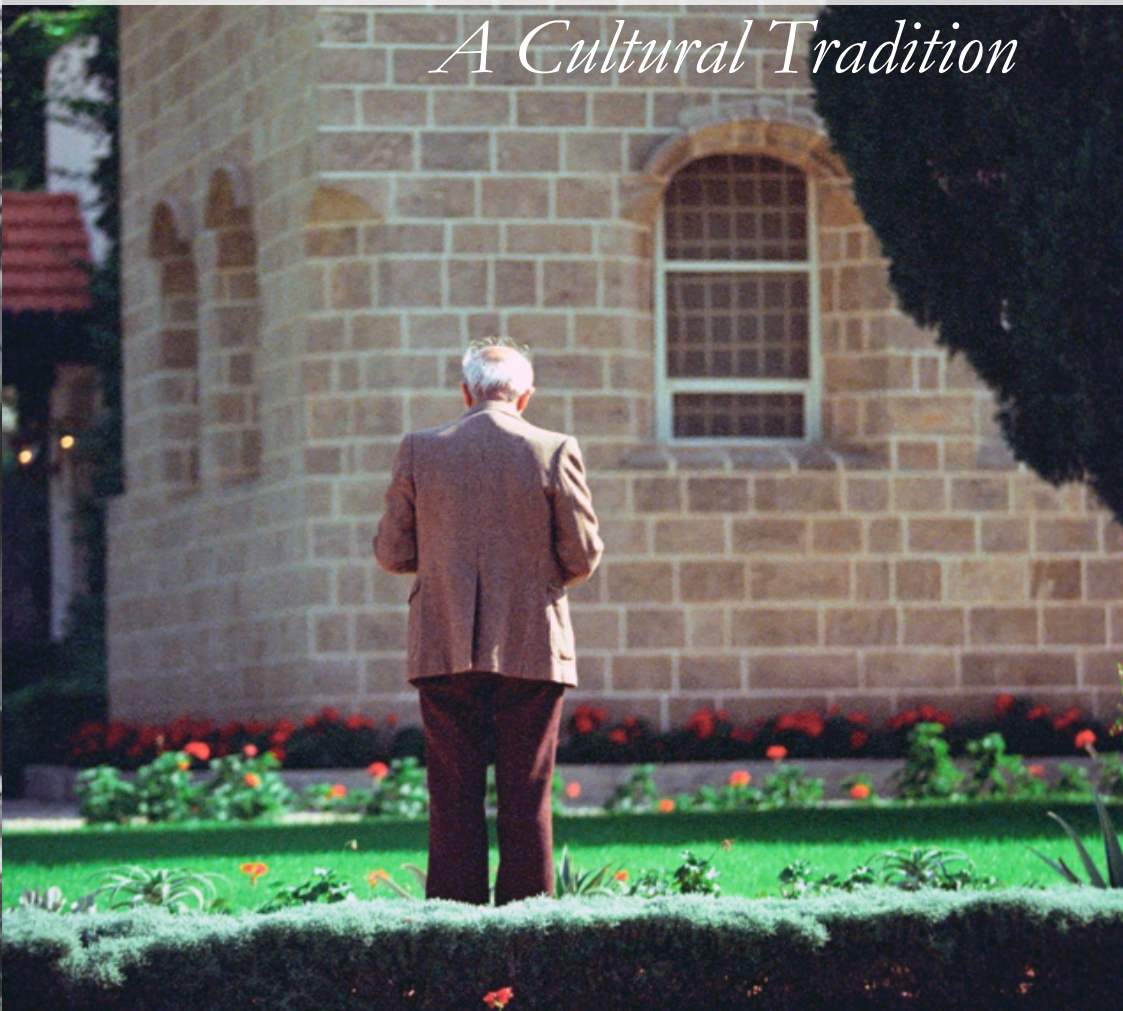




Bahá'í Pilgrimage



A Cultural Tradition



Pilgrims climbing the stairs in the courtyard of the House of 'Abdu'lláh Páshá



A pilgrim praying in the gardens

Introduction

Pilgrimage, the journey to and visitation of a sacred place, is a practice found in most of the world's religions. Beyond the physical journey, which may resemble, in its outward forms, certain kinds of tourism, pilgrimage is essentially a spiritual experience. In its highest form, it is an experience of profound significance, which may fulfill the longings of a lifetime or mark a major turning-point in the life of an individual or a family.

