

gatherings. For these Western Bahá'ís, 'Abd-al-Bahá linked the Nineteen Day Feast with the Lord's Supper ('Abd-al-Bahá, p. 149; II, p. 421), interpreting the Qur'anic reference to a banquet (ma'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 Bahá'ís from gathering in large numbers, at least in the early part of 'Abd-al-Bahá's ministry, and so 'Abd-al-Bahá continued Bahá'-Allah's instructions that the meetings of the Bahá'ís 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 (Fazel 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 Bahá'í month; that in order to facilitate freedom of discussion during the administrative portion of the feast, only enrolled Bahá'ís may attend; that only scripture (mainly Bahá'í but also from the Qur'an and the Bible if desired) should be read in the devotional part, but messages from the Bahá'í 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 ruhani) 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 Bahá'ís may nevertheless hold feasts.

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Bayt-al-'adl-e a'zam), the present world leadership of the Bahá'í 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 Bahá'ís can participate; and its role as the main way in which the local Bahá'í administrative institutions (local spiritual assemblies, mahfel-e ruhani) can keep close contact with their communities. Indeed, the feast should form a "dynamic link" between the individual Bahá'ís and the administrative structure of the Bahá'í community. It gives the administrative institutions an opportunity to communicate their plans to the community and, in the process of consultation, for the individual Bahá'ís 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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