

Day of the Covenant – Why?

By Susan Gammage *

Why November 26?

In earlier years the day now celebrated as the Day of the Covenant was known as the Fête Day of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The following series of extracts explain the origins of this special day and the reason for its change of name.

Robert Stockman, a Bahá'í historian, records that a celebration of this day was the first commemoration of a Holy Day in the United States.

On 26 November 1901 the House [Chicago] and the Women's Assembly of Teaching sponsored a celebration of "the Master's Day". Today this is known as the Day of the Covenant. It was the first definite commemoration in the United States of a Bahá'í Holy Day. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had asked the Bahá'ís to hold a commemoration of the Bahá'í covenant rather than a celebration of His birthday because He had been born on the same day that the Báb had declared His mission and that day should be devoted to the Báb's anniversary. (Robert Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, volume 2. P. 56)

But why choose November 26?

The explanation of how 26 November came to be substituted, in relation to the birthday of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for 23 May is related by the late Hand of the Cause Hasan M. Balyuzi in his book, *'Abdu'l-Bahá* on page 523:

"'Abdu'l-Bahá told the Bahá'ís that this day was not, under any circumstances, to be celebrated as His day of birth. It was the day of the Declaration of the Báb, exclusively associated with Him. But as the Bahá'ís begged for a day to be celebrated as His, He gave them November 26th, to be observed as the day of the appointment of the Centre of the Covenant..." (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, January 23, 1984. *Lights of Guidance*, 1988 edition, quote #1018)

During his research into the construction of the House of Worship in Wilmette, Bruce Whitmore uncovered this gem of history.

The Fête Day of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the inspiration of the Bahá'í community of Ashkhabad, Russian Turkestan, which "thought there should be a day set aside for the Centre of the Covenant, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in which all the believers should gather

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together, chant the prayers, remember His life, His deeds, His actions, and, above all, remember His example and servitude, His example of evanescence and love and unity with the world. A supplication was sent and He accepted it. He accepted this day and, therefore, annually this day has been celebrated by them." (*The Dawning Place*, p. 38)

But this still does not clarify the choice of November 26. However, a 13 November 1995 memorandum from the Research Department to the Universal House of Justice contains this explanation

In an unpublished Tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in reference to the selection of a day to be celebrated in His behalf, indicates that the date chosen should be approximately 180 days distant from the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh -- that is, as far from the Day of Ascension as possible.

That same memorandum contains an account of a celebration of this special day in the Holy Land on the eve of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

...the Bahá'ís in the East marked the day during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's lifetime on 27 or 28 November, according to His wish that it be as far from the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh as possible. The following passage from *The Passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, by Lady Blomfield, indicates that in the Holy Land the Bahá'ís held the meeting on the day before 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, November 27:

"On Sunday morning (November 27th) ['Abdu'l-Bahá] said: "I am quite well and will get up as usual and have tea with you in the tea room." After he had dressed he was persuaded to remain on the sofa in his room.

"In the afternoon he sent all the friends to the tomb of the Báb, where on the occasion of the anniversary of the declaration of the Covenant a feast was being held, offered by a Parsi pilgrim who had lately arrived from India.

"At four in the afternoon being on the sofa in his room He said: "Ask my sister and all the family to come and have tea with me."

"His four sons-in-law and Ruhi Effendi came to him after returning from the gathering on the mountain. They said to Him: 'The giver of the feast was unhappy because you were not there.' He said unto them:

'But I was there, though my body was absent, my spirit was there in your midst. I was present with the friends at the tomb. The friends must not attach any importance to the absence of my body. In spirit I am, and shall always be, with the friends, even though I be far away.'"

The memorandum ends with the clarification written on behalf of the Guardian that forever fixed November 26 as the Day of the Covenant.

The celebration of November 26th as the Day of the Covenant should be observed by the believers throughout the world. (25 August 1931 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)