

The Greatest Holy Leaf's Unparalleled Role in Religious History and the Significance of the Arc, the Site of Her Resting Place

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The year 2013 marks the hundredth anniversary of `Abdu'l-Bahá's return to the Holy Land from His historic trip to Egypt and the West. He left Haifa for Egypt in September 1910 and returned there three years later. The person "invested ... with the responsibility" to attend "to the multitudinous details arising out of His protracted absence from the Holy Land" (*Bahíyyih Khánum, the Greatest Holy Leaf* [henceforth, "BK"], p. 39) was His honoured sister, Bahá'íyyih Khánum,¹ the Greatest Holy Leaf. In the words of Shoghi Effendi: "At the time of His [*Abdu'l-Bahá's*] absence in the western world, she was His competent deputy, His representative and vicegerent, with none to equal her" (BK 28).

The centenary of `Abdu'l-Bahá's return to the Holy Land after His protracted absence coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Universal House of Justice. As we gather to celebrate these landmarks, we take time to ponder upon the life of a most remarkable woman in the history of religion, focus attention on the outstanding services she rendered and on the significance of the site Shoghi Effendi chose for her burial place. It was his choice of a specific spot on Mount Carmel that determined the location of the Arc, around which are built the institutions of the world administrative

centre of the Faith, the Seat of the Universal House of Justice occupying its centre top.

The Greatest Holy Leaf

Born in Tihran to Bahá'u'lláh and Ásíyih Khánum in 1846, she was named Fatimih at birth. She was later called Bahá'íyyih. In a Tablet revealed in her honour, Bahá'u'lláh confirms that she appeared in His name. *“Verily she is a leaf that hath sprung from this preexistent Root. She hath revealed herself in My name and tasted of the sweet savours of My holy, My wondrous pleasure”* (BK p. v). The full text of Bahá'u'lláh's original Arabic of the above is inscribed around the circular dome of the Greatest Holy Leaf's monument on Mount Carmel (*Ibid*).

Varaqiy-i-'Ulya is the original Arabic title Bahá'u'lláh bestowed on Bahá'íyyih Khánum's mother. After Ásíyih Khánum passed away, He bestowed the title on their daughter, Bahá'íyyih Khánum. To avoid confusion, Shoghi Effendi translated the title as the Most Exalted Leaf for Ásíyih Khánum, and the Greatest Holy Leaf for Bahá'íyyih Khánum.

During Bahá'u'lláh's Ministry

Bahá'íyyih Khánum's life of service began at the age of six, when Bahá'u'lláh was imprisoned in the Siyah Chal in late 1852. At that time His House in Tihran was plundered. His wife, Ásíyih Khánum with her three children took refuge in two rented rooms in an obscure corner of the city. To obtain news of Bahá'u'lláh and His condition, she was forced to leave early in the morning and return after dark. Her son, `Abbas, who later adopted `Abdu'l-Bahá as His title, then eight years old, would accompany His mother. The six-year old Bahá'íyyih Khánum would stay behind together with her two-year old brother, Mírzá Mihdi, later titled the Purest Branch. This is how she describes those frightful days:

How well I remember cowering in the dark, with my little brother, Mírzá Mihdi, the Purest Branch, at that time two years old, in my arms, which were not very strong, as I was only six. I was shivering with terror, for I knew of some of the horrible things that were happening, and was aware that they might have seized even my mother. (*The Chosen Highway*, pp. 42-3)

Referring to this episode, Shoghi Effendi says:

As far back as the concluding stage of the heroic age of the Cause, which witnessed the imprisonment of Bahá'u'lláh in the Siyah-Chal of Tihiran, the Greatest Holy Leaf, then still in her infancy, was privileged to taste of the cup of woe which the first believers of that Apostolic Age had quaffed. (BK 3-4)

After four months imprisonment in the Siyah Chal (Black Pit), Bahá'u'lláh was released on condition that He leave His homeland. Bahá'íyyih Khánum was among the members of the family who accompanied Him. She had to part with the beloved brother whom she had carried in her delicate arms during Bahá'u'lláh's four-month imprisonment and to whom she was so attached. She also left her extended family and the country she so loved, never to see it again.

During a ten-year sojourn in Baghdad, "she grew into a beautiful girl, very much like her lovely mother in grace of body and character, a gentle, slender maiden with large grey-blue eyes, golden-brown hair, and warm, ivory-colored skin. Her sense of humour was keen and her intelligence remarkable." (*Chosen Highway* 69)

Lady Blomfield who interviewed Bahá'íyyih Khánum writes about her decision to remain unmarried and the reason behind it: "As she grew up, she implored her father to allow her to remain unmarried, that she might the better devote herself to her three dearly loved ones.² And so it was." Lady Blomfield

then recounts what she had heard from an old man, a friend of Bahá'u'lláh, Who had once said to him: "*I know no man worthy to marry such purity as my daughter.*" In response to her question, "*Khánúm must have been very lovely?*" The man had said: "I have been told so; naturally, I never saw her." (*Chosen Highway* 69)

The human perfections that Bahá'íyyih Khánúm exemplified, the heavenly attributes that she embodied, the laudable services that she rendered during the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh and her tremendous capacity for selfless service throughout her life won her from the Supreme Pen the appellation of the Most Distinguished Heroine of the Bahá'í dispensation:

Verily, we have elevated thee to the rank of one of the most distinguished among thy sex and granted thee, in My court, a station such as none other woman hath surpassed. Thus have We preferred thee and raised thee above the rest, as a sign of grace from Him Who is the Lord of the throne on high and earth below ... How high is the testimony of the Sadratu'l-Muntaha for its leaf; how exalted the witness of the Tree of Life unto its fruit! (BK 3-4)

Life in exile for a sensitive and conscientious child like Bahá'íyyih Khánúm, who was deeply concerned about the difficulties that her parents faced, was particularly onerous. She was ever ready to help in whatever manner she could.

