

## Awwal Muharram. See New Year's Day

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### Ayyám-i-Há (Bahá'í Intercalary Days) (February 25–March 1)

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Most religions have a season of gift-giving and good cheer, and for Bahá'ís, this is “Ayyám-i-Há” (“Days of Há”; February 25–March 1, sunset to sunset). The observance of “Ayyám-i-Há” is creatively expressed. For instance, in 2007, the Bahá'í community in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, hosted their 40th annual “Ayyám-i-Há tea party” which Mayor Fred Eisenberger and Member of Parliament David Sweet attended—even though this was a decidedly nonpolitical event. (Bahá'ís shun partisan politics, which they see as divisive). (See “Baha’i Intercalary Days Time of Fellowship, Charity; Party Is Now a 40-year-old Community Tradition,” *Ancaster News*, March 23, 2007, 11.) This is just one example of how “Ayyám-i-Há” may be celebrated. It is also a day of service to the wider community, as the examples provided below show.

So what is “Ayyám-i-Há”? The Bahá'í Calendar is made up of 19 months of 19 days each, which totals 361 days (see “Bahá'í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship”), to which are added four (or, in leap years, five) “Intercalary Days” (the other name by which Ayyám-i-Há is known), to harmonize with the 365-day (366 in leap years) solar year. Thus Ayyám-i-Há is a Bahá'í festival that serves calendrical and community purposes. This season of joy and giving precedes a 19-day period of restraint and contemplation known as the Bahá'í Fast (March 2–20, sunset to sunset), in which Bahá'ís abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. (See “Nineteen-Day Feast [Bahá'í].”) Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, ordained Ayyám-i-Há as follows:

O Pen of the Most High! Say: O people of the world! . . . Let the days in excess of the months be placed before the month of fasting. . . . It behoveth the people of Bahá, throughout these days, to provide good cheer for themselves, their kindred and, beyond them, the poor and needy, and with joy and exultation to hail and glorify their Lord, to sing His praise and magnify His Name . . . Thus hath it been ordained by Him Who is the Lord of all mankind. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 24–25)

As this passage of Bahá'í scripture indicates, this time of festivity (“good cheer”) is not only to have a good time, but to do some good at the same time, by giving to the less fortunate. It is a time of both cheer and charity, in which reaching out to those in need enriches the quality of this time and renders it all the more worthwhile.

The numerical (*abjad*) value of the Arabic/Persian letter “Há” is five, which corresponds to the potential number of intercalary days. The Bahá'í Writings attach symbolic significance to the letter “Há,” which represents, *inter alia*, the mysterious and transcendent “Essence” of God. Since the days and months of the Bahá'í

calendar are named after some of the “attributes” of God, the “Days of Há” may symbolize the transcendence of the essence of God over the attributes of God, which represent the “nature” of God as manifest in creation, and as perfectly manifested in the “Manifestations of God.” This is a Bahá'í term for the great prophets and messengers of God, including, *inter alia*, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh, whom Bahá'ís recognize as great God-inspired truth-bearers and lawgivers in their respective religious eras.

Thus, Ayyám-i-Há can signify the “Days of God” and are thus invested with spiritual meaning beyond their pragmatic calendrical function, where symbolism and celebration go hand in hand. As one report stated: “Ayyám-i-Há can be thought of as days outside of time, days that symbolize eternity, infinity and the mystery and unknowable Essence of God Himself.” (“‘Days Outside of Time’ Festival Reveres Eternal Essence of God” [2008].)

Shoghi Effendi (Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, who led the Bahá'í world from 1921 to 1957 and who furthered the development of the system of elected councils at the local, national, and international levels that administer Bahá'í affairs today), wrote: “As regards the celebration of the Christian Holidays by the believers, it is surely preferable and even highly advisable that the friends should in their relation to each other discontinue observing of such holidays as Christmas and New Year’s, and to have their festal gatherings of this nature instead during the intercalary days and Naw-Rúz.” (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, March 19, 1938; cited in *Lights of Guidance*, 302.) In practical terms, young Bahá'í children in cultures where the celebration of Christmas is pervasive may be inclined to view Ayyám-i-Há as “Bahá'í Christmas,” as it is most likely a time when they will receive gifts from family and friends. In turn, Bahá'í parents often find this a good time to strengthen the children’s identity as Bahá'ís, by holding Ayyám-i-Há parties to which they can invite their friends and celebrating it with their classmates at school when possible. A Bahá'í children’s book, *The Ayyám-i-Há Camel*, shows one family’s way of personalizing the holiday: inventing an “Ayyám-i-Há Camel” to represent the gift-giving nature of this Bahá'í festival.