For Bahá'ís, the reverence toward and aspiration to visit the Bahá'í Holy Places in Haifa and the Western Galilee is comparable to the feelings of Christians with regard to Nazareth and Bethlehem, Jews for Jerusalem, Buddhists for the Gangetic plains of Northern India, and Muslims toward Mecca. Likewise, the practice of pilgrimage to these places has evolved and developed over nearly 140 years, acquiring the character of a distinct cultural tradition, as in other religions.

The Obligation to Perform the Pilgrimage

For Bahá'ís, making a pilgrimage represents the fulfillment of a religious duty prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of their faith, in His book of laws, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. This duty is to be performed once in a lifetime by all believers who are financially able to make the journey, but the timing is left to the individual.

The Evolution of Bahá'í Pilgrimage Over Time

While Bahá'u'lláh was alive, pilgrims came to the Acre area from Iran and other countries of the Middle East with the purpose of attaining His presence. From the period of Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment in the Acre Citadel, there are accounts of pilgrims who, after traveling on foot from Iran, were obliged to return home in the same way,



'Abdu'l-Bahá traveling with pilgrims from Haifa to Acre along the beach (1921)

without even being allowed to enter the walled city, contenting themselves with a glimpse of His hand as He waved to them from a window of the citadel. The more fortunate ones had the experience of being in the presence of Bahá'u'lláh, and some received the special gift of having prayers and

writings revealed in their honor. These encounters, which nearly always took place at one of the sites included in the nomination, left an indelible mark upon the pilgrims, becoming a memory treasured by their descendents to the present day. It was during this time that the pilgrims began the practice of circumambulation, which involved walking around the abode of Bahá'u'lláh as a symbolic gesture of love and reverence.

It was customary for pilgrims at that time to seek permission before embarking on pilgrimage, although some apparently did not wait for a response. A typical pilgrim would arrive in Acre and be welcomed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who would make arrangements for his or her lodging and prepare them for the experience of meeting the object of their journey, Bahá'u'lláh Himself. The pilgrims generally stayed until Bahá'u'lláh gave them leave to depart, and as a result, the duration of the pilgrimage varied from a few days to several months.



'Abdu'l-Bahá with pilgrims from the East and West in front of His home in Haifa (1920)

Following the passing of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892, the focal point of the pilgrimage experience was His Shrine in Bahjí. After the interment of the remains of the Báb on Mount Carmel in 1909, the focus was enlarged to include His Shrine. Visitation to these two shrines included the practice of circumambulation, the removal of footwear upon



*Left: 'Abdu'l-Bahá walking towards the Old Western Pilgrim House (1921)
Right: Several pilgrims standing on the porch of the same building*

entry, and the recitation of a particular text from the scriptures entitled the "Tablet of Visitation". The pilgrims were received by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who met with them personally on a daily basis, rejoicing their hearts with affectionate words of advice and encouragement, answering their questions and illuminating their understanding with his explanations of the teachings of the Faith.

Starting in 1898, pilgrims began arriving from Western Europe and North America, usually by steamship. Many of them have left published accounts of their experience including the hospitality offered to them by 'Abdu'l-Bahá at the House of 'Abdu'lláh Páshá in Acre or one of the houses of the Persian Quarter in Haifa. During the latter part of this period, the pilgrims from Iran and other Middle Eastern countries were lodged in the pilgrim house next to the Shrine of the Báb. 'Abdu'l-Bahá usually met with the eastern and western pilgrims separately, and the men and women had different programs out of deference for local customs. As



Pilgrims in front of the Pilgrim House in Haifa

in the time of Bahá'u'lláh, pilgrims sought the permission of the head of the faith before arriving or leaving, resulting in stays of variable duration.

Like his grandfather and great grandfather before him, Shoghi Effendi followed the practice of personal meetings with the pilgrims. When accompanying the pilgrims on their visits to the Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, he would invariably recite the “Tablet of Visitation”, which was also used by the pilgrims themselves when visiting the Shrines alone or in groups. By now the practice of group circumambulation of the two shrines had become a well established tradition and an integral part of the observance of Holy Days by local believers and pilgrims alike. Shoghi Effendi instituted visits to the archives, during which the pilgrims were shown portraits of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, original manuscripts of the scriptures, sacred relics and other historical artifacts, as well as trips to Acre to visit the Citadel, the House of ‘Abbúd, the Ridván Garden, and other sites.

In 1929, Shoghi Effendi completed the construction of the building at 10 Haparsim Street, which was designed as a hostel for western pilgrims, and adopted the custom of taking the evening meal with them in the dining room on the lower level. He usually met with the eastern pilgrims in the pilgrim house next to the Shrine of the Báb. These gatherings offered the pilgrims the opportunity

to converse with the head of their faith, ask clarifications of the teachings, and understand his vision of the needs of the community in the current stage of its development. Shoghi Effendi continued to approve all requests by the believers to make the pilgrimage, but in 1951, he announced that the duration of pilgrimage would henceforth be fixed at nine days.

