on that momentous first day of

Ridvan, beyond the declaration that he was “He Whom God will make manifest,”

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involves matters of great import in that Baha’u’llah had decreed three of his most

far-reaching laws, by (1) abrogating holy war, (2) asserting that no independent

Messenger of God (literally, “Manifestation of God”) after

Baha’u’llah would

appear for at least a full 1,000 years, and (3) dispensing entirely with the Islamic

category of ritual impurity or “uncleanness” (najis). Baha’u’llah later recounted

this sweeping pronouncement in the Most Holy Book (the Kitab-i-Aqdas):

God hath, likewise, as a bounty from His presence, abolished the concept of “uncleanness,” whereby divers things and peoples have been held to be impure. He, of a certainty, is the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Generous. Verily, all created things were immersed in the sea of purification when, on that first day of Ridvan, We shed upon the whole of creation the splendours of Our

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most excellent Names and Our most exalted Attributes. (Baha’u’llah, The Kitab-i-Aqdas, 47)

The Festival of Ridvan is important for yet another reason: most

Baha’i elec-

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tions take place at this time. On the first day of Ridvan (April 21), all local Baha’i

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councils, each known as a Local Spiritual Assembly, is democratically elected, in

a “spiritual election” conducted prayerfully and meditatively.

The system of Baha’i elections is unique, both religiously and politically. Politi-

cal scientist Arash Abizadeh has observed that Baha’i elections are governed by

formal institutional rules and informal norms that specifically prohibit such

famil-
iar features of the political landscape as nominations, competitive campaigns,
vot-
ing coalitions, or parties. As an alternative model of democratic elections,
Baha'i
elections incorporate three core values at the individual, interpersonal, and institu-
tional levels: (1) the inherent dignity of each person; (2) the unity and
solidarity of
persons collectively; and (3) the intrinsic justice, fairness, and transparency
of
elected Baha'i institutions. Baha'i elections thus serve four
primary functions:
(1) selection (electing representatives); (2) legitimation (authorizing
Baha'i gov-
erning bodies in the eyes of the community at large); (3) education
(cultivating
the spirit of responsibility in each Baha'i voter); and (4) integration
(fostering sol-
idarity within the community as a whole).
National Baha'i conventions are also held during the Festival of
Ridvan for the
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purpose of electing national councils, each of which is called a National
Spiritual
Assembly. An exception to the timing of these conventions occurs once every
five
years, when the Universal House of Justice, the international governing council
of
the Baha'i Faith, is elected during the Festival of Ridvan. The next
is scheduled for
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Ridvan 2013, with national Baha'i elections rescheduled for May.
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The Festival of Ridvan marks the inchoative establishment of the
Baha'i reli-
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gion as a distinct faith-community through Baha'u'llah's disclosure
of his divine
authority. The Festival of Ridvan also marks the progressive advancement of
the
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Baha'i Faith as a distinct administrative order through the process of
electing the
faith-community's governing authorities.
Baha'is believe that in a future Golden Age—in which a self-governing
world

commonwealth emerges as the fruit of social evolution enlightened by Baha'i sociomoral principles—the Festival of Ridvan is destined to become the greatest ?

celebratory event in the world, according to the teleological Baha'i vision of the inevitable course of human history.

Christopher Buck

See also 'Abdu'l-Baha, Ascension of; Ayyam-i-Ha (Baha'i Intercalary Days); Bab, Festival of the Birth of the; Bab, Festival of the Declaration of the; Bab, Martyrdom of the; Baha'i Calendar and Rhythms of Worship; Baha'i Faith; Baha'i Fast; Baha'u'llah, Ascension of; Baha'u'llah, Festival of the Birth of; Covenant, Day of the; Naw-Ruz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Baha'i); Race Unity Day; World Religion Day.
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Rishi Panchami

Rishi Panchami is a Hindu holiday with two related emphases. It is observed on the fifth day after the new moon in the Hindu month of Bhadrapad (August–

September on the Common Era calendar), which is the final day of the primary Teej Festival, known as Hartalika Teej, widely celebrated across northern India and Nepal as a women's festival. It is also a day set aside to show respect of the seven legendary sages known as the Sapta Rishis.

The celebration of Teej is directed to Parvati, the wife of Shiva. She is said to have fasted and practiced various austere practices to win Shiva's affections. Women observe a strict fast dedicated to Shiva on the day of Rishi Panchami. In some regions, the fast is also observed by men. Women begin the day with a special ritual bath and will later in the day visit temples dedicated to

Shiva for an appropriate ritual. The fast is usually broken following the

Rishi Panchami puja (worship).

— Ridvan, Festival of (Used by permission of the curator)

Hindu women take turns pouring water on each other while taking a ritual bath in the Bagmati River during Rishi Panchami in Nepal.

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