

Preparations for Bahá'í Funerals and Burials: Some practical notes

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Just as the Bahá'í teachings address how a Bahá'í is to live his or her life, so do they address how we approach death and the preparations for a Bahá'í funeral and burial. Bahá'u'lláh has encouraged us to regard death as a “*Messenger of Joy*,” for the deceased one, regardless of our own pain at the loss of a loved one. His Laws regarding funeral and burial have the purpose of comforting the living as well as ensuring the continued blessings of God upon the soul newly born into the next life.

On the Obligation to Prepare a Will

In His Book of Law, Bahá'u'lláh says that it is “*incumbent upon everyone*” to write a will. He even indicates some of its contents: it should be headed with the Greatest Name (Bahá'u'lláh, Allah'u'Abha or Yá Bahá'u'l- Abhá' are all various forms of the Greatest Name); it should mention the believer's belief in the oneness of God as manifested by Bahá'u'lláh and set forth any good deeds which the deceased wishes to have performed in his or her name. Such good deeds will have an impact upon the soul in the next world and may even, says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, “*be the cause of his pardon and forgiveness, and of his progress in the Divine Kingdom.*” Therefore, a Bahá'í may choose to perform such acts through the instrument of his will. He may also choose to honor Bahá'u'lláh's own provisions, outlined in the Kitáb-i- Aqdas, for the distribution of his estate, including, for example, remembering his teacher(s), or distributing his unpaid portion of the Huqúqu'lláh. It would be wise also to indicate in one's will one's wish to be buried according to the Bahá'í laws of burial, which are unfamiliar to many. This can be spelled out in the will in detail, or a reference can be made to a publication such as this one, which is then kept in a safe place along with the Will. There is no prohibition against donating one's body, or some organs, for scientific purposes, should one wish to do so, though one might wish to ensure that these be treated with respect and that the provision be observed that the remains not be buried more than one hour's journey from the place of death and that there be no cremation. A legal Will and Testament requires the appointment of an Executor. This Executor should not be the National or Local Spiritual Assembly, as the responsibilities of an Executor can be time-consuming and are better left to a responsible individual.

Location of Burial Place and Timing of Burial

In Bahá'í Law, the deceased is to be buried no more than one hour's journey from the place of death. The journey to the burial place should be timed at an hour, regardless of the means of transport, and may be calculated from the city limits. The length of time between death and the burial is unspecified in the Bahá'í writings, though Bahá'u'lláh's says that “*the sooner the burial taketh place, the more fitting and preferable.*” We gain some idea of the context of this statement in Shoghi Effendi's explanation that in the Orient the practice is to bury the person within 24 hours of the time of death.

Should the Bahá'í community own a Bahá'í cemetery, this would of course be an ideal location for the burial. If no Bahá'í cemetery is available, the deceased may be buried in any cemetery. The position of the body in the grave should be with its feet pointing toward the Qiblih, or toward Akka and Bahá'u'lláh's Own Resting-Place. It is common in most cemeteries in the United States for this¹ provision to be observed, as it is an element of Christian belief regarding the Day of Judgement.

The emblem used on Bahá'í gravestones to indicate that the deceased was a believer is a nine-pointed

1 To be precise, in Western cemeteries, the bodies are placed facing East, not Southeast or whatever direction would be most accurate for Qiblih.

star with the word “Bahá'í” enclosed. In the United States, most commercial enterprises which make gravestones are familiar with this emblem. The Greatest Name should not be used, either in its calligraphic form nor in the ringstone symbol, upon a grave.

Preparation for Burial

Bahá'ís are not to be embalmed or cremated, unless required by law, as our teachings require both that the body be treated with great respect and that it be allowed to decompose naturally, with no means used to hasten its decomposition. After death, the body is to be washed carefully and wrapped in a shroud. Should a Bahá'í pass away in a Western hospital, the body will probably already have been washed, as this is the custom before transport to a funeral home. It is also not unfamiliar to funeral homes to honor this provision, inasmuch as the washing and wrapping of the body is also observed by those of the Jewish faith. Therefore, a funeral home may provide a location for someone to perform this service, or they may be commissioned to do it. In the Holy Family, the responsibility of washing the body was given to an intimate of the deceased and was considered a great honor, and some Bahá'í families retain this custom. Therefore, some Bahá'í communities do not require a funeral home's services, having arranged to provide these services themselves. Though it is not specified in the Bahá'í law, it has been the custom among the Bahá'ís of Iran to perfume the body as well, with attar of rose or another perfume. Subsequently, the body should be wrapped in white cloth, preferably silk, though cotton is also mentioned.

If one is unfamiliar with this method of preparing the body, as is true in the West where the deceased is often buried in their own clothing, the following notes may be helpful: The shroud is a piece of cloth approximately seven yards or meters in length, when used for a person of normal height and weight. It can be wrapped around the body in one piece, though this is more difficult than to cut it into four one yard or meter pieces, with one each used for the feet and legs, trunk, shoulders, and head, with the longer three foot piece wrapped the length of the body to hold the other pieces in place. It is not necessary to cover the face, but the shroud may be wrapped over the top of the head, as with a shawl.