Bahá'ís celebrate Ayyám-i-Há worldwide, since the Bahá'í Faith has been established in every country in the world, except for the Vatican and North Korea, making it the second-most widespread religion in the world today, next to Christianity. Among the world’s six million Bahá'ís, Ayyám-i-Há traditions are highly diverse and “in the making.” In 2008 in Zambia, for instance, one Bahá'í blogger posted: “Last Friday we had an Ayyám-i-Há party with the children’s classes. We had a treasure hunt, a piñata, a water balloon fight and some arts+crafts! The kids had so much fun.” (Karrie, “Service in Zambia,” online at <http://serve-zambia.blogspot.com>.) Bahá'í families and communities are to remain free to creatively express their observance of this occasion, so as to avoid creating hard-and-fast customs or rituals.

Some other examples of ways in which Ayyám-i-Há has been celebrated include: sending “Ayyám-i-Há cards” to friends and family; having an annual

family “Ayyám-i-Há dinner”; organizing treasure hunts for Bahá'í children and their friends; bringing small presents to a Bahá'í child's kindergarten classmates and organizing an edible art activity; giving children an “Ayyám-i-Há present” on each day of the four or five days; hanging “Ayyám-i-Há stockings”; baking “Ayyám-i-Há cookies” (in the shape of a nine-pointed star, a symbol of the Bahá'í Faith); making Bahá'í prayer beads; decorating the home with nine-pointed stars; making “Ayyám-i-Há banners” with pockets for small gifts; having a community bowling party or pancake party; etc.

As for Ayyám-i-Há charity and service projects, these examples are representative: organizing a food drive or hunger relief for donating food to local food banks; paying surprise visits to friends or home-bound acquaintances, with heartwarming displays of friendship and songs; visiting people in hospitals and homes for the aged; providing crafts activities for residents at nursing homes; giving gift packages to people at homeless shelters; and so forth.

In 2008 in Malaysia, for instance, the Local Bahá'í Youth Committee of Kuching organized a blood donation campaign at the Kuching Bahá'í Centre in Malaysia. In 2007, the Bahá'ís joined with Temple Israel, a conservative synagogue in Albany, New York, in co-organizing a multicultural music and dance concert in the majestic sanctuary at Temple Israel on February 25, 2007, during which \$1,701.50 was raised among the some 200 attendees and donated to the Food Pantries for the Capital District. In 2003 in Singapore, Bahá'ís observed Ayyám-i-Há with a blood donation drive, followed by a picnic for families in a beachside park. Recently, “home visits” seem to be a popular mode of service among Bahá'ís.

There is a special Bahá'í prayer for Ayyám-i-Há (found in most Bahá'í prayer books), and in which these blessings are invoked:

I implore Thee, O Thou the King of kings and the Pitier of the downtrodden, to ordain for them the good of this world and of the world to come. Write down for them, moreover, what none of Thy creatures hath discovered, and number them with those who have circled round Thee, and who move about Thy throne in every world of Thy worlds. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í Prayers*, 236–37)

Here, God is represented as “the Pitier of the downtrodden,” which makes the one who is praying mindful of those who are less fortunate, and of the need to reach out to make this world a better place. For Bahá'ís, personal salvation is bound up with social salvation, in that personal transformation is dynamically related to the efforts a person makes to transform society. The Bahá'í Intercalary Days are therefore all about good cheer, hospitality, and doing good for others, when celebrations and service go hand in hand.

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*See also* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Ascension of; Báb, Festival of the Birth of the; Báb, Festival of the Declaration of the; Báb, Martyrdom of the; Bahá'í Calendar and Rhythms of Worship; Bahá'í Faith; Bahá'í Fast; Bahá'u'lláh, Ascension of; Bahá'u'lláh, Festival of the Birth of; Covenant, Day of the; Naw-Rúz, Festival of; Nineteen-Day Feast (Bahá'í); Race Unity Day; Ridván, Festival of; World Religion Day.

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