The responsibilities that she undertook at a young age amazed everyone. She was so busy with acts of service that she had little or no time to receive instructions in the arts of reading and writing. Her conversation with Lady Blomfield confirms this:

'My mother,' she said, 'sometimes gave lessons to my brother `Abbas, at other times Mírzá Musa would teach

Him, and on some occasions he would be taught by His father.'

'And *your* lessons? I asked.

'But I never had any time for studies,' she said, in a tone which spoke volumes of absolute self-effacement, and this is the keynote of her whole life, no thought of her unselfishness entered her mind. (*Chosen Highway* 69).

Yet her communications with Bahá'ís throughout the world, when she was required to step forward and take on a leadership role, testify how well she met the challenge. Her letters in Persian have been published in *Dastkhathay-i-Hadrat-i-Varaqiy-i-'Ulya*. The English translation of a large selection of her letters was published in 1982 in *Bahíyyih Khánum, the Greatest Holy Leaf* on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of her passing.

What we know of Bahá'íyyih Khánum's services during the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh is confined to her spoken chronicles recorded by Lady Blomfield and Shoghi Effendi's messages. The situation of the women in the nineteenth century Middle East, historians' focus on the Person of the Manifestation of God and the events revolving around Him, His sons and male followers, to which they had easy access, as well as their respect for tradition, which generally excluded women and their services from historical treatment, are responsible for the dearth of information about her and other early prominent women related to Bahá'u'lláh and the Bab.

Shoghi Effendi makes it clear that Bahá'íyyih Khánum

shared the imprisonment, the grief, the banishment of the Abha Beauty, and in the storm which broke out in Iraq – because of the plotting and the treachery of the prime mover of mischief, the focal centre of hate – she bore, with complete resignation and acquiescence, uncounted ordeals.³ (BK 26-7)

He confirms that when she was in her teens, Bahá'u'lláh entrusted her “with missions that no girl of her age could, or would be willing to, perform.” He also explains how with “spontaneous joy she seized her opportunity and acquitted herself of the task with which she had been entrusted!” (BK 33)

Extolling Bahá'íyyih Khánúm's outstanding attributes that distinguished her from others and which manifested themselves after arrival in `Akká, Shoghi Effendi says:

Not until ... she had been confined in the company of Bahá'u'lláh within the walls of the prison-city of `Akká did she display, in the plenitude of her power and in the full abundance of her love for Him, those gifts that single her out, next to `Abdu'l-Bahá, among the members of the Holy Family as the brightest embodiment of that love which is born of God and of that human sympathy which few mortals are capable of evincing.

Banishing from her mind and heart every earthly attachment, renouncing the very idea of matrimony, she, standing resolutely by the side of a Brother whom she was to aid and serve so well, arose to dedicate her life to the service of her Father's glorious Cause. Whether in the management of the affairs of His Household in which she excelled, or in the social relationships which she so assiduously cultivated in order to shield both Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá, whether in the unfailing attention she paid to the everyday need of her Father, or in the traits of generosity, of affability and kindness, which she manifested, the Greatest Holy Leaf had by that time abundantly demonstrated her worthiness to rank as one of the noblest figures intimately associated with the life-long work of Bahá'u'lláh. (BK 34-35)

During the Ministry of `Abdu'l-Bahá

The ascension of Bahá'u'lláh on 29 May 1892 brought to the fore deep-rooted resentment in the heart of Mírzá Muhammad-`Ali, the half-brother of `Abdu'l-Bahá and the Greatest Holy Leaf. Mírzá Muhammad-`Ali, envious of `Abdu'l-Bahá's matchless personality and His high standing in the Bahá'í community, also in society, had tried to undermine Him through various schemes even during their Father's lifetime. Now that Bahá'u'lláh had passed away, Mírzá Muhammad-`Ali imagined vainly that he could enjoy a station on par with `Abdu'l-Bahá and share with Him the authority bestowed on Him in Bahá'u'lláh's Book of the Covenant.

Before His Ascension, Bahá'u'lláh had entrusted a sealed document written in His own hand to `Abdu'l-Bahá. In that document, known as the Book of His Covenant, Bahá'u'lláh had appointed His Most Great Branch (`Abdu'l-Bahá), His Successor and the authorized Interpreter of His Writings. In the same document He had made it clear that the station of Mírzá Muhammad-`Ali, the Greater Branch, was beneath that of `Abdu'l-Bahá's. When the document was unsealed and its contents read in the presence of selected believers including some family members, Mírzá Muhammad-`Ali's hopes were shattered. Therefore he resorted to mischief and treachery to achieve his goal. He and his supporters, including almost all members of Bahá'u'lláh's family, started a campaign to undermine `Abdu'l-Bahá, to confuse the faint in heart and divide the community. The Greatest Holy Leaf during that crucial juncture in the early history of the Bahá'í Faith stood firmly by the side of her illustrious Brother and fearlessly lent Him her full support. In the words of Shoghi Effendi, "in the midst of that storm of violation, the countenance of that rare treasure of the Lord shone all the brighter, and throughout the Bahá'í community, her value and high rank became clearly perceived" (BK 28). He also says:

With the passing of Bahá'u'lláh and the fierce onslaught of the forces of disruption that followed in its wake, the Greatest Holy Leaf, now in the hey-day of her life, rose to the height of her great opportunity and acquitted herself worthily of her task ... but for her sleepless vigilance, her tact, her courtesy, her extreme patience and heroic fortitude, grave complications might have ensued and the load of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's anxious care would have been considerably increased. (BK 37-8)

