

The Ninth Cycle of the Bahá'í Calendar

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COMMENTARY

The ninth cycle of the Bahá'í calendar
Its relationship to the teaching work

By 'Alí Nakhjavání

The letter of the Universal House of Justice dated July 10, 2014, with its attachment about the Bahá'í calendar, was a great surprise to many of the friends in the Bahá'í world. To clarify several technical issues involved and to appreciate the timing and understand the implications of this message, this article is offered to the readership of this eminent journal.

In this epoch-making message that launches a unified Bahá'í calendar, the Universal House of Justice pointed out to us: "The adoption of a new calendar in each dispensation is a symbol of the power of Divine Revelation to reshape human perception of material, social, and spiritual reality. Through it, sacred moments are distinguished, humanity's place in time and space reimagined, and the rhythm of life recast." The same message drew attention to the fact that the launching of the new calendar will further "unite" the Bahá'í world.

Why is the Bahá'í calendar associated with a lunar calendar?

The friends in the West had always known, through books such as *God Passes By* and *The Dawn-Breakers*, that many Bahá'í historical dates were recorded and mentioned based on the lunar calendar of Islam. They had been also aware that a few Bahá'í anniversaries were being observed in some countries in the East in accordance with the lunar calendar, while the rest adhered to the dates of the solar calendar.

To provide for resolving this disparity, the Bahá'í texts stipulated that the Universal House of Justice had to determine the locality in the world that should be used as the Bahá'í meridian and the manner in which the Bahá'í calendar could be adjusted to enable the Birthdays of Bahá'u'lláh and of the Báb to occur on two consecutive days, as indicated in Bahá'í texts attributed to Bahá'u'lláh Himself.

In its letter of July 10, 2014, the Universal House of Justice gave its answers to these two questions. As of Naw-Rúz 2015, the Bahá'í meridian will be the city of Tehran, where the spring equinox will determine the first day of the Bahá'í year. From that year onward the two Birthdays will be internationally observed according to a lunar reckoning within the solar calendar, the dates of which will be announced in good time by the Universal House of Justice.

The Writings and Utterances of Bahá'u'lláh, such as those published in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, clearly stipulate that Tehran was indeed the "mother of the world," "the source of the joy of all mankind," "the

holy and shining city" and "the land of resplendent glory." What other city had been so praised by the Blessed Beauty? It seems Tehran was destined to be the meridian of the future World Order. To an Oriental pilgrim Shoghi Effendi once said that the Prophet Muhammad had called Mecca "the mother of villages," but Bahá'u'lláh had conferred the title "mother of the world" to His native city.

As to the question of the observances of the Twin Birthdays, as indicated in Note 138 of *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (pages 224–225), what Bahá'u'lláh meant by the two birthdays being as one day (in *Questions and Answers* #2) was that they should fall on two consecutive days. This is confirmed in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian. To explain fully this provision in the *Aqdas*, I will quote the following passage from Note 138 mentioned above:

"In the Muslim lunar calendar these [i.e. the anniversaries of the Births of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb] fall on consecutive days, the birth of Bahá'u'lláh on the second day of the month of Muharram 1233 A.H. (12 November 1817), and the birth of the Báb on the first day of the same month 1235 A.H. (20 October 1819), respectively. They are thus referred to as the 'Twin Birthdays' and Bahá'u'lláh states that these two days are accounted as one in the sight of God (Q&A 2)."

Thus, as we can clearly see, the dates of these Twin Festivals, which have a lunar character, will be moving constantly with respect to the solar calendar. The July 10, 2014, message has set their movement to correspond with a fixed number of lunar cycles after Naw-Rúz, so in any given year they will fall in October or November.

The Bahá'í world has enlarged its membership over the years, has become well known to the general public as well as governments of the world, and has openly established branches of its Administrative Order wherever it was legally possible. The Bahá'í International Community has been duly recognized as a nongovernmental organization by the offices of the United Nations.

There is no doubt that the eyes of the world will be watching with keen interest the forthcoming planetary celebrations by the Bahá'ís of the two-hundredth anniversaries of the Births of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, in 2017 and 2019 respectively, and the commemoration in 2021 of the hundredth anniversary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which had signalized the inception of the Formative Age of the Faith. Thanks to the action of the Universal House of Justice, they will not see a Bahá'í world divided between East and West in its calendar dates, but will witness one unified world community, as the Universal House of Justice indicated in its message of July 10, 2014.