Pilgrimage continued without interruption after the passing of Shoghi Effendi in 1957, through the interregnum and under the Universal House of Justice when it was first elected in 1963, with most of the traditional elements described above. In the early days, the members of the Universal House of Justice shared meals with the pilgrims and took turns accompanying them to the shrines and reciting the “Tablet of Visitation”, as Shoghi Effendi had done. The growth of the community, however, made it necessary to accommodate ever increasing numbers, which, in turn, dictated significant organizational changes. In 1969, the Universal House of Justice asked all pilgrims to arrange their own accommodations in local hotels, abolishing the distinctions between eastern and western believers. A system was instituted for processing requests



Pilgrims entering the Shrine of the Báb (left) and circumambulating the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh (right)



Pilgrim praying outside the Shrine of the Báb

and scheduling group pilgrimages. The shared evening meals were replaced by an afternoon tea during which the pilgrims could mingle with the members of the Universal House of Justice, who now took turns giving evening talks to the pilgrims. Members of the International Teaching Centre assumed the responsibility of accompanying the pilgrims and reciting the “Tablet of Visitation” during their initial visit to the Shrine of the Báb, which now involves a group circumambulation, since the space inside is insufficient to accommodate an entire group.

Current Practice

The annual number of pilgrims visiting the Bahá'í Holy Places in Haifa and the Western Galilee has grown from a few score to over five thousand, with groups of up to 400 coming at once. The central focus continues to be the visits to the Shines of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb and meetings with the elected leadership of the faith. The standard nine-day program also includes visits to virtually all the sites included in the nomination, which are conducted by special pilgrim guides chosen from among the volunteer staff of the Bahá'í World Centre. As they visit these sites, today's pilgrims

understand that they are continuing a long-standing tradition, walking in the footsteps of earlier generations while eagerly learning about the historical events that shaped the community, its culture and its identity, and drawing closer to the spirit of its founding figures.

Conclusion

The practice of pilgrimage to the Bahá'í Holy Places in Haifa and the Western Galilee is an integral part of the belief system and community life of Bahá'ís, and it has acquired a traditional character that is comparable to that of pilgrimage in other religions. Circumambulation, removal of footwear and the recitation of the specially designated “Tablet of Visitation” in connection with visits to the Shines of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, and the receipt of guidance and spiritual nourishment through direct meetings with the leadership of the community are among the traditional practices that have characterized Bahá'í pilgrimage throughout the years and provide a sense of continuity that will project into the future.



The Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh

Sample Pilgrimage Program

DAY 1 <i>Monday</i>	Morning:	Orientation in the auditorium of the International Teaching Centre Building	DAY 5 <i>Friday</i>	Morning:	Visit to the Mansion of Mazra'ih and the Mansion of Bahá'u'lláh at Bahjí
	Afternoon:	Circumambulation and visit to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh in Bahjí		Evening:	Presentation by a member of the International Teaching Centre
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DAY 2 <i>Tuesday</i>	Morning:	Circumambulation and visit to the Shrines of the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá	DAY 6 <i>Saturday</i>	Day reserved for individual visits*	
	Afternoon:	Reception by the Universal House of Justice			
	Evening:	Presentation by a member of the House of Justice	DAY 7 <i>Sunday</i>	Morning:	Visit to the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, the International Teaching Centre and the Centre for the Study of the Texts
				Evening:	Presentation by a member of the International Teaching Centre
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DAY 3 <i>Wednesday</i>	Morning:	Prayers at the Shrine of the Báb			
	Afternoon:	Visit to the International Archives Building			
	Evening:	Meeting with the International Teaching Centre			
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DAY 4 <i>Thursday</i>	Morning:	Visit to the Prison and the House of 'Abbúd	DAY 8 <i>Monday</i>	Morning:	Visit to the House of 'Abdu'lláh Páshá
	Afternoon:	Visit to Ridván Garden		Evening:	Presentation by a member of the House of Justice
	Evening:	Visit to Bahjí			
			DAY 9 <i>Tuesday</i>	Morning:	Visit to the Residence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Old Western Pilgrim House
				Evening:	Pilgrim Farewell

**Sites visited by pilgrims individually: Place of Revelation of the "Tablet of Carmel"; Tent Land; Haifa Bahá'í Cemetery; Monument Gardens; Resting Place of Amatu'l-Baha Ruhiyyih Khanum. Junayn Garden is currently not visited pending completion of the landscaping.*