When the Covenant-breakers' widespread activities climaxed and affected 'Abdu'l-Bahá's health, He withdrew to Tiberias, where He stayed for weeks. During that time the Greatest Holy Leaf for the first time in her life had to shoulder the kind of responsibility never before she had been required to undertake. A significant event took place during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's absence from 'Akká in 1895. The marriage of Diya'iyyih Khánum, the eldest daughter of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Munírih Khánum, with Mírzá Hadi, a great nephew of Khadijih Bagum, who had come from Iran for the purpose took place at that time. Mírzá Hadi had been to the Holy Land toward the end of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry and his proposal to marry Diya'yyih Khánum had received His approval. His return to the Holy Land for the purpose of finalizing arrangements for the wedding coincided with the time 'Abdu'l-Bahá had withdrawn to Tiberias. His approval for the marriage to take place at that time was sought and received. However, He was not physically present at the ceremony. A Tablet He revealed at that time lays open the depth of His sorrow occasioned by the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh and the immense hardships sustained by members of His family:

Now because it is the day of separation, and the time of mourning, the fire of anxiety is flaming, the heat of burning sorrow is, as it were, shriveling up the universe!

The calamities of my family are beyond endurance, and the troubles of those sorrowful leaves (sister, wife, daughters) are without end.

From all directions the arrows of hardship are being showered upon them, like rain-drops in spring, and the spears of the unfaithful are being hurled upon them without ceasing....

Oh, family of this sorrowful one, all is sacrifice. No pleasure is desired by you.

I know your sorrows.

The Mufti may be asked to chant the Marriage Chant at the Holy Shrine on Sunday. (Chosen Highway 113-114)

Despite the immense suffering that the sedition and mischief-making of Mírzá Muhammad-'Alí and his kindred had caused the Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and His family, the Greatest Holy Leaf, the person in charge in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's absence, invited them to the wedding. Tuba Khánum⁴ says: "My aunt invited the family of Muhammad-'Alí to come in the evening. They came and jeered at the simplicity of the wedding with great ridicule." (*Ibid* 114)

The stringent restrictions imposed upon women prevented them to personally carry out functions outside the home. By doing so they would have risked being seen by men who were not their close blood relatives. Women of good repute did not appear in public in those days without an immediate male relative. The marriage of Diya'iyih Khánum and Mírzá Hadi during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's absence in Tiberias was fortuitous in that the family now had a close male relative, who could undertake what needed to be done beyond the confines of the house. This arrangement made it possible for the Greatest Holy Leaf to discharge her responsibilities inside and outside the home until 'Abdu'l-Bahá returned to 'Akká.

Another trip of weeks' duration that 'Abdu'l-Bahá undertook for health reasons was when He visited Haifa and stayed in the cave of Elijah. The presence of Bahá'íyyih Khánum in 'Akká made it possible for 'Abdu'l-Bahá to take such trips, when it was necessary.

The Covenant-breakers' constant agitation and intrigues caused the Central Government, whose seat was Constantinople (Istanbul of today), to dispatch twice a Commission of Enquiry, to investigate fabricated charges against 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and submit a report. "In the days of the Commission of Investigation," Shoghi Effendi says, "she [Bahá'íyyih Khánum] was a staunch and trusted supporter of the peerless Branch of Bahá'u'lláh, and a companion to Him beyond compare." (BK 28)

When His life was in imminent danger, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote His Will and Testament. In it He appointed Shoghi Effendi, then a child, as the Guardian of the Cause of God. His situation being very grim and investigators most intent on keeping everything under surveillance, He buried the document under ground, lest it be discovered and its contents disclosed prematurely. It was to Bahá'íyyih Khánum, His well-beloved sister and confidant, that He divulged the secret of Shoghi Effendi's appointment to lead the Bahá'í world after Him.

There is yet another instance pointing to the complete trust 'Abdu'l-Bahá had in the Greatest Holy Leaf's ability to discharge delicate responsibilities. When the casket containing the remains of the Bab and His fellow-martyr reached the shores of the Holy Land, she was the person entrusted with that precious trust. The remains were kept in her room in the House of 'Abdu'lláh Pasha until a safe venue could be found.

Then came the revolution of the Young Turks, which was the outward cause of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's release from years of confinement in 1908. Instead of enjoying with members of His family a life of relative ease, He first completed the Mausoleum He was building on Mount Carmel since 1900. On Naw-Ruz 1909, He entombed the remains of the Bab, and immediately

began preparations for His historic trip that “in pursuance of God’s inscrutable Wisdom”, He had conceived “in the darkest hours of His confinement...” (BK 39) In a Tablet revealed in honor of the Greatest Holy Leaf on the day He embarked on His historic trip, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

O thou my sister, my dear sister!

Divine wisdom hath decreed this temporary separation, but I long more and more to be with thee again. Patience is called for, and long-suffering, and trust in God, and the seeking of His favour. Since thou art there, my mind is completely at rest.

In recent days, I have made a plan to visit Egypt, if this be God’s will. Do thou, on my behalf, lay thy head on the sacred Threshold, and perfume brow and hair in the dust of that Door, and ask that I may be confirmed in my work; that I may, in return for His endless bounties, win, if He will, a drop out of the ocean of servitude. (BK 13)

Referring to the magnitude of responsibilities that the Greatest Holy Leaf discharged during ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s trip to the West, Shoghi Effendi says:

And when ... the ban on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s confinement was lifted ... He with unhesitating confidence, invested His trusted and honoured sister with the responsibility of attending to the multitudinous details arising out of His protracted absence from the Holy Land. (BK 39)

The responsibilities that the Greatest Holy Leaf discharged at various stages of her life, especially during ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s protracted absence in the western world, achieved purposes far beyond what was considered the need of the hour: Serving as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ‘competent deputy, representative and vicegerent’ (BK 28) familiarized the Bahá’í world with her unique

personality and leadership ability. As a result, the believers turned to her unhesitatingly, when He passed away unexpectedly after a brief illness. It also prepared her to fill an apparent void immediately after `Abdu'l-Bahá's ascension and discharge even greater responsibilities several times during Shoghi Effendi's ministry.