Other features of the Bahá'í calendar

It should first be remembered that each Bahá'í day begins at sunset, and not at midnight as it is now commonly reckoned. For the coming year, the Universal House of Justice has fixed important dates—such as those for Nineteen Day Feasts, Bahá'í Holy Days, Ayyám-i-Há and the fasting period—and apprised

all National Spiritual Assemblies of them. These dates will be available from the national Bahá'í offices of every country, and in some countries they have already been shared with the friends.

In an authentic statement published in The Bahá'í World series from Volume IV to Volume XX, titled "Bahá'í Calendar and Festivals," there is an entry in the last section, described as "Additional Material Gleaned from Nabil's Narrative," that is substantial and of great importance. Toward the end of this section it is stated that the Báb divided the years following the date of His Revelation "into cycles of nineteen years each" and had given a name to each year. The ninth cycle began in 1996 and is due to end just before Naw-Rúz in 2015. We are now in 171 B.E., the last year of the ninth cycle.

The training institute: A new institution is born

Ridván 1996 was not only the start of the ninth cycle, it was also the beginning of the Four Year Plan of the Universal House of Justice. The House's message on that occasion called upon every National Spiritual Assembly in the world to consult with the Counselors on their continents, then to establish training institutes in each country to undertake core activities aimed at promoting the teaching and consolidation work. A few years later, in its message of Ridván 2004, the Universal House of Justice stated that this new institution had proved to be an "engine of growth" for the community wherever it was established.

In a letter on behalf of our beloved House, written to an individual believer and dated March 15, 2009, its Secretariat wrote: "'All men,' Bahá'u'lláh asserts, 'have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.' ... The central purpose of the training institute process is to raise up human resources who can contribute to this objective." And we then read, in its Ridván 2010 message, the following: "[T]he Bahá'í world has succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service."

Indeed 1996 proved a turning point in the destinies of our beloved Faith. It is interesting to see how the unity reflected in the worldwide implementation of the Bahá'í calendar corresponds with an unprecedented unity of thought and action that has gradually, over these 19 years, surrounded the emerging framework of the current series of Plans.

Immediately after the decision to establish training institutes, the Universal House of Justice announced in its Ridván 1997 message that another new institution should complement the work of these institutes. This marked the creation of Regional Bahá'í Councils, to function under the supervision of each National Assembly and become an added link to support the activities of Local Spiritual Assemblies. The ninth cycle was steadily evolving and rapidly unfolding.

It was clear that in addition to establishment of training institutes and Regional Councils, other detailed measures had to be initiated to systematize

the work of these two pivotal new institutions. Gradually and patiently the Universal House of Justice had to formulate new courses of action.

Among the most important was the need for each National Assembly, in consultation with the Counselors, to divide its country or territory into workable and sensible clusters, taking into consideration means of communication in use in each cluster.

Further steps were clearly necessary. Thus guidelines were provided for initiating core activities, forming study circles, holding devotional meetings, undertaking home visits as seemed appropriate, organizing children's and junior youth activities with the energetic and vital support of Bahá'í youth, conducting reflection meetings to evaluate progress with the welcome participation of interested seekers and inquirers, planning the expansion and consolidation work in cycles of activity, and establishing regular programs of growth to sustain the developments accomplished.

A survey of activities such as those described above will amply demonstrate that since the inception of the ninth cycle in the Bahá'í calendar, the majority of communities throughout the Bahá'í world have developed a new culture of free and open association with the general public and the social environment around them, and that they are for the most part—especially among the precious Bahá'í youth—vigilant, alert, wide awake, and determined to push forward in their efforts to carry out enthusiastically and in their varied aspects the wishes and hopes of the Supreme Body.

We are moving forward deliberately

Progress on major projects calls for processes, and by its very nature has to be gradual. We see how the development of the gardens in Bahjí, in the Haram-i-Aqdas and in the other three quadrants of the large wheel of gardens that surround the Most Great Shrine, has been a gradual process.

Similarly we see how the construction of the Shrine of the Báb, with its golden dome and the beautiful terraces that adorn it, has also been a process extending over several decades.

It is quite evident that our increasing discourse with the society around us, on the one hand, and the significant publicity we have received through the surge in the oppression and persecution of the Bahá'í community in the land of its birth, on the other, have given rise to a great eager interest on the part of the peoples, governments and media of the world to be informed of our status, our activities and our plans worldwide.