The deceased, if he or she is fifteen years of age, should also be buried wearing a Bahá'í burial ring, customarily placed upon the forefinger. This ring, which is very simple in nature, bears the inscription in Arabic, “*I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Merciful, the Compassionate.*” Spiritual Assemblies may choose to keep a supply of burial rings, obtainable from the Bahá'í Distribution Service, available locally for this purpose.

The coffin used to bury the deceased should be made, in the words of the Aqdas, “of crystal, stone, or hard fine wood.” Therefore, coffins made of metal or soft wood should not be used.

These latter four observances: of the burial ring, the shroud, the nature of the coffin, and the direction in which the deceased faces; these observances are Bahá'í law binding upon believers from Iran and other Middle Eastern countries but not obligatory at present for Bahá'ís from the West. However, some Western believers may wish to observe Bahá'í funeral practices associated with the East, inasmuch as they were observed by the family of Bahá'u'lláh Himself.

The Funeral Service

According to Bahá'í law, there is just one ceremonial requirement at a Bahá'í funeral, and that is the recitation of the Prayer for the Dead (No. CLXVII in *Prayers and Meditations of Bahá'u'lláh*) for any believer over the age of maturity (age 15). This prayer should be recited by one believer only, at the graveside, with all those present standing. It is not necessary to face the Qiblih when it is recited. Other prayers may be chosen as well, and the service should be very simple and dignified. All of the arrangements for the service and the burial is left to the family of the deceased and no fixed form for funeral services should be adopted or imposed upon the friends.

In the Prayer for the Dead, there is a specific provision that allows the changing of the gender in the recitation of the prayer, specifying, for example, that the deceased was “*Thy handmaiden and the daughter of Thy handmaiden*” instead of “*Thy servant and the son of Thy servant.*” Other prayers may

as well be read; any of the prayers which were originally revealed for a man or woman can be said for the opposite sex, but the text should not be changed with regard to gender in their reading. In one of His talks, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has indicated that the term “man” refers to all humankind and not just to men.

Bahá'ís may also hold future memorial gatherings for the deceased should they wish to do so. There are general guidelines in the teachings encouraging the believers to distinguish the Bahá'í services from the customary gatherings of believers in other faiths. Therefore, the observance of a Bahá'í funeral presents a wonderful opportunity for teaching the faith to those who wish to respect the deceased with their presence at the service. The Bahá'í service is a dignified yet joyful event, honoring the promotion of a soul to its next realm of existence, and as such can educate others and bring comfort to their hearts.

Prayer and Philanthropic Deeds

Since “The Master has told us that gifts and good deeds done in memory of those who have passed on, are most helpful to the development of their souls in the realms beyond....,” it would follow that, should we wish to continue to honor the deceased, we might consider how to do good deeds in their name. It is also a special gift to children that they might through prayer seek pardon and forgiveness for the shortcomings of their parents. In fact, in one of His tablets, Bahá'u'lláh encourages any soul who wishes God's forgiveness for himself, to pray also for the forgiveness of his parents.

Bahá'í Cemeteries

Some Bahá'í communities may choose to plan for the establishment of a Bahá'í cemetery. To do so is to considerably reduce the expense of preparations for burial to the family of the deceased. At this time [1994], one can easily spend upwards of \$6000 on a simple funeral and burial for the deceased. A Bahá'í cemetery is not very difficult to obtain. It requires the purchase of a piece of land for this purpose, the approval of local authorities with regard to its location, and the setting aside of a number of acres of land for the graves. The graves may be dug in advance of the need for their use, lined with a cement liner, topped with a cement slab which prevents the formation of a depression in the earth, and then topped with turf, marked for future use. It may be possible for a Bahá'í community to make arrangements with a funeral home or a commercial supplier of caskets to obtain these at a discount related to the volume of the purchase.

In a letter to the Bahá'ís of Brazil, the Universal House of Justice makes the following observations regarding Bahá'í cemeteries: “*At the present time there are no definite regulations for preparing Bahá'í cemeteries. However, in a Tablet of the Master's He emphasizes the need for the cemetery to have a beautiful outward appearance and states that the graves should not be joined together but that each one should have a flower bed around its four sides. He also indicates that it would be pleasing if a pool were located in the center of the cemetery and beautiful trees were planted around it as well as around the cemetery itself.*” Should a Bahá'í community commit to obtain a cemetery, it should of course also be prepared to maintain it with the appropriate care and concern for its beauty.

Summary

The greatest gift a human being can make to God is a life lived in the knowledge and the worship of God. In fact, one's life is the most creative endeavor one undertakes. When a soul who has lived an exemplary life departs from this plane of existence, his or her passing becomes an instrument of education to other souls. The manner in which one plans for the distribution of one's belongings, the manner in which one's funeral and burial reflect one's commitment to God, the beauty with which one's grave is maintained; all of these become a further reflection of the nobility of a life well lived.