After `Abdu'l-Bahá's Ascension and During Shoghi Effendi's Ministry

`Abdu'l-Bahá passed away very early in the morning of 28 November 1921. Shoghi Effendi, the person He had appointed in His Will and Testament as the Guardian of the Cause of God, was then studying at Oxford University in Great Britain, completely unaware that he had been chosen to lead the Bahá'í world after His Grandfather's ascension. Equally unaware were the believers that Shoghi Effendi was the distinguished Branch appointed by `Abdu'l-Bahá to lead the Bahá'í world after Him. Mírzá Muhammad-'Ali, whose opposition to the Centre of the Covenant, had cost him the loss of the right to succeed Him, was hard at work to present himself as the leader of the Bahá'í community. At that crucial juncture in the history of the Faith, the Greatest Holy Leaf, `Abdu'l-Bahá's competent deputy during His protracted absence from the Bahá'í World Centre, stepped forth and guided the believers throughout the world until Shoghi Effendi returned to the World Centre, exactly one month after `Abdu'l-Bahá's ascension.

Shoghi Effendi received the news of his Grandfather's ascension at about noon on 29 November. The Greatest Holy Leaf had sent a cable to the address of Major Tudor Pole in London. It reached that office at 9:30 in the morning on 29 November. It read: "His Holiness `Abdu'l-Bahá ascended Abha Kingdom. Inform friends" (BK 114). Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum believes Major Pole "must have telephoned Shoghi Effendi, asking him to come at once to his office..." (*The Priceless Pearl*, p. 39). When Shoghi Effendi learned the shocking news, he

began preparations for the voyage to Haifa. Heartbroken and grief-stricken he travelled by boat to Alexandria, Egypt, then by train to Haifa, where he arrived a month later. The Covenant-breakers during this time had renewed intense activity to install Mírzá Muhammad-`Ali as the rightful successor of `Abdu'l-Bahá. The Greatest Holy Leaf, fully aware of their schemes, despite the tremendous loss she had suffered, prevented Mírzá Muhammad-`Ali from entering `Abdu'l-Bahá's House where mourners were received, and ensured that the Covenant-breakers' efforts and propaganda were in vain. She warned the friends in America on 14 December 1921:

Now is period of great tests. The friends should be firm and united in defending the Cause. Nakeseens [Covenant-breakers] starting activities through press other channels all over world. Select committee of wise cool heads to handle press propaganda in America. (BK 114)

Bahá'íyyih Khánúm's acute alertness, constant vigilance and ceaseless efforts during that short critical period after `Abdu'l-Bahá's ascension, when He was gone and the person He had appointed as the Guardian of the Cause of God and authorized interpreter of Holy Writings was away, protected the believers from the mischief of evil-doers and their fresh intrigues.

On 21 December 1921, Bahá'íyyih Khánúm assured the Persian and American believers that `Abdu'l-Bahá had left "full instructions in His Will and Testament" (*Ibid*). On 29 December, though herself bereaved and heart-broken, she received the grief-stricken 24-year old Guardian of the Cause of God. Referring to the boundless love with which she received him and the tender way she treated him, he says:

After the ascension of `Abdu'l-Bahá to the realm of the All-Glorious, that Light of the Concourse on High enfolded me, helpless as I was, in the embrace of her love, and with incomparable pity and tenderness,

persuaded, guided, and urged me on to the requirements of servitude. The very elements of this frail being were leavened with her love, refreshed by her companionship, sustained by her eternal spirit. (BK 29)

On 7 January 1922, Bahá'íyyih Khánum sent two cables to Iran, announcing the dispatch of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament and of Shoghi Effendi's appointment as Centre of the Cause (*Priceless Pearl* 47). On 16 January 1922, she informed the friends in the United States: "In Will Shoghi Effendi appointed Guardian of Cause and Head of House of Justice." (*Ibid* 48)

Legal Challenge to Shoghi Effendi's Authority

A month after his return to the Holy Land, Shoghi Effendi faced a legal challenge to his authority as the Guardian of the Cause of God. Mírzá Muhammad-'Ali, the Greater Branch, had he not brought himself to naught through active opposition to the Centre of the Covenant, would have succeeded 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Most Great Branch, according to the Book of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant. However, he had lost his legacy due to his misdeeds and wicked doings, and been excommunicated during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who, in His Will and Testament appointed Shoghi Effendi as the Guardian of the Cause of God. Mírzá Muhammad-'Ali nonetheless tried to establish his authority through legal action. According to Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum,

... [Mírzá Muhammad-'Ali] applied to the civil authorities to turn over the custodianship of Bahá'u'lláh's Shrine to him on the grounds that he was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's lawful successor. The British authorities refused on the grounds that it appeared to be a religious issue; he then appealed to the Muslim religious head and asked the Mufti of 'Akká to take formal charge of Bahá'u'lláh's Shrine; this dignitary, however, said he did

not see how he could do this as the Bahá'í teachings were not in conformity with Shariah law. All other avenues having failed he sent his younger brother, Badiulláh, with some of their supporters, to visit the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh where, on Tuesday, 30 January, they forcibly seized the keys of the Holy Tomb from the Bahá'í caretaker, thus asserting Muhammad-'Alí's right to be the lawful custodian of his Father's resting place. This unprincipled act created such a commotion in the Bahá'í Community that the Governor of Akká ordered the keys to be handed over to the authorities, posted guards at the Shrine, but went no further, refusing to return the keys to either party. (*Priceless Pearl* 53-4)

The shock of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sudden departure from this world, the immense grief occasioned by not having been with Him during the last days of His ministry, the utter surprise of being required to take on the mantle of leadership of the Bahá'í world, and the intensity of opposition by the Covenant-breakers to his appointment, all of which affected his health, convinced Shoghi Effendi of the necessity to spend some time in a quiet place to recuperate, also to gain "strength, self-confidence and spiritual energy." (BK 21) Therefore, just over three months after his arrival, he appointed the Greatest Holy Leaf as his representative and head of a committee established to look after the affairs of the worldwide Bahá'í community, both at home and abroad, and left the Holy Land. The letters that he wrote to the Bahá'ís of the world in English and Persian conveyed this information. In effect, as Bahá'íyyih Khánum had deputized for 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His travels in the West, she was now called upon to deputize for His Chosen Branch. As we will see, she performed this task with competence, self-abnegation and absolute loyalty. Indeed, the members of that committee, except for the Greatest Holy Leaf, at various stages during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi broke the Covenant. She stood firm till the last breath. No other woman in religious history has played a comparable role.