It would be appropriate to seize this opportunity to look at the standing and position of the Bahá'í community in the world today:

- Three National Assemblies have been re-formed in recent years in the Muslim world: those of Egypt, Indonesia and Iraq.
- More than 5 million Bahá'ís reside in virtually every country and territory around the world, in well over 100,000 localities.

- There are 182 National Spiritual Assemblies operating around the world. Over 40 percent of the membership of these national councils are women.
- National Spiritual Assemblies in countries with extended areas of jurisdiction have all established Regional Bahá'í Councils.
- The number of Continental Counselors has reached 81, with 990 Auxiliary Board members serving under them.
- The number of countries where Bahá'í marriage certificates are recognized has reached 60.
- Bahá'í literature is available in 802 languages.
- Over 27,000 classes for the spiritual and moral education of children and junior youth, open to children of Bahá'ís and those belonging to other denominations or groups, are conducted by Bahá'í communities on a regular basis.
- More than 600 Bahá'í elementary schools, mostly in rural areas where formal schools do not exist, are operating throughout the world.
- Seven continental Bahá'í Houses of Worship have been established in virtually all the continents of the globe—all open for prayers and readings for the spiritual upliftment of Bahá'ís and interested friends. The eighth and last continental Temple is being built in Santiago, Chile.
- Plans for the construction of two national and five local Bahá'í Houses of Worship have been set in motion.
- Countless devotional gatherings all over the world are held regularly in Bahá'í centers and in Bahá'í homes. These are open to the believers and to the public as well.
- In all such meetings, whether in Bahá'í Temples or in informal devotional gatherings, Bahá'í prayers and readings are offered as well as appropriate extracts of scriptures of other revealed religions.

Most of the above data were kindly shared with me by the Statistics Department of the Bahá'í World Center.

The role of the individual believer in the community

The progress of the Bahá'í world as noted above was achieved through the systematic prosecution of a series of Plans initiated by Shoghi Effendi, the stages of the Divine Plan authored by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. These Plans, which unite the entire Bahá'í world in a common vision and mission, are now set forth and directed by the Universal House of Justice.

As we carry these Plans out, individual effort and community activities reinforce and complement each other. They never cancel each other out. They are like two rails of a train track that need and supplement each other. In one letter, written in English and dated July 28, 1954, Shoghi Effendi gives us three analogies to enable us to comprehend the efforts of the individual believer in the community. He likens the individual believers to "the warp and woof" that determine the quality of the "whole fabric" and to the "countless links" of the "mighty chain" of God's Holy Cause, and each one of the friends to "one of the multitude of bricks" that support the structure of His Faith.

In another letter, written in Persian and dated Naw-Rúz of 111 B.E. (i.e. in 1954), Shoghi Effendi likens the individual isolated believer to a point, a group of fewer than nine to a letter of the alphabet, a Local Spiritual Assembly to a word, a National Spiritual Assembly to a sentence, and the Universal House of Justice to a Book. What an inspiring concept this is, indicating that although each one of us is just a point, yet this point is not only associated with, but is part of, one of the pages of His glorious Book!

In one of His Tablets Bahá'u'lláh praises the believer who considers himself or herself to be the sole and only believer in His Cause. In other words, He is calling on each of us to consider oneself to be a Mullá Husayn.

Shouldn't we, then, each endeavor prayerfully and persistently to become an instrument in the hands of our Lord's heavenly Faith?

The teaching work: the dominating passion of our lives

We need to read and meditate on the implications of the passages reproduced below, extracted from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and statements of the Master, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice on this theme:

"Consort with all men, O people of Bahá, in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship." —Gleanings, section 132

"Be unrestrained as the wind while carrying the Message of Him Who hath caused the Dawn of Divine Guidance to break." —Gleanings, section 161

"Teach ye the Cause of God, O people of Bahá, for God hath prescribed unto every one the duty of proclaiming His Message, and regardeth it as the most meritorious of all deeds." —Gleanings, section 128

"To assist Me is to teach My Cause." —Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, page 196

"Verily, God hath made it incumbent upon every soul to deliver His Cause according to his ability." —Bahá'í World Faith, page 206

Let us hearken to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's celestial voice on this subject:

"When the friends do not endeavour to spread the message, they ... will not witness the tokens of assistance ... nor comprehend the divine mysteries." —Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, section 211