The issue of the legal custodianship of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh had not been resolved when Shoghi Effendi left on 5 April 1922. On that day, he wrote to Colonel Symes, the Governor of Phoenicia:

As I am compelled to leave Haifa for reasons of health, I have named as my representative during my absence, the sister of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahíyyih Khánum. To assist her to conduct the affairs of the Bahá'í Movement in this country and elsewhere, I have also appointed a committee of the following Bahá'ís [eight men of the local community, three of them the sons-in-law of 'Abdu'l-Bahá] ... The Chairman of this Committee, to be soon elected by its members, with the signature of Bahíyyih Khánum has my authority to transact any affairs that may need to be considered and decided during my absence. I regret exceedingly to be unable to see you before my departure, that I may express more adequately the satisfaction that I feel to know that your sense of justice will safeguard the interests of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh whenever called upon to act. (*Priceless Pearl* 276)

The legal action that Mírzá Muhammad-'Ali took resulted in Bahá'íyyih Khánum being declared by Shoghi Effendi in his official communication with the governor of the area as his representative with the right of signature. This was no doubt the first time in his career that the governor had to deal with a woman at the head of a religious community, in a land revered by several religions and among people so steeped in tradition. Had anything like it happen previously in the annals of religion?

In the first letter that Bahá'íyyih Khánum sent in April 1922 to the believers after Shoghi Effendi's departure, she said:

According to a letter written by his own hand, which is enclosed, he has appointed this prisoner to supervise and manage the affairs of the Cause, through consultation

with the Holy Family, during his absence. Therefore, this perishable one, temporarily, has organized an assembly to act according to the advice of the souls who were appointed and nominated by him – His Holiness Shoghi Effendi. (Quoted in *Leaves of the Twin Divine Trees*, p. 189)

The enclosure mentioned in Bahá'íyyih Khánum's letter, a letter written in Shoghi Effendi's hand, reads:

This servant, after that grievous event and great calamity, the ascension of His Holiness 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Abha Kingdom, has been so stricken with grief and pain and so entangled in the troubles created by the enemies of the Cause of God, that I consider that my presence here, at such a time and in such an atmosphere, is not in accordance with the fulfillment of my important and sacred duties.

For this reason, unable to do otherwise, I have left for a time the affairs of the Cause both at home and abroad, under the supervision of the Holy Family and the headship of the Greatest Holy Leaf until, by the Grace of God, having gained health, strength, self-confidence and spiritual energy, and having taken into my hands, in accordance with my aim and desire, entirely and regularly the work of service I shall attain to my utmost spiritual hope and aspiration. (BK 21)

In May 1922, Bahá'íyyih Khánum informed the believers throughout the world of the incessant activities of the Covenant-breakers, apprised them of the details of the seizure of the key of Bahá'u'lláh's Shrine and directed them to send requests to the British authorities in Jerusalem confirming that Shoghi Effendi was the legitimate leader of the Bahá'í world community, appointed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament. This course of action was based on what the

government had suggested. The full text of the letter is quoted in *Bahíyyih Khánum, the Greatest Holy Leaf*, pages 117-120.

Several months passed and there was no response. Wishing to know what actions the governor had taken regarding the restoration of the key to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh to its original caretaker, Bahá'íyyih Khánum in a letter dated 15 October 1922 enquired from him about the case. In response she received a letter, dated 30 October. It reads:

Dear Madam,

In reply to your letter of the 15th instant I regret that I cannot throw any very new light on the subject. As has been stated publicly the Government feel that the custody of the Shrine at Acre as well as other important questions affecting the Bahá-ist organization should if possible be settled by a Congress of representatives of Bahá'í opinion throughout the World. To judge from messages received from a number of Bahá-ist Centres it would appear that they endorse and uphold the provisions of the Will of the late Sir Abdul Bahá Abbas, and as soon as the Congress aforementioned has actually met and given its decision the Government will be prepared to entertain its final recommendations. In the meantime if it is possible to find an individual whose provisional custody of the Key of the Shrine will be offensive to no section of Bahais I shall be only too glad to hand over the key to him until such time as the Congress has met and made its final recommendations in the matter. (*Leaves*, p. 193)

Shoghi Effendi returned to the Holy Land in mid-December 1922 and continued efforts to satisfy the requirements and convince the authorities to return the key of the Most Holy Tomb to its original caretaker. Finally, fourteen months after the key had been forcibly seized, the Sub-Governor at Acre was instructed by the District Governor, G.S. Symes, 'to return the

key of the Tomb of Bahá'Ulláh to Es Saiyid Abu'l-Kassim', the original caretaker of the Shrine. The date of that letter is 14 March 1923. (*Leaves*, p. 193)

The Eruption of Hostilities in Iran

While dealing with the issue of the seizure of the key to the Most Holy Shrine by the Covenant-breakers, another significant crisis erupted. The fanatical elements in Iran, vainly imagining that with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ascension the friends in that land had been left defenseless, took advantage of political instability in the country, stirred up trouble and incited the inhabitants to renew their attacks on the Bahá'ís in that land. Bahá'íyyih Khánum's letter of 20 July 1922 to the Bahá'ís of America explains:

Sad news has come to us out of Iran in recent days, and it has intensely grieved the entire Bahá'í world: they have, in most parts of that land, set bonfires of envy and malevolence, and hoisted the banner of aggression against this much wronged community; they have left no means untried, no plot or strategy neglected, and have arisen with extreme hostility and spite to pull out by their very roots the trees of this garden of God. (BK 165)

In the same letter she asks that assemblies act urgently, contact the Iranian embassy in their country and seek justice on behalf of their persecuted Bahá'í brothers and sisters in Iran. She explains what the petition was to include, even asks the assemblies to "make this same representation through your own ambassador in Tihran, so that he may direct the attention of the Iranian authorities to these persecutions, and awaken that government to the possibility of divine retribution and to the shameful stigma occasioned by such actions directed against this innocent community by the heedless and ignorant amongst the mass of the people..." (BK 169)

The beloved Guardian, after his return to the Bahá'í World Centre on 22 December 1922, left again for health reasons in early summer 1923 and in 1924, each time for several months. The Greatest Holy Leaf's presence in Haifa to supervise the work of the Faith in his absence was indispensable. Every time she performed most conscientiously and faithfully the responsibilities entrusted to her, and each time after Shoghi Effendi returned, she bowed before his authority and continued supporting his work to the end of her life. What she did stands in clear contrast to other members of the family, most of whom at various stages of Shoghi Effendi's ministry turned against him and broke the Covenant.

For a glimpse of the scope of the services Bahá'íyyih Khánúm rendered joyfully to the community at large during World War I, we have this testimony from Shoghi Effendi:

The outbreak of the Great War gave her yet another opportunity to reveal the true worth of her character and to release the latent energies of her heart. The residence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Haifa was besieged, all throughout that dreary conflict, by a concourse of famished men, women and children whom the maladministration, the cruelty and neglect of the officials of the Ottoman Government had driven to seek an alleviation to their woes. From the hand of the Greatest Holy Leaf, and out of the abundance of her heart, these hapless victims of a contemptible tyranny, received day after day unforgettable evidences of a love they had learned to envy and admire. Her words of cheer and comfort, the food, the money, the clothing she freely dispensed, the remedies which, by a process of her own, she herself prepared and diligently applied — all these had their share in comforting the disconsolate, in restoring sight to the blind, in sheltering the orphan, in healing the sick, and in succouring the homeless and the wanderer. (BK 40)

And the following from Dr. Habib Mu'ayyad, who at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's behest, served in the Holy Land for some time:

Poor and shelterless orphans were the recipients of her special care and affection. She sheltered them in the house of the Master and loved them dearly ... regardless of whether they were Arab or non-Arab, black or white, Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í. She taught them good manners, the art of relating to others, dawn prayers, reading and writing, home management, embroidery, sewing, cooking, studying the verses of God, fear of God and human perfections. She adorned them with the ornament of knowledge, good character, perfection and fear of God. She turned them into fruitful trees, led them to the highway of guidance, prepared them for living the life, made them prosperous and delivered them to society. (Translated from Dr. Habib Mu'ayyad's memoirs in *Payam-i-Bahá'í*, no. 33, p. 12.)

The Greatest Holy Leaf's Station and the Significance of the Arc, the Site of Her Resting Place

Bahá'íyyih Khánúm passed away in Haifa on 15 July 1932. In a cable sent on the day of her passing, Shoghi Effendi says: "Humanity shall ere long recognize its irreparable loss." In the same cable he refers to her as his 'sole earthly sustainer', his 'affectionate comforter', 'the joy and solace' of his life. Regarding her burial place, He says, "Her sacred remains will repose vicinity Holy Shrines." As an evidence of the unique station she occupies and a mark of appreciation for the unprecedented services she rendered during her life, Shoghi Effendi had chosen a significant spot on Mount Carmel as the site for her resting place. In the same cable he says: "So grievous a bereavement necessitates suspension for nine months throughout Bahá'í world every manner religious festivity."⁵ He directs "Local Assemblies and Groups hold befitting manner memorial gatherings, extol a life so laden sacred experiences, so

rich imperishable memories...” He further advises that “additional commemoration service of strictly devotional character” be held “Auditorium Mashriqu’l-Adhkar.”⁶ (BK 22-3)

Shoghi Effendi had made the decision to bury Bahá’íyyih Khánúm’s remains in a specific spot on Mount Carmel, before she passed away. The instructions he had left for her burial, if she winged her flight to the world beyond while he was away, make this conclusion clear. The spot he had chosen was in close proximity to the Mausoleum built by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for the Bab, where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s body has also been entombed. Certain known factors help us grasp the significance of his choice:

Bahá’íyyih Khánúm’s unique station as the Most Outstanding Heroine of Bahá’u’lláh’s dispensation warranted a burial place that symbolized her exalted rank. It was also to be a place, to which the remains of her mother and martyred brother, the Purest Branch, could be transferred. For they, too, enjoy special station bestowed upon them by Bahá’u’lláh, and the Greatest Holy Leaf had expressed the wish to be buried close to her mother.

The spots on Mount Carmel ennobled by Bahá’u’lláh’s footsteps during His several visits to Haifa were, as far as we know, confined to an area facing ‘Akká, the Qiblih of the people of Bahá. The most favored spot was the one He had chosen for the Bab’s Sepulcher. The areas surrounding that exalted edifice are regarded sacred precincts.

In the Lawh-i Karmil (the Tablet of Carmel), the charter for the development of the Bahá’í World Centre, addressing the mountain of the Lord, Bahá’u’lláh has revealed: “*Ere long will God sail His Ark upon thee, and will manifest the people of Bahá who have been mentioned in the Book of Names*” (TB 5). This statement clearly designates Mount Carmel as the place where the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, “the supreme legislative body of the Bahá’í world” (*Messages to the Bahá’í World, 1950-1957*, p. 21), would be established. However, it does not specify a specific area of Mount Carmel.