"In this Day every believer must concentrate his thoughts on teaching the Faith. ... O loved ones of God! Each one of the friends must teach at least one soul every year. This is everlasting glory! This is eternal grace." —from "The Individual and Teaching," section 30, in Compilation of Compilations, Vol. 2

"Each one of the friends must teach at least one soul every year." —'Abdu'l-Bahá

"Teach ye the Cause of God, O people of Bahá, for God hath prescribed unto every one the duty of proclaiming His Message, and regardeth it as the most

meritorious of all deeds." — Bahá'u'lláh

Shoghi Effendi invites us to listen to his ringing voice:

"... let us arise to teach His Cause with righteousness, conviction, understanding and vigour. Let this be the paramount and most urgent duty of every Bahá'í. Let us make it the dominating passion of our life." —from a letter dated Nov. 24, 1924, by Shoghi Effendi, in Bahá'í Administration

"All must participate, however humble their origin, however limited their experience, however restricted their means, however deficient their education, however pressing their cares and pre-occupations, however unfavourable the environment in which they live." —The Advent of Divine Justice, 2006 ed., para. 66

"Let him ... attempt to devise such methods as association with clubs ... and societies [interested in] subjects akin to the teachings and ideals of his Cause. ..." —The Advent of Divine Justice, 2006 ed., para. 78

"Never must they let a day pass without teaching some soul, trusting to Bahá'u'lláh that the seed will grow." —from a letter dated May 30, 1956, on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Compilation of Compilations, Vol. 2

"The successful carrying out of our various plans is the greatest sign we can give of our faith and inner assurance, and the best way we can help our fellow-men out of their confusion and difficulties." —from a letter dated April 9, 1949, on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Unfolding Destiny

"[You must] ... make a special point of praying ardently not only for success in general, but that God may send to you the souls that are ready. There are such souls in every city." —from a letter dated March 18, 1950, on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Compilation of Compilations, Vol. 2

"The friends must realize their individual responsibility. Each must hold a Fireside in his or her home, where new people are invited, and where some phase of the Faith is mentioned and discussed. If this is done with the intent of showing Bahá'í hospitality and love, then there will be results." —from a letter dated March 6, 1957, on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Lights of Guidance

And the Universal House of Justice lends its unerring guidance:

"It is the individual who manifests the vitality of faith upon which the success of the teaching work and the development of the community depend. Bahá'u'lláh's command to each believer to teach His Faith confers an inescapable responsibility which cannot be transferred to, or assumed by, any institution of the Cause." —Ridván 1996 message

"Most noteworthy in this regard is the spirit of initiative shown by believers who extend the range of their endeavors to assist others also striving to tread a path of service." —Ridván 2005 message

"What all must acknowledge, irrespective of circumstance, are both the crying need of a humanity that, bereft of spiritual sustenance, is sinking deeper into

despair and the urgency of the responsibility to teach with which we each have been entrusted as members of the community of the Greatest Name." —Ridván 2007 message

"Now, therefore, it is our sacred duty to make the utmost use of our freedom, wherever it exists, to promote the Cause of God while we may. The surest way to do this and to win the good-pleasure of Bahá'u'lláh is to pursue, with dedication and unrelenting vigor, the goals of whatever Plan is in force, for Bahá'u'lláh has stated 'To assist Me is to teach My Cause.'" —from a letter dated Naw-Rúz 1980 by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World

"... we have observed [a rise] in the capacity of the friends to converse with others on spiritual matters and to speak with ease about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation. They have understood well that teaching is a basic requirement of a life of generous giving." —Ridván 2010 message

"The successful carrying out of our various plans is the greatest sign we can give of our faith and inner assurance, and the best way we can help our fellow-men out of their confusion and difficulties." — Shoghi Effendi

"It is the individual who manifests the vitality of faith upon which the success of the teaching work and the development of the community depend. Bahá'u'lláh's command to each believer to teach His Faith confers an inescapable responsibility which cannot be transferred to, or assumed by, any institution of the Cause." — Universal House of Justice

May the strengthening grace of the Blessed Beauty reinforce the work of the institutions of the Faith in the United States and abundantly sustain the noble efforts of the precious members of this distinguished community, which has been singled out for unique victories to be won under the shadow of His Most Great Name.

'Alí Nakhjavání, now a resident of France, served for 40 years as a member of the Universal House of Justice.

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