The three significant sites identified on Mount Carmel are: The site for the Shrine of the Bab chosen by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the site where He revealed the Tablet of Carmel, designated by Shoghi Effendi as the site for the future Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, and a site on Mount Carmel for sailing of the Ark of God (the Seat of the Universal House of Justice). The determination of the exact spot on Mount Carmel for the Seat of the Universal House of Justice seems to have been made by Shoghi Effendi. That determination has a direct link to his choice of a spot for the Greatest Holy Leaf's resting place.

The Significance of Mount Carmel Arc and Its Link to the Ark of God Revealed in the Tablet of Carmel

Shoghi Effendi envisaged an Arc in the heart of Mount Carmel, upon which the Ark of God was destined to sail. He considered the base of that Arc a most befitting place for the resting place of the Greatest Holy Leaf. The link between 'Ark' (ship) and 'Arc' (a semi-circle, or bow-shaped) goes back to the time of Noah: The rebelliousness of his followers caused a devastating flood and threatened everyone's life. Noah built an ark (ship), which saved from annihilation those who entered it. When the storm and flood subsided, a rainbow appeared "As a sign that the earth will no longer be destroyed by flood" (Gen. 9:8-16; Ezekiel 1:28). Rainbow is "the token of the covenant which God made with Noah when he came forth from the ark." (Smith's Bible Dictionary) What links ark meaning ship to arc meaning bow-shaped or semi-circle, is the rainbow that appeared when the storm subsided. Rainbow has since become the sign of the covenant that God will protect from destructive storms and flood those who enter His Ark and abide therein. Shoghi Effendi has referred to the Universal House of Justice as "the last refuge for a tottering civilization."

When Shoghi Effendi determined the site of the Greatest Holy Leaf's resting place, he clearly had in mind an elaborate plan, which included transferring the remains of Ásíyih Khánum, the Most Exalted Leaf, and Mírzá Mihdi, the Purest

Branch, from `Akká to the same spot on the slope of Mount Carmel. This plan materialized in December 1939, seven years after the passing of Bahá'íyyih Khánúm. When all was done, he conveyed the exhilarating news by cable to the friends in North America:

BLESSED REMAINS PUREST BRANCH AND
 MASTER'S MOTHER SAFELY TRANSFERRED
 HALLOWED PRECINCTS SHRINES MOUNT
 CARMEL. LONG INFLICTED HUMILIATION WIPED
 AWAY. MACHINATIONS COVENANT-BREAKERS
 FRUSTRATE PLAN DEFEATED. CHERISHED WISH
 GREATEST HOLY LEAF FULFILLED. SISTER
 BROTHER MOTEHR WIFE `ABDU'L-BAHA
 REUNITED ONE SPOT DESIGNED CONSTITUTE
 FOCAL CENTRE BAHÁ'Í ADMINISTRATIVE
 INSTITUTIONS AT FAITH'S CENTRE.⁷ SHARE
 JOYFUL NEWS ENTIRE BODY AMERICAN
 BELIEVERS. (BK 60-61)

Referring to the significance of what had been accomplished, he writes in his history of the first Bahá'í century:

The conjunction of these three resting-places, under the shadow of the Bab's own Tomb, embosomed in the heart of Carmel, facing the snow-white city across the bay of `Akká, the Qiblih of the Bahá'í world, set in a garden of exquisite beauty, reinforces, if we would correctly estimate its significance, the spiritual potencies of a spot, designated by Bahá'u'lláh Himself the seat of God's throne. It marks, too, a further milestone in the road leading eventually to the establishment of that permanent world Administrative Centre of the future Bahá'í Commonwealth, destined never to be separated from, and to function in the proximity of, the Spiritual Centre of that Faith, in a land already revered and held

sacred alike by the adherents of three of the world's outstanding religious systems. (GPB 348)

In several of his messages Shoghi Effendi explains the significance of conjoining the resting-places of the Greatest Holy Leaf with those of her brother and mother. In a message to America, after the transfer of the remains of Ásíyih Khánum and the Purest Branch from `Akká to Mount Carmel, he says:

... the conjunction of the resting-place of the Greatest Holy Leaf with those of her brother and mother incalculably reinforces the spiritual potencies of that consecrated Spot which, under the wings of the Bab's over-shadowing Sepulcher, and in the vicinity of the future Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, which will be reared on its flank, is destined to evolve into the focal center of those world-shaking, world embracing, world-directing administrative institutions, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh and anticipated by `Abdu'l-Bahá, and which are to function in consonance with the principles that govern the twin institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice. Then, and then only, will this momentous prophecy which illuminates the concluding passages of the Tablet of Carmel be fulfilled: *"Ere long will God sail His Ark upon thee (Carmel), and will manifest the people of Bahá who have been mentioned in the Book of Names."* (*Messages to America 1932-1946*, 32-3)

And speaking of the link between the site of the resting-places of the Greatest Holy Leaf, her mother and brother on Mount Carmel in Haifa and the Mother Temple of the West in North America, he says:

And now, while the Bahá'í world vibrates with emotion at the news of the transfer of the precious remains of both the Purest Branch and of `Abdu'l-Bahá's mother to a spot which, watched over by the Twin Holy Shrines

and in the close neighbourhood of the resting-place of the Greatest Holy Leaf, is to become the focus of the administrative institutions of the Faith at its world centre, the mere act of linking the destiny of so far-reaching an undertaking with so significant an event in the Formative Period of our Faith will assuredly set the seal of complete triumph upon, and enhance the spiritual potentialities of, a work so significantly started and so magnificently executed by the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the North American continent.⁸ (*Ibid*, p. 37)

In designing the beautiful monument built over the resting-place of the Greatest Holy Leaf, Shoghi Effendi had in mind for it not only “to evolve into the focal centre of those world-shaking, world-embracing, world-directing administrative institutions, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh” (MA 32) but also for it to symbolize the institutions of the Administrative Order: the steps symbolize Local Spiritual Assemblies, the pillars the National Spiritual Assemblies and the dome the Universal House of Justice.

By a happy coincidence, the construction of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice was complete by the time the Bahá'í world commemorated the Fiftieth anniversary of the passing of the Greatest Holy Leaf on 15 July 1982. At the Bahá'í World Centre the friends visited her resting place at the early hours of that morning, the exact time when she had passed away. Later that day the friends residing in the Holy Land gathered in the Reception Concourse of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice for a memorial gathering with a program befitting her station. Her memorial service was the first gathering to be held in the Reception Concourse of the Seat.

The significance of Bahá'íyyih Khánum's high station and the uniqueness of the services she has rendered are eloquently described in Shoghi Effendi's statements about her. The following is a sampling:

Only future generations and pens abler than mine can, and will, pay a worthy tribute to the towering grandeur of her spiritual life, to the unique part she played through the tumultuous stages of Bahá'í history, to the expressions of unqualified praise that have streamed from the pen of both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of His Covenant, though unrecorded, and in the main unsuspected by the mass of her passionate admirers in East and West, the share she had in influencing the course of some of the chief events in the annals of the Faith, the sufferings she bore, the sacrifices she made, the rare gifts of unfailing sympathy she so strikingly displayed – these, and many others stand so inextricably interwoven with the fabric of the Cause itself that no future historian of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh can afford to ignore or minimize. (BK 32)

To this bear witness the Company on High, and beyond them God Himself, the Supreme Lord of all the heavens and the earths: that during all thy days, from thine earliest years until the close of thy life, thou didst personify the attributes of thy Father, the Matchless, the Mighty. Thou wert the fruit of His Tree, thou wert the lamp of His love, thou wert the symbol of His serenity, and of His meekness, the pathway of His guidance, the channel of His blessings, the sweet scent of His robe, the refuge of His loved ones and His handmaidens, the mantle of His generosity and grace. (BK 56)

O thou solace of mine eyes, and beloved of my soul! Thy grace to me was plenteous, it can never be concealed; thy love for me was great, it can never be forgotten. Blessed, a thousand times blessed, is he who loves thee, and partakes of thy splendours, and sings the praises of thy qualities, and extols thy worth, and follows in thy footsteps; who testifies to the wrongs thou didst suffer, and visits thy resting-place, and circles around thine

exalted tomb, by day and by night. Woe unto him, retribution be his, who disputes thy rank and station, and denies thine excellence, and turns himself aside from thy clear, thy luminous and straight path. (BK 57)

Conclusion

Religion has always been heavily dependent on women for its promotion and for the salvation of human beings. Through their adherence to revealed laws and principles, they have passed on cherished values and instilled in future generations standards of decency necessary for carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization. This pattern is traceable in all religions in spite of religious history largely ignoring their services. One of the unfortunate outcomes of the restrictions imposed on women in the past has been making it impossible for them to scale summits readily available to men. Among the handful of women whose names religious history has recorded none played a leading role through a mandate conferred on her by the center of authority. Bahá'íyyih Khánum, the Greatest Holy Leaf, is the first woman in religious history deputizing for the Person Bahá'u'lláh appointed as the Centre of His Covenant. She played a crucial role during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's absence in the western world. She also played a vital part after His Ascension, and served as Shoghi Effendi's representative during his early absences from the World Centre of the Faith in the Holy Land.

The site of her resting place is a significant spot on Mount Carmel, as stated in a cable from Shoghi Effendi:

DESIGNED CONSTITUTE FOCAL CENTRE BAHÁ'Í
ADMINISTRATIVE INSTITUTIONS AT FAITH'S
CENTRE. (BK 60-61)

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NOTES

- ¹ The name engraved on the seal, with which the Greatest Holy Leaf sealed her letters, is *Bahá'íyyih*. This may be the reason the Iranian friends refer to her as Bahá'íyyih Khánum and, as a sign of respect, do not use it to name their daughters. In his messages to the western friends Shoghi Effendi used *Bahíyyih* as the Greatest Holy Leaf's name, probably because it is easier to pronounce and is used as a proper noun. Bahá'íyyih and Bahíyyih are derivatives of the Arabic root *Bahá'*, which means "glory."
- ² Her parents, Bahá'u'lláh and Ásíyih Khánum, and her brother, 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

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- ³ After Bahá'u'lláh's departure from Iran, His half-brother, Mírzá Yahyá, on his own accord left Iran for Baghdad in disguise, lived in Bahá'u'lláh's House as a guest, stirred up mischief and caused the holy family, particularly Bahá'íyyih Khánum, untold suffering. See *The Chosen Highway* for details.
- ⁴ The second eldest daughter of `Abdu'l-Bahá and Munírih Khánum.
- ⁵ It is remarkable that for the first and probably only time in the history of the Faith, the friends throughout the world were urged to suspend for nine months every manner of religious festivity. In another message Shoghi Effendi asks the friends, if possible, to even postpone celebrations of personal nature.
- ⁶ In 1932, the construction of the Mother Temple of the West was not yet complete. The edifice was dedicated twenty years later in 1953. Therefore, the commemorative service for Bahá'íyyih Khánum was, it seems, the first gathering of its nature held in the Auditorium of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar.
- ⁷ By the time this project was complete, Munírih Khánum, the wife of `Abdu'l-Bahá had passed away and buried in an area close to the resting place of the Greatest Holy Leaf, but at a lower elevation.
- ⁸ Referring to the construction of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar of America, the Mother Temple